

Constructing the Platform-Specific Self-Brand: The Labor of Social Media Promotion

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Abstract

With the widespread uptake of social media, discourses and practices of self-branding have become a pervasive feature of social and economic life. However, the way in which the digital self-brand gets reproduced across a sprawling social media landscape remains comparatively under-theorized. Our paper therefore draws upon in-depth interviews with 52 online content creators—including designers, artists, writers, and marketing consultants—to examine how cultural workers present themselves across the panoply of social networking sites. As we show, workers' self-presentation activities were structured through the production of a *platform-specific self-brand*, which was based upon the imaginations of (1) platform affordances, (2) audiences, and (3) the producer's own self-concept. Our findings highlight producers' compulsion to engage in continuous, cross-platform labor—despite widespread uncertainty about its economic outcomes. We conclude by addressing the stakes of a social media moment when workers of all stripes are prodded to incessantly curate, monitor, and ultimately *invest in* their online personae.

Keywords

social media, self-branding, affordances, labor, audience

Introduction

In the two decades since business pundit Tom Peters (1997) roused *Fast Company* readers to become the “CEO of Me, Inc.,” the logic of self-branding has infiltrated employment discourses across industries, professions, and worker levels. From physicians to financial planners, educators to gig economy participants, workers of all stripes are encouraged to promote themselves with gusto. Directives to engage in strategic self-promotion dovetail well with the codes of impression-management and status-building endemic to social networking sites (Gehl, 2011; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013; Pooley, 2010). Crafting a professional profile, curating one's content, and engaging with colleagues and clients are framed as compulsory activities for both job aspirants and the gainfully employed (Duffy, 2017; Gershon, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2018).

Such shifts testify to the ascent of an attention economy (Bueno, 2016) or digital reputation economy (Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2010), whereby users are compelled by neoliberal regimes of self-governance to devote time, energy, and human capital to fashioning the self. Self-branding, explains Hearn (2010), represents “a form of affective, immaterial labor that is purposefully undertaken by individuals to garner

attention, reputation, and potentially, profit” (p. 427). Following from this, we argue that these laboring demands are intensifying with the continued rollout of new platforms. Indeed, while social media users may have once been called upon to project just “one identity” (Zuckerberg, 2011), they increasingly showcase discrete elements of their persona on particular sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (boyd, 2014; Gershon, 2017; van Dijck 2013a; Wilken, 2015; Zhao, Lampe, & Ellison, 2016). How, then, does the digital self-brand get reproduced across a vast, ever-evolving social media landscape?

To address this question, our paper draws upon in-depth interviews with a total of 52 creative workers—including designers, artists, writers, and promotional consultants—culled

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from two separately conducted studies (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Scolere, 2017). Our decision to focus on creatives is based upon their unique placement in the wider cultural economy, where they seemingly presage emergent working conditions and expectations (Banks, Taylor, & Gill, 2013; McRobbie, 2016). Interview data reveal that despite the common mantra of maintaining a “consistent” online persona, cultural workers tend to constantly (re)construct their self-presentation activities through a cultural logic and practice we term *platform-specific self-branding*. The platform-specific self-brand, we show, is based upon the imaginations of (1) platform affordances, (2) the audience, and (3) the producer’s own self-concept. After examining how these materially directed, other-directed, and self-directed constructions shape online behaviors, we highlight how the obligation to continuously rework the self functions above all as labor. However, despite workers’ investments of time, energy, and attention, the outcomes of self-branding labor are fraught with uncertainty. We conclude by addressing the stakes of a social media moment when workers of all stripes are prodded to incessantly curate, monitor, and *invest in* their online personae.

