

Branding the Self on Yelp: Consumer Reviewing as Image Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

This research offers a case study of how consumer reviewing on Yelp.com is conceived by users as a viable platform for constructing and promoting a self-brand. A thematic analysis of 18 in-depth interviews conducted with Yelp reviewers examines the various practices and relations involved in the self-branding process. Findings reveal that authenticity, feedback, and positive affect are of central importance to the task of “image entrepreneurship.” Although consumer reviewers commodify their own image to build a reputation for others, participants recognize consumer reviewing and self-branding as mutually constituted sites of productivity with recognizable market value. At the same time, Yelp’s commercial nature complicates the potential range of agency and empowerment experienced. As a tool for self-branding, consumer reviewing is evaluated as a mechanism of the post-Fordist social factory in which notions of work are dispersed into all spheres of life.

Keywords

consumer reviewing, self-branding, digital labor, social production, Yelp

Introduction

As rating, reviewing, and “liking” become commonplace activities across the social web, the reputations of businesses, services, and products become increasingly difficult to manage. Ostensibly, the registration of preferences in the digital sphere democratizes the reputation of businesses and empowers by enabling consumers to (re)claim control over information made available about commodity goods and services. In this sense, consumer evaluation websites and mobile applications like Yelp, Tripadvisor, Menumania, Zomato, and Google Places can potentially undermine the power traditional gatekeepers (e.g. marketers) have had over the information about commodity goods and services. Yet at the same time, the registration of preferences and other affective displays are commonly valorized as productive activities from the non-proprietary resources that lie outside traditional forms of corporate control (Arvidsson, 2008).

Despite the relatively robust literature on collaborative forms of “social production” (Arvidsson, 2008) and the ways in which digitally based activities of “prosumption” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) have altered the traditional relationship between production and consumption, comparatively little attention has been paid to consumer reviews as a site of analysis. Similarly, the concept of self-branding has been discussed in relation to social media activities like blogging and micro-blogging (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gregg, 2009;

Marwick, 2013; Page, 2012), YouTube (Chen, 2013), or within the context of economic precarity in general (Gill, 2011; Hearn, 2008, 2010). Little research, however, has attended to the ways in which the evaluation of brands on consumer evaluation sites is taken up by users as productive spaces for building one’s own self-brand (Kuehn, 2015).

What this article argues is that consumer evaluations serve as a form of productive and participatory consumption inextricably tied to the market-driven practice of self-branding. Interviews conducted with 18 active “Yelpers” reveal how these reviewers articulated consumer reviewing as a productive social activity with extractable surplus value. Importantly, they discussed Yelp as a primary space through which one’s self-brand is crafted and maintained. Viewed as an investment in one’s own creative or intellectual capital, consumer reviewing is regarded as an activity that might be parlayed for current or unspecified future gain. Accordingly, social production and self-branding are theorized here as mutually constituted sites of economic productivity. Drawing upon critical

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branding research, this article offers a context-specific case study that elaborates upon the way consumer reviewing contributes to what Hearn (2006) identifies as “the collapse of any meaningful distinction between notions of the self and capitalist processes of production” (p. 133).

Digital Labor and Self-Branding

Online forms of creative, social, or productive activities have been widely theorized in the literature as a form of “digital labor,” debated by scholars from a range of perspectives as holding the capacity for self/other empowerment on one end, or self/other exploitation on the other (e.g. Andrejevic, 2013; Andrejevic et al., 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Jenkins, 2006). The motivations for online social production also vary. Arvidsson (2008), for example, explains digital labor as driven by “socially recognized self-realization”; that is, users are motivated to produce content not only for a personal sense of self-satisfaction but from the social support their activities evoke from others. Scholars also continue to debate the extent to which social production constitutes an (un)alienated form of labor; while participants are not coerced into the activities from which they also derive great pleasure, they also produce exceptional monetary value and intellectual property for commercial platforms to which users have no access (e.g. Andrejevic et al.; Fuchs). Other explanations theorize the motivations behind social production as “hope labor” (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) and “aspirational labor” (Duffy, 2015), to highlight the future-oriented promises online sites of production hold for the possibility of translating these seemingly leisure, volunteer activities into paid work.