The Social Media Self (Brand)

With the profound uptake of social networking sites, research on online self-presentation abounds (e.g., boyd & Ellison, 2007; Hogan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2012). As these and other studies make clear, socially mediated self-expression defies the kind of discrete impression management associated with offline, face-to-face communication. Accordingly, Internet studies researchers have invoked Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical metaphor to think about the “collapsed contexts” of social media environments (boyd, 2010). The absence of contextual boundaries means that one’s family, friends, coworkers, and potential employers are often privy to the same digital persona. In more recent years, scholars have noted that digital users may react to the reality of collapsed contexts by projecting various socially mediated “selves” (Wilken, 2015; Zhao et al., 2016). As van Dijck (2013b) contends, users intentionally present distinctive versions of themselves according to explicit and implicit understandings of individual platforms. Job market hopefuls, for example, approach content sharing and networking on Facebook quite differently from LinkedIn (Gershon, 2017). In other instances, an individual may create multiple accounts on a *single* platform to protect their privacy (boyd, 2014). Teenagers and young adults reportedly use “finstas” (fake Instagram accounts) to share less polished imagery and more candid captions with close friends (Williams, 2016).

The calculated deployment of multiple social media “selves” seems particularly significant for those who rely upon digital self-presentation for professional reasons, namely, creative workers. These workers experience the precarity of the contemporary job market acutely, with working conditions marked by long hours and persistent instability

(e.g., de Peuter, 2014; Gill, 2010; McRobbie, 2002). The piecemeal nature of creative careers incites many workers to adopt strategies of self-enterprise (Cohen, 2015; Gandini, 2016). Outwardly *leisure* social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are thus cast as “platform[s] for the performance and presentation of a commodified Self” (Flisfeder, 2015, p. 554).

Accordingly, there is a growing body of literature that critically explores creative workers’ self-promotional activities on particular social networking sites, including Pinterest (Liss-Marino, 2014; Scolere & Humphreys, 2016), Instagram (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015), Twitter and LinkedIn (Gandini, 2016), and Xing (a German site; Sievers, Wodzicki, Aberle, Keckeisen, & Cress, 2015), among others. Many of these studies conceptualize online social networking as a form of labor despite (or perhaps because of) the emphasis on sociality and relational practices. Yet, crucially, such brand-building efforts are considered a necessary—but largely uncompensated—part of the job (Duffy, 2017; Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2008; Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005). Highlighting how digital networks furnish social capital amid a sprawling “reputation economy,” Gandini (2016) contends,

The performance of a certain amount of free and unpaid labor is perceived not just as a natural element in the freelance scene but an eminently strategic and managerial device to start the loop of self-branding, visibility and reputation construction across a network of social relations. (p. 132)

Despite the insight of these studies, scholars have yet to understand how the self-brand takes shapes and evolves within an expansive social media ecology, where individual platforms have distinctive—largely imagined—ideologies, features, and uses.

Imagined Affordances and the Social Media Ecology

The concept of *affordances* is useful for mapping out the complex relationship between a technology’s material and social features; affordances represent the opportunity for an interaction between the properties of an object and the actions of a social agent (Gibson, 1979). Across communication and Science and Technology Studies (STS), the literature has tended to focus on how an object’s design or technological features allow users to do something specific with the object; for instance, the buttons on a remote control allow a user to press them, actualizing the affordance of changing the channel. Davis and Chouinard (2017) argue that affordances are actualized under the following conditions: perception, dexterity, and cultural and institutional legitimacy. That is, in order for an affordance to be utilized, a person must be *aware* of what the technology can do, must also be *able* to use the feature, and the use must be *legitimized* by social norms (p. 1).

The recent rise of “platform studies,” indexing a growing awareness that platforms are not neutral, but, instead, represent particular political-economic configurations (Gillespie, 2010; Helmond, 2015) has led to renewed interest in the study of affordances of social networking sites. While the physical design features of technologies “can, and often do, put users on particular paths” (Hopkins, 2016, p. 3), affordances are also understood by users through “observation of how others use the platform, and previous personal experience” (Zhao et al., 2016, p. 8). Bucher and Helmond (2018), moreover, make clear how social media technologies can be conceptualized as encompassing what they term “high-level affordances,” or the “dynamics and conditions enabled by technical devices, platforms and media” (p. 12) and concrete “low-level affordances,” which are material and design-focused.

To be sure, affordances are not presented to social actors equally: some affordances are recognized by, or relevant to, only certain individuals or social groups (Gibson, 1979). It is in this vein that Nagy and Neff (2015) provide a corrective to the concept of affordances as the objective features of a particular technology, by highlighting the constructed, or *imagined*, nature of the interactions between people and technology. “Imagined affordances,” they contend, exist between “users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers” (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 1). That is, properties of a technology are not only ones that actually exist, but also ones that are “imagined” by users. Thinking about affordances as imagined highlights “the importance of mediation, materiality, and affect” (p. 1) in understanding platforms (ibid). Material features of platforms shape interactions and in turn are shaped through use. Furthermore, users’ interactions with technology are constructed through perceptions of platforms (mediation) and emotional experiences (affect).

More broadly, the notion of “imagination” highlights the constructed nature of the social world and our placement within it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/1991; Taylor, 2004). And, indeed, over the last four decades, scholars have illuminated the critical role of media and popular culture in enabling participants to imagine culture and society (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Ettema & Whitney, 1994; Turow, 1997). But how do creative workers who use social media to present an employable front imagine this digitally mediated world? What role do the affordances of particular platforms play in their imaginations? And what are the implications of these workers’ activities for themselves, their labor conditions, and our broader understanding of social media self-presentation?

Method

This article brings together interview data ($n = 52$) from two separate studies of creative professionals’ social media activities: the first focused on the digital practices of female

entrepreneurs (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017); the second explored how designers utilize social media as they curate their professional identities (Scolere, 2017). Data for the first sample were drawn from a larger study of female entrepreneurs, freelancers, and small business owners. Participants were recruited online, using social media to search for lists of successful cultural producers, as well as appealing to the personal online networks of the researchers for contacts. The second sample was composed of graphic design professionals who strongly identified with the culture of self-enterprise. As a leading professionally oriented creative platform, Bēhance was used as the sampling frame to recruit graphic designers actively developing their professional identities. Several recruitment strategies were employed to recruit registered users of Bēhance, including posting recruitment messages on LinkedIn design-oriented professional groups, appealing to personal networks, and recruiting within the Bēhance platform. In both studies, snowball sampling was employed to recruit additional participants.

Our combined interview sample included women ($n = 31$) and men ($n = 21$) working across the creative industries, including designers/artists, professional bloggers, marketing consultants/publicists, and content producers. For privacy reasons, participants’ real names and identifying characteristics are not reported; however, on the whole, our sample skewed toward white, middle-class men and women in their 20s and 30s, living in large cities throughout the United States. Our participants identified a wide range of platforms that they used, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, Bēhance, Dribbble, Tumblr, Periscope, Pinterest, Google Plus, and Snapchat.

Interviews, which took place over Skype/phone, were recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed by either the researchers or a professional transcription service to ensure accuracy. To examine how creative professionals understood their own digital self-presentation and social media practices, we employed an interpretivist and naturalistic framework (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). In-depth interviews were structured around a series of “open-ended process reflection questions” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 679) to encourage participants to reflect on their digital self-presentation across a variety of networked platforms. Topics of discussion included participants’ education and professional background, use of platforms, work routines and conditions, digital creative processes, and evaluation of creativity online. To analyze the data, we created a master document of the combined transcription data, which the three authors coded. Based on an iterative process of identifying emerging themes and consulting the literature (Charmaz, 2005, p. 508; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we developed an initial set of category codes including audience perceptions, media ecology, platform materiality, temporality, and the producers’ self-concept. Using the lens of imaginations in shaping self-branding, we continued to further refine our coding schema to develop the categories that we present below.