The goals of social production have also been tied to the work of “self-branding,” an economized construction of the self that deploys a favorable presentation of identity along a market-based logic. From a normative standpoint, the task of self-branding assumes that one’s digital reputation is an increasingly central part of contemporary identity management. Critical and qualitative media research has too pointed to the ways in which aspiring workers and professionals alike reflexively acknowledge the responsibilities inherent to managing their online persona and the perceived value associated with such activities (e.g. Duffy, 2015; Gill, 2011; Gregg, 2011). Understood as the aggregation of attention, reputation management is certainly not new; yet the explosion of digitally networked and mediated identity performances over the past several decades has expanded the resources that can be deployed constructively or destructively in the circulation of reputational discourses. It is not just new technologies or mediated spaces that enable this shift, either. The cultural and economic emphasis placed upon reputation is very much tied to late 20th-century transformations in the political economy, in which marketing and branding have become central activities of contemporary capitalism.

Reputation Management and the Social Factory

The centrality of branding and marketing to everyday life is often theorized as symptomatic of the shift from modern industrialism to post-Fordist modes of production, which had significant implications for labor. As summarized by Gill and Pratt (2008),

transformations in advanced capitalism under the impact of globalization, information and communication technologies, and changing modes of political and economic governance have produced an apparently novel situation in which increasing numbers of workers in affluent societies are engaged in insecure, irregular labor. (p. 2)

For Harvey (1990), the economic and organizational restructuring processes of “flexible accumulation” characterizing post-Fordist capitalism have further deskilled the laborer via strategies of outsourcing, subcontracting, mobility, automation, constant innovation, and decentralized production. Within this context of capitalist restructuring the focus on diversification, image production, branding, and “niche” marketing also emerged as new forms of accumulation. Due in part to the flexibility afforded by the disengagement of capital from labor, the dismantling of organized labor and other institutional forms of identity left a void to be filled. New patterns of consumption and lifestyle marketing emerged as the primary means by which social, cultural, and political identification were formed (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Featherstone, 2007; Lury, 2004).

From this context, the logic of work becomes diffused into the social and cultural spheres of everyday life. As the rise of the flexible, mobile, and temporary workers introduces a new level of risk, workers themselves become increasingly responsible for managing that risk. Under the constraints of advanced capitalism and neoliberal modes of governance, the insecure worker, consumer, *and* citizen are expected to accept personal responsibility and live in the spirit of entrepreneurialism—what Lury (2004) refers to as a pathological ethos of a “lifestyle of survivalism.” Under the precarity of advanced capitalism, self-branding has become an entrepreneurial strategy for managing the risks and insecurities of everyday life in a post-Fordist economy.

It is within this context of precarious labor and economic restructuring that human resource professionals, marketing agents, and brand “gurus” have begun to apply the logic of branding and niche marketing to the entrepreneurial self. For “a free agent in an economy of free agents,” the most important task is to distinguish the self from other potential hires in the labor pool (Peters, 1997, para 8). Accordingly, employers become less concerned with traditional qualifications such as job skills, knowledge, and education and more interested in what social networks, cultural capital, or other life(style) experiences one brings to the workplace. A central task for “free agent laborers” is finding innovative ways to set

themselves apart in a highly competitive market. Potential job candidates are recommended to think about themselves as a corporation and construct their brand according to a “feature-benefit model” productive for potential hiring firms.

Reputation management becomes an accessible strategy for navigating risk as flexible online platforms provide “the interactive subject” with the tools and resources needed to successfully create and sell one’s personal brand (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Signaling the convergence of economics and cultural labor, self-branding becomes a necessary part of life in the “social factory” where “work is dispersed into all areas of life and the social becomes the site for the creation of new forms of productive activity and their transformation into commodities” (Hearn, 2006, p. 132). Autonomous Marxists have pointed to the way that socially networked digital media proffer new sites of productive activity that depend on the “immaterial labor” of users, that is, “the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” (Lazzarato, 1996, para 2). As a form of immaterial labor, self-branding is not merely the reduction of humans to commodity form “but rather is a process of transforming and shifting cultural labor into capitalist business practices” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 8).

Importantly, self-branding subsumes and structures the seemingly “authentic” cultural spaces of everyday living under the logic, language, and strategies of brands for the purposes of self-promotion and empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Self-branding complicates the perceived historical binary between individual “authenticity” and “the market” as the need to sell oneself as authentic is of central importance to this form of entrepreneurial self-work. Mapping onto moral panics over consumer culture’s colonization of the “authentic,” self-branding therefore becomes the primary way individuals can reclaim some sense of authenticity lost to the modernization process.