Findings: Self-Promotion in the Social Media Age

All of our interviewees used social media in a professional capacity and as part of their concerted efforts to promote themselves, their businesses, and their creative products. The majority alluded to the importance of maintaining a “presence” on several sites; as Myra explained to this end, there’s an “expectation that you have to be *everywhere*” (italics added). Furthermore, and notwithstanding the ideal of social media “consistency,” creatives varied their digital self-presentations in patterned ways. As Will summarized, “I think different platforms showcase different things for different reasons, and that’s why I [use] them.” This comment exemplifies a logic and practice of digital impression management we term *platform-specific self-branding*. As we detail below, the platform-specific self-brand is based upon assumptions about platform materiality and environment, constructions of the audience, and reflections on the creator’s own self-concept.

Imagined Affordances: Platform Materiality and the Mediated Environment

Those in our sample routinely made decisions about the platforms on which to create and share content based upon considerations of each site’s material and design features (“low-level affordances”), the site’s perceived culture (“high-level affordances”), and the interaction of these elements within the wider social media environment (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Owing to the swelling importance of visual content in the social media sphere (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), several interviewees acknowledged how their image-sharing activities were guided by the technical specificities of platforms. As Mindy explained,

There’s a huge difference between all of the social platforms . . . even just when it comes down to image size. Like, on Facebook everything is wider horizontally than it is vertically, whereas on Pinterest it’s the opposite: it needs to be more vertical, and Instagram, obviously is a square . . . [and Twitter] rolled out their Twitpics, and those are also more horizontal.

For Mindy, considerations about where—and how—to post content were deeply implicated in the interplay between the platform’s material demands (i.e., image parameters) and her *perceptions* of the mediated environment for certain types of content. Explaining why she doesn’t “share the same image on all the platforms,” she noted that photos not containing the image of a person do well on Pinterest, whereas “on Instagram, you know, it’s selfies and that kind of thing.” Similarly, Jordan compared Bēhance’s design structure, with its vertically oriented “project” format composed of multiple images, to platforms such as Instagram, which were originally designed around a singular image post. As he explained,

[Instagram’s] more of a consumable singular image that can get someone excited about potentially looking into your work. It functions different [from Bēhance] in that I obviously don’t want to put up an entire project on Instagram. It doesn’t seem correct for the platform.

Like Jordan, many of our interviewees were influenced by perceived norms about where and how to promote their creative products. Interviewees revealed, moreover, how their expectations about visual display continued to evolve with the introduction of new features, such as the ability to compose a post with multiple images or the launch of Instagram “stories.” These findings illustrate the integral role of evolving platform features in self-branding practices. Other creative professionals acknowledged the affordances of discrete platforms while discussing textual constraints. For instance, Alice attributed her success as a writer to her penchant for clever tweets. Nodding toward Twitter’s character limitations, she added, “Because if you can instill an idea in one sentence that really resonates with people, like, they can probably do it in longer form [as a journalist].”

In addition to more discernible technical affordances, including visual and textual constraints, our interviewees acknowledged the role of algorithms in shaping their digital self-presentation activities. Algorithms are, of course, concealed to users—the oft-used “black box” metaphor is an evocation of Gaver’s (1991) concept of “hidden affordances”; however, these were rendered perceptible to our interviewees at moments of change. That is, shifts in the display or ordering of content led creative producers to infer updates to the platform’s algorithm (Bucher, 2017; Rader & Gray, 2015). For instance, Elaine attributed the apparent lack of interaction on her Facebook page to the fact that “the Facebook algorithms changed so the business pages just became ghost towns. There was just nothing happening.” Graphic designer Simon, meanwhile, expressed frustration about his inability to control *when* his creative work was distributed, a shift he attributed to a modification in Instagram’s algorithm wherein posts were no longer displayed chronologically. As he concluded, “My work isn’t getting the same interaction that it once was.” While these creative professionals attributed their perceived communication failures (gauged by changes in content engagement) to external, platform-specific updates, they often responded with a heightened sense of urgency; more frequent posting was an attempt to ensure visibility and engagement.

Producers’ self-promotional practices were also guided by cultural designations of different platforms. Expositions of the “tone,” “feeling,” “flavor,” or “impression” of a particular site suggest that social networks may have *platform ideologies* that function like Gershon’s (2010) conception of “media ideologies.” Carolyn noted how “Instagram feels more in the moment,” and Kenneth, similarly, said there was “a sense of immediacy” to the image-sharing site. Other creative producers indicated platform ideologies through their

references to the imagined uses of each platform. Interviewees thus believed that Instagram was for “food” or “art,” while Twitter was more of a community for sharing ideas and developing a point of view. These impressions were largely independent of specific design features and, instead, were constructed as part of a larger social media ecosystem. Lacy, for instance, described how her experiences had “taught” her “that Instagram was a community platform.” In respect to Twitter, Naomi stated: “There’s wonderful community building in this space.” That Lacy and Naomi associate community-building with two *different* platforms highlights the individualized ways affordances are imagined, materialized, and constructed. Interviewees frequently evoked expert sources and research on social media branding that dictated these cultural conceptions and content norms, because they “confirmed” what worked on some platforms and not others. Often, these allusions to expertise were vague: “all the literature on Facebook,” “larger wisdom out there,” and “there are studies out there.” Thus, creatives felt compelled to follow “best practices,” but could not cite specifics about from where these directives came.

It is important to note that impressions about a particular platform were always made relationally, as producers compared platforms against each other within the larger social media ecology. Alice contrasted Twitter, which she lauded for its professional uses, to Facebook, which she “[doesn’t] see as a creative tool at all.” Max, too, structured his beliefs about platforms on practice and interaction; to him, Facebook is for “conversations on design,” while Instagram is for “work that you’re promoting.” Helen, meanwhile, described her understanding of new platform technologies within a larger constellation of other sites: “Any new platform . . . teaches [users] the way all the other platforms communicate.” She went on to discuss the tendency of various platforms to borrow the features of other sites over time: “Instagram has created a new Snapchat feature. It’s not called a Snapchat feature, but Instagram Stories is a direct rip-off of Snapchat. [. . .] And so things like that—these platforms all are trying to take from each other—makes them worth learning.” Comments like this—which signal producers’ framing of the evolution of features across the wider social media landscape—suggest a culture of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999), wherein emergent forms of media draw steadily upon the characteristics of their predecessors.

Imagined Audiences: Digitally Networked Professional Publics

Media theorists have long emphasized the imagined nature of audiences; that is, “the audience” is not a singular, clearly delineated group of individuals, but rather a socially constructed category that is based upon the perceptions of media creators, executives, advertisers, and more (e.g., Ettema & Whitney, 1994; Turow, 1997). In a similar vein, social media

users tend to have a sense of their audience(s) in mind as they create and broadcast content to digitally networked publics (Brems, Temmerman, Graham, & Broersma, 2016; Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Against this backdrop, our interviewees routinely invoked perceptions of the online audience when discussing content creation and distribution activities for particular platforms. Some designers and content producers referenced broadly defined demographic categories—gender, age, and geography—to explain why they were drawn either toward or away from a particular platform for self-promotion. Ariana, for instance, organized her exposition of the social media ecology by age/generational factors:

You have different demographics on different platforms. I think the younger people are leaving Facebook and going more to Snapchat and going back to Twitter, ironically, since the adults have kind of left Twitter and are going to Facebook and other places. So, I do think you have to find where your people are.

Lifestyle content creator Brian, similarly, expressed his belief that “Twitter is . . . a little bit older, . . . And then Instagram’s definitely a lot younger.” He added, “I just did a social media giveaway with some of their bloggers on Instagram, and I got a ton of followers that appeared mostly to be like under 20 in like Brazil and Spain.” Meanwhile, designer Trent struggled to reconcile a demographic-based image of the typical Snapchat user with the practices of fellow designers. As he quipped, “I’m a freaking man in my 30s, I don’t need to be on freaking Snapchat.” Yet, he conceded, “I have a bunch of friends that are designers that use it all the time.”