In the post-Fordist digital economy, “creating a self-brand relies on traditional discourses of the ‘authentic’ self as one that is transparent, without artifice, open to others” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 60). This form of “image entrepreneurship” (Hearn, 2008) requires the constant articulation of who one is to their audience, which is in turn evaluated and legitimized by others. Registering one’s preferences via consumer reviewing, then, does not only serve as a mechanism for aligning with particular taste cultures; it also serves as a means of creating and managing an authentic “enterprising self”: the self-conscious public display of one’s desirable, believable, and potentially commodifiable characteristics. Building the entrepreneurial image, especially over consumer-oriented and commercial platforms like Yelp, is itself constructed by how one talks about brands. As Banet-Weiser points out, there no longer remains a separation between authenticity and brand culture, if there ever really was; in the current moment, “authenticity *is* itself a brand” (p. 14).

Creating an authentic branded self thus involves managing one’s own image in a cultural-economic system where

attention is increasingly monetized. The social factory offers the means for understanding how the unwaged, immaterial activity of consumer reviewing is harnessed by both the commercial platforms on which they sit *and* by the reviewers themselves as productive and value-producing labor. In the context of consumer reviewing, immaterial labor encompasses the general task of engaging in social exchange. The social web’s open architecture offers a platform for individuals to realize their own capacity and empowerment through their immaterial productivity on these sites (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Yet at the same time, the immaterial labor of information sharing, collaboration, discussion, feedback, and evaluation occur over proprietary platforms that data-mine and commodify these social and cultural activities toward the ends of capital accumulation. The cultural scripts with which an individual can draw upon in the branding process are always in some part constrained by the site’s architectural properties, terms of service, and financial imperatives, highlighting brands’ ambivalence in some sense (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Kuehn, 2015). Users can, in other words, articulate and craft a brand identity on sites like Yelp, but they do so within a commercial context that ultimately contains and limits the range of possibilities for agency, empowerment, or politics.

Neither Banet-Weiser (2012) nor Hearn (2008, 2010) deny self-branding is tied to the personally satisfying, socially supported activities that induce the kind of agency and empowerment identified by Arvidsson (2008). Rather, their view of self-branding highlights the way “capital’s direct involvement in the production of subjectivity” is embodied (Hearn quoting Read, 2003, p. 159). As the social factory subsumes all social and cultural activities as moments of capitalist production, life becomes always and at all times labor. Community-oriented social network sites like Yelp, therefore, are implicated in the construction of the social factory as yet another platform by which the interactive subject participates in social and cultural activities that are valorized in economic terms.

Methods

Since launching in 2004, Yelp has become one of the most successful and expansive evaluation sites globally, allowing users to rate and review restaurants, retailers, non-profit organizations, entertainment venues, public and government services, and more. Both a website and mobile application, Yelp boasts over 95 million reviews, an average of 86 million unique monthly visitors to its mobile app alone (“About Yelp,” 2016). Users are represented by a self-crafted profile, picture, and reviews of the places or businesses to which they have attended or consumed. Active users can eventually be awarded “Yelp Elite” status by the site, which signals their perceived value to the Yelp community as based on their contributions. Yelp was thus selected as the site of analysis for its global popularity, consistent growth, strong user base, and interactive community culture.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 active “Yelpers” across North America over the course of 1 year as part of a larger project on the digital labor of consumer evaluations. Participants were contacted through snowball sampling method, which began with a call for participation post on Yelp’s San Francisco and Philadelphia “Talk” forums. Participants were asked a range of questions about their approach to writing reviews and the perceived value of this activity. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using the principles of qualitative textual analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), a process theoretically informed by the sensitizing construct, “self-branding.” Following Baptiste’s (2001) approach to interpretive research, the categorization of themes attempted to maintain each participant’s manifest meaning. The analytical approach taken to make sense of these themes draws from my own interpretive lens around self-branding and social production.

Building and Valorizing the Self-Brand

Nearly all of the participants in this study acknowledged the role Yelp played in promoting and building one’s reputation, although none of them explicitly referred to the term “self-brand” and only a few ever invoked the term “reputation.” Most participants instead inferred these concepts in discussions about their reviewing processes and experiences. The way Yelp functions as a space for constructing a self-brand can be summarily explained through the three interrelated themes of *authenticity*, *feedback*, and *affect*. Each of these themes is discussed separately below, but it is their convergence that allows the activities of self-presentation to be understood as “self-branding.”

Authenticity

When asked about their approach to writing reviews, participants generally expressed the importance of remaining faithful to an “authentic” version of themselves. Reviewers carefully constructed their Yelp experience to showcase select desirable traits, but they did not attempt to build a self-brand upon a playful imaginary of who one is *not* or might wish themselves to be. The goal of representing an authentic self is described by “Mark P”¹ as a representation of his interests and personality:

I have a lot of other interests besides food, I’m interested in writing, I’m a big comic fan, I like genre fiction, I like horror and sci-fi, I like heavy metal music, I’m interested in politics so I thought I can inject a lot of my soul and wit into these reviews—my personality . . .

Interview participants discussed the importance of writing in a way that is both “true” to the self and useful to others. Reviewer Kelly J exemplified this dual characteristic. As

a post-graduate student in Nutrition studies, she claimed to approach reviewing as a way to add “color” and “personality” to her professional life:

Since I’m in nutrition what I do usually is just very descriptive and about the facts . . . science can be so dry and that’s totally not me; I’m a little much I think for some of my fellow scientists so I can just channel it into reviews.

Kelly J’s scientific expertise is a major part of her digital reputation, but so is her experience living with a debilitating digestive disorder. This condition also informs her approach to writing restaurant reviews. She is recognized on Yelp for writing about how to navigate food allergies and often makes specific recommendations about where to go and what to order:

I can get a haircut anywhere but I can only eat at certain places; and I think because my main review focus is on food and dietary needs then I’m more about that than I am about where I got my nails done last.

In Kelly J’s case, Yelp reviews enable a space for the convergence of various aspects of her identity (personality, scientist, health) while adding value to her personal and professional life.

Reviewer Mike S takes a different but equally consistent approach to constructing an authentic brand identity, which is also at least partly influenced by aspects of how he perceives himself outside of Yelp. As a self-identified “professional amateur foodie,” Mike S aims to achieve a position of authority on local food culture. Branding himself as a critic whose job it is to “hold businesses accountable,” Mike S boasted about being thrown out of restaurants for his Yelp reviews and, in another case, having a local bartender fired.

Mike S described these seemingly negative experiences as having provided him with a great deal of credibility, popularity, and leverage in his own workplace. As a professional information technology (IT) consultant, his Yelp expertise and Elite status have built him an offline reputation for being “in the know” about good restaurants and local food culture, making him the “go-to” guy for recommendations integral to the wining and dining of important business clients. The reputation Mike S built on Yelp is a form of social and cultural capital with potentially viable economic return in his (offline) professional life.

Establishing authenticity also depends on one’s adherence to an ethical code. This “code” helps mitigate conflicts that might potentially threaten the credibility of one’s carefully crafted reputation. Reviewer Scott S discussed his ethical code in terms of being authentic to the self and others:

So there’s this sort of ethics that I have in it? Like a morality to it? That like, in my mind is very consistent and I’ll actually totally change things and remove reviews that I think don’t live up to it.

Speaking to this point, other participants believed that reviewers ought to “use their power benevolently and carefully,” be “thoughtful and balanced,” and write “honestly” and “responsibly.” As part of their ethical code, participants claimed to almost always visit a business more than once before issuing a negative review; others claimed to tactically avoid “throwback” reviews (i.e. reviews of places not recently patronized) or to “soft peddling” negative experiences with some degree of positive feedback. Ethics were explicitly tied to perceptions of authenticity.

Feedback

Nearly all of the participants identified feedback as a primary mechanism for incentivizing more production. Feedback incentivized writing more reviews, participation in Yelp’s “Talk” forum, leaving positive comments, and other forms of community participation. Social engagement plays a key role in building, maintaining, and valorizing one’s self-brand.

Like Mark P, Kelly J, and Mike S, other interviewees similarly aspired to being “known for” their writing style or some other individuating aspect—for example, the review’s technical or structural format, expressed interests and lifestyle, or sense of humor. However, it does not matter how hard one tries to differentiate themselves or their review style via particular aesthetic qualities if it is not recognized and appreciated by other members. As a form of evaluation or ranking, feedback is a primary impetus for constructing a consistent and authentic reputation because it provides “a conscious recognition of the fact that other users are ‘buying’” into the “branded self” a user is selling (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 68).