Other interviewees’ eschewed demographic indicators for lifestyle attributes, which they tended to extrapolate to larger audiences. Haley, for instance, used subjective markers to explain *how* her audience on Facebook differed from her Twitter followers: “Facebook is much more warm and cozy, and [my followers] know who my children are, they know the faces, they know my dogs. They want the meatier part of my story.” On Twitter, she contrasted, “I mouth off quite a bit.” Here, we can see how such assumptions—in this case, those on Twitter are more accepting of “mouthing off”—intersected with her own behaviors that are expressed to her “actual” online following. The dichotomy of “personal” versus “professional” was also deployed to articulate the presumed audience of a particular platform. Joel, for instance, had been steered away from Facebook because of his belief that: “it’s more family. It’s just not professional anymore.” He added, “I tried to make it more professional, but there’s a lot of life stuff on there, too, so [Facebook has] become less important [for showcasing creative work].” Luis, similarly, differed his self-presentation strategies based upon the distinction between Facebook (a more “personal” platform) versus Instagram (a more “professional” one):

My Facebook is really . . . where I have lots of pictures of my dog and pictures of our Christmas time and my family and stuff like that. Whereas Instagram, which I do share on a professional level, it almost has to be a little more curated . . . So I have a lot of interesting architectural photos that I see around town, or things that just look visually interesting and appealing to me . . . And then Twitter I think is just kind of a hodgepodge of both. I get to make jokes with all my friends, but at the same time I can use it in a professional setting.

In these cases, assumptions about who was mostly likely to utilize a particular platform—and the extent to which this category overlapped with creators' target audience—guided the processes of content creation, distribution, and promotion.

Unsurprisingly, creatives and designers directed their attention toward those platforms most likely to yield favorable results: visibility for a client, kudos from one's peers, and—amid a burgeoning independent economy—a new gig. Creatives thus engaged in substantial "relational labor," that is, "an investment toward building and maintaining an audience that will sustain a career" (Baym, 2015, p. 14) while trying to bolster their digital reputations. The building and maintenance of relationships was deemed necessary to secure future work, whether networking with peers or sharing ideas with potential clients. Or, as Mindy put it, the desire "to keep growing my audience" was understood as "part of [the] job." Myra, a food blogger, explained how she knew many of her followers on Instagram in real life, through traveling to promote her books. To maintain her relationships with her audience, she "always [made] sure to shout out on my social media accounts when I am doing events, so that people know where they can sort of follow me." She also posted "little mini recipe sort of things on Instagram" sporadically, as a gesture to keep her audience interested.

As we discuss later, audiences ("follower count") and evaluation ("likes") were widely upheld as evidence that one platform was more useful than another. Independent designer Hannah explained how "metrics" informed her strategies for investing in Bēhance over other platforms to achieve her professional goals:

It sounds superficial, but when your profile's getting lots of traffic, and you're getting likes and awards, and things like that, you start keeping up with those metrics because it's a way for you to gauge if your work is consistently getting attention. And I have to say, out of all the social media sites that I use, I wake up every morning with several Bēhance notifications, as opposed to my Instagram or my Twitter which has a lot lower engagement.

Noah, similarly, relayed, "I am on Bēhance because . . . whether or not many of my friends are active on it, there is a large portion of the creative industry who is very active on it." Noah's professed desire to be what he called "part of that buzz" reveals how participation in certain career-centric platforms serves a vetting function as "members" are imbued

with credibility and status. Despite many designers viewing Bēhance as important in promoting their work, numerous others pointed to Instagram as more tied to client inquiries, highlighting the provisional nature of platform ideologies. More broadly, such statements reveal how platform-specific imaginations of the audience coincided with self-presentation