Almost everyone I interviewed found that positive feedback from other Yelpers encouraged them to write more often. Thus, it is not only the *process* of writing but the sense of validation from others that drives users toward the goal of constantly improving upon their Yelp brand identity. As one participant stated,

It’s incredibly validating and empowering if somebody contacts you and says “That was a great review” or you go look at it and go, “Wow, 20 people found this useful and somebody thought this was funny and cool?” You know, it’s a real nice stroke to the ego.

Mark P developed his identity as the “guy who writes about places nobody else will” based on the positive emails he received from others who have gone on to try many of his recommendations. Kelly J stated that she regularly receives virtual compliments on her profile and personal messages of gratitude from strangers who share similar allergies or dietary issues. These accolades motivated her decision to consciously solidify a branded personality across her corpus of Yelp reviews and interactions:

And also, it’s that whole positive feedback thing. If someone really likes or tells me that they like a review because I mention

some unknown fact, like [a local bar] has gluten-free beer . . . it’s better than getting zero feedback on [in a squeaky “girly” voice] “I went to get my haircut and it was really nice . . .” No one cares, no one cares what my hair looks like.

At the same time, her motivations were not entirely benevolent. She also sees Yelp as a space to rationalize information sharing by streamlining her “expertise” in a public platform:

I write because instead of just having someone just asked me, “Do you know if I can go here or here?” I’d rather have it so they can just Google it [laughs]; they can find it on their own and not hassle me.

Importantly, then, constructing an authentic “Yelp persona” that is legitimized by the response of others is an important end-goal to one’s reviewing practices. But as demonstrated in the next section, it is a goal dependent on the careful presentation of self that remains consistent with the site’s *affective* culture of participation.

Affect

While participants certainly take creative liberties in constructing their self-brand, Yelp’s commercial logic inadvertently structures participation around a desired affective dimension. As noted above, positive reinforcement from others shapes the direction one’s reviewing takes and, by default, one’s Yelp identity. Yet in related fashion, participants also acknowledged the central importance that *appearing* positive plays in eliciting the support of others, as well. For example, several interview participants expressed a hesitancy to appear “too negative” in their reviews. They discussed consciously writing more positive, supportive reviews to counterbalance those that took a more critical stance in an effort to thwart assumptions that they were a “difficult” personality and, therefore, an unreliable opinion. Even Mike S, who had been refused service and had someone fired for his reviews, noted the importance of balancing criticism with positive commentary.

Being known as a positive person on Yelp is tied to a reviewer’s credibility and thus authenticity. Writing “too negatively” is perceived to conflict with the capacity to co-manage one’s “offline” personal or professional reputation and associations. Several interview participants stated they often worried that something they wrote might negatively impact their position in the community, employment prospects, or their reputation in the workplace. The need to appear positive—what Hearn (2010, p. 427) refers to as “smiley positivity”—is the disposition of the successfully branded individual who, consistent with the neoliberal ethos of the contemporary era, conveys the sense that he or she has taken responsibility for her own happiness and fulfillment. As one reviewer put it, “You need to think about what you’re

doing . . . this isn't just your bedroom where you can just rant to your friends." Another reviewer, Dave H, notes,

I mean when you write reviews it reflects upon you . . . You notice I don't write many one-star reviews? Like, part of the reason is because there's not many places that are *that bad*. This is a one-star review I did; it was tough to do. I had to revise it like, 20 times. Thirty times. It took me like a week, more than that. Somebody actually complained to me about it, too.

Reputational status on Yelp depends on a *perceived* authentic consistency across one's reviews that is balanced by an appropriate affective valance and ethical code, and verified through the feedback of others. Appearing inconsistent, fake, too negative (even too positive), or exploitative were all considered "red flags" by other participants. Reputational status is achieved through the construction of an identifiable, consistent brand persona with an appropriate affective positioning. It is one that depends upon (as it also symbolizes) reliability, credibility, trustworthiness—but also, as discussed in the next section, validation from the community's "inner-circle."

Valorizing the Self-Brand

Consistent with other social media research, the participants I interviewed assigned a range of values to their reviewing activities, not all of which were expressed in economized terms. They often pointed to Yelp's social dimension as the most commonly articulated reward for their creative investments. The potential to make new social connections and friends or the opportunity to enhance one's social capital as a "popular" reviewer was listed as perceived benefits. As one participant put it, "I made a bunch of friends with the help of Yelp. They set up the sandbox, you know?" The opportunity to hone one's own intellectual, creative, and social capital are all motivations consistent with the goals of socially recognized self-realization (Arvidsson, 2008).

However, participants were quite open about the perceived economic value of Yelp's socio-technical affordances, particularly in terms of how they impacted upon one's own reputation. Some participants were explicit about using Yelp for "personal PR" or as a way of "getting noticed." They discussed the work of self-branding as an attempt to valorize their Yelp activities as a launching pad for future careers, temporary job prospects, or other material compensation (i.e. being "discovered," landing a paid position).

One reviewer, for instance, claimed to write prolifically in areas outside his local community as a way of generating attention to his profile from new readers. John R saw Yelp as a free space for gaining recognition for the "creative short stories" he wrote in the form of consumer reviews; Jennifer T wrote a positive review for the business that just hired her

as a temporary worker in the hopes her loyalty might pave a way to full-time employment with the firm. Mary Beth L listed her "Yelp Elite" status on her resume that she circulated at a university job fair in the search for professional work. Ken D saw Yelp as a platform to capitalize upon his personal interests in photography and event planning. An excerpt from this latter conversation illustrates not only the dominant motivations of socially recognized self-realization but an awareness of how his reviewing activities are also motivated by their value-generating affordances:

Me: So what [is] it about Yelp that you liked?

Ken: Just free photo hosting; that was it . . . I didn't care about the community aspect at all. And then when I got random compliments and random friend requests I was like, "Huh?" and I ignored them for the longest time . . .

Me: So do you care about the community aspect now? Has that changed?

Ken: Only a little bit; I still do a lot of social things; I do way more social things outside Yelp—Yelp is only one small part . . . I'm good at it—I'm good at managing my online personality. PR, so. People are like, "I wanna meet you."

At the time of our interview, Ken D explicitly used Yelp's server space to host and showcase over 14,000 high-resolution digital photographs he has taken of local businesses and services. Additionally, he regularly used Yelp's "Events" category and "Talk" forums to post mass invitations to weekly social outings and fundraisers he organized for the sole purpose of generating social connections and network building. Ken D consciously deployed Yelp as a tool that supplemented other promotional strategies he already had in place (e.g. an email listserve). He acknowledged Yelp as quite effective in growing his social network across the country. Residing in a Philadelphia suburb, Ken D spoke of using Yelp to expand his social network from New York City to San Francisco, where he is now actively known *because of* his Yelp presence. He explained,

Everyone's good for something . . . it's nice to have someone to drink with and a couch to crash on? A cuddle buddy. So it's useful. It's useful when you go to travel to random places, like [when] you're stuck at the airport and need a ride . . .

While Ken D ostensibly recognized the immaterial value that *friendship* might play in these pursuits, he largely framed Yelp's value to his life in terms of capital.

Authenticity, feedback, and smiley-positivity converge as the requisite for obtaining "Yelp celebrity" status. Yelp celebrities are a community-branded subjectivity based on a user's reputation as a Yelper; it is at once its own persona as it also contributes to a reviewer's self-brand by

signaling credibility, reliability, and active community contribution. The Yelp celebrity is an *informal*, socially constructed designation attributed to the most popular site members by those who see themselves as outside the celebrity inner-circle. The Yelp celebrity is different from “Yelp Elite” status, which is formally awarded to the site’s most active users on a case-by-case basis by local community managers. Unlike the informally designated “celebrity,” Yelp Elite members are awarded a virtual badge and social benefits including personal invitations to (offline) parties and events or having reviews appear at the top of business listings on Yelp.

While there may be hundreds of Elites in any given Yelp community, those that transcend to “celebrity” status are not always Yelp Elite. Rather, they are branded as such by other users for their dominance in driving discourse across the site, most notably on the regional “Yelp Talk” forums. These users produce the “ethical capital” (Arvidsson, 2008) that helps keep the Yelp community together (perhaps more so than Yelp’s paid community managers), even as their social status functions at the exclusion of other members. Acceptance by these “celebrities” can also determine how other participants are ranked on the site or conceived as viable members of the community. Not unlike the high school politics of popularity and acceptance, there is an explicit understanding by non-Elite, non-celebrity Yelpers that being held in high esteem by Yelp’s most popular users is a pathway to building one’s own reputation and status.

Yelp’s most successful personalities are thus measured by visibility. Some of the Elite/celebrity participants I interviewed even wishfully expressed a nostalgic desire for being treated like a “regular person” again when entering local establishments. Regardless of how imagined this perceived notoriety might be, reputational success came with its own set of unanticipated conflicts to be managed. Several participants acknowledged the notoriety that their Yelp reviewing had brought them to their local business community. More than half of the participants I interviewed had been personally contacted by a local business or service to sample free or discounted meals, drinks, spa treatments, or other services. Each attributed these invitations to their reputational status on Yelp. All reportedly declined such invitations on ethical grounds. The reported desire to avoid such “special treatment,” however, is symbolic of having built a successful, recognizable, and authentic personal brand.

Importantly, obtaining this level of notoriety rarely happens for those who play outside Yelp’s rules. As discussed in the next section, one’s agency over his or her online persona is limited by a number of social, cultural, and technological constraints tied to Yelp’s commercial nature. It is such that many participants actually structure their participation to become “ambassadors” for the site in ways that arguably compromise how we might otherwise envision agency, empowerment, and authenticity in practice.

Navigating Yelp’s Commercial Constraints

While Yelp’s tagline promises “Real People, Real Reviews,” the participants I interviewed often found it difficult to circumvent the structural limitations imposed by the company’s Terms of Service and Content Guidelines. Most expressed writing in a way that corresponded with the site’s official rules and regulations or the available closed “feedback” options that restrict user compliments to the narrowly defined designations of “Useful,” “Funny,” and “Cool.”

Yelp Elite members—those whose authentic and consistent self-brand had been formally recognized by the site—felt most compelled to tailor their expressions and activities according to Yelp’s user guidelines. According to the website, Elite members are expected to “be active in your Yelp community” by writing regular reviews, or providing feedback and compliments to others. Many of the Elites I interviewed expressed this status induced a sense of “responsibility” to promote Yelp’s objectives. One Elite member claimed to “friend” new users whose reviews met the standards of a “good review” because “It’s important to encourage the *right* type of review.” In other words, he too used positive feedback as a validation system to encourage activity to unfold in particular directions—directions amenable to Yelp’s established guidelines.

Others also reported feeling that Elite status compelled them to participate in ways consistent with Yelp’s commercial imperatives. Maintaining Elite status is, therefore, informed by Yelp’s overarching culture of participation, which puts limits on the range of expressions one can articulate if they wish to preserve this status. For example, Elite members are compensated with sponsored parties, “swag,” or other events, and some claimed feeling “obligated” to positively review the events, venues, or various vendors that supplied the party’s goods and services: “If they’re going to give me the status I should, you know, step up the activities.” Elites must also follow Yelp’s expected participation guidelines or risk losing Elite status. At least one participant I interviewed lost Elite status after challenging Yelp’s review policy with the local Community Manager. Another complained about Yelp’s removal of his reviews that contained political or corporate critiques. Yelp systematically filters politicized reviews as a violation of its Content Guidelines, which frustrates efforts to critique corporations or challenge consumer capitalism in any direct way (Kuehn, 2015). Self-branding complements Yelp’s commercial nature by inducing production around commodity discourses. In theory, this can potentially create tensions for Yelp when one tries to build his or her reputation on a set of discourses that violates the site’s commercial imperatives. In practice, however, this rarely occurs. Even reviewers who try to differentiate their self-brand by offering an oppositional reading or a political critique of brands are lone voices effectively minimized by other architectural, social, and cultural constraints. Where

such reviews are not flagged, filtered or removed for containing political or controversial content, their marginalized presence merely reinforces the myth that Yelp (and the wider interactive economy) is an authentic, democratic space through which agency and self-empowerment manifest.

As these examples demonstrate, self-branding blurs the line between authentic engagement and corporate coercion. Members build their self-brand through seemingly authentic expressions of the self, which Elite status helps elevate. But in most cases, the expressions that are valorized are those that correspond to Yelp's content guidelines in the first place. Earning Elite status functions in service of Yelp's bottom line by reinforcing the perceived value of working within the site's hegemonic guidelines. Elite status obfuscates the technical, social, and cultural constraints that ultimately delimit the range of agency users have over their self-brand. As demonstrated, Yelp users are instead more likely to defend or take up Yelp's commercial interests by identifying with the site's goals rather than subverting them.

Conclusion

The above findings demonstrate the reflexive approach that consumer reviewers take in mobilizing social production as a means of self-branding. As illustrated, constructing a branded self is not a free-for-all, unrestricted activity; rather, it is a continuous, negotiated process that requires at least some adherence to the cultural context of the site through which the brand-building process takes place. At the individual level, participants used their reviewing activities to hone a particular skill set, exercise their creative abilities, or expand their social networks; yet nearly all described their reviewing activities as a form of "work" that was, in turn, measured and valorized by the accolades of others. Yet participants all had a sense of what the valorization process required—a consistent profile or reviewing approach, the right affective valence, adherence to the Yelp community's ethical code, and recognition by members with higher levels of social status.

As evidenced by the way participants both described and made meaning from their evaluation activities, consumer reviewing is a highly affective and managed practice. Social production in this context is at its most extreme as "it takes the form of networking or personal branding where the very point of creating community ties and offering experiences is the cultivation of charisma and social capital" (Arvidsson, 2008, p. 333). This "charisma" is not unlike what Max Weber identified as "the core logic of the ethical economy" in which even one's own self-interested pursuits serve to build strong social ties by winning the favor of others (p. 333). The public, self-expressive, and searchable affordances of social media enable myriad ways for multiplying one's visibility and thus positions Yelp as a viable instrument for promoting oneself to others. Ken D's highly managed social networking initiatives are a good example of how this process works.

Reflective of life under the social factory, his leisure activities are about the visibility process made productive as a rationalized form of "work"; in this instance, the end result of building a ubiquitous social network contains in itself an identifiable market value where "everyone is good for something."

The capacity to valorize the self-brand depends on its perceived authenticity by others. As Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, "Authenticity remains central to how individuals organize their everyday activities and craft their very selves" (p. 10). Brands might serve as the structural logic of everyday life, she states, but they can be read and appropriated for a wide range of oppositional or unintended purposes. Certainly, Yelp users appropriate the tools and resources the platform makes available in order to construct their own "authentic" displays and expressions. These practices can at times push back against the commercial nature of the space by violating the terms of service or content guidelines, by raising political critiques of consumer capitalism and so forth (Kuehn, 2015). Brand critique can itself be part of one's self-brand in certain cases, demonstrating the range of contested and negotiated meanings that Yelp enables. In practice, however, this rarely occurs. The promise of Elite or celebrity status, which elevates and legitimizes one's self-brand, generally induces the Yelp community to help police and reinforce the site's objectives. Challenges to the site's commercial nature that do "leak" through merely reinforce Yelp's *authenticity* as a "democratic" space where interactive subjects can build a brand identity that contests or negotiates market powers.

So what critiques might be raised about this type of discursive display of "lifestyle survivalism"? As the interviews demonstrate, participants had little trouble identifying the affective and managerial dimensions of their laboring, as well as the returns on their investments. What's more, there seemed to be little cognitive dissonance about constructing a digital self consistent with a market logic. Certainly, Yelp's basis in consumption experiences likely contributes to this normative discourse. Yet heeding Hearn's (2008) theorization of the branded self as an economized sense of being, even in the context of the social web's alleged participatory, unalienating affordances, it still remains that "notions of the self and capitalist processes of production" are rendered inseparable (2006, p. 133). Or, as Banet-Weiser (2012) puts it, "The result is a fixed cycle" as brands "offer a cultural context that celebrates the production of the self but is shaped by an economic context that relies on that self to be a brand" (p. 66).

There are limits to the range of agency, personal responsibility, and empowerment that self-branding offers. What these associated rewards and pleasures do not do, for example, is "destabilize" capitalist control. These personal investments do not contest the way surplus value is derived from the brand-building process by the proprietary platforms dependent on user-generated content for their own monetization. In effect, what Yelp's mode of social production

illuminates is the way image entrepreneurship subsumes creative practice and human sociality under the rules and measures of the market. It is such that “the normativity of brand cultures more often than not reinscribes people back within neoliberal capitalist discourse rather than empower them to challenge or disrupt capitalism” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 221). The fact participants so unproblematically acknowledge this as the “reality” of the world we live in takes us even further from imagining a social world in which the basis of self-production and our personal relations are built upon something other than the discourses, dynamics, and logics of capital.

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1. All interview participants have been given pseudonyms (consistent with Yelp’s username format of given name, last initial) in order to maintain confidentiality.

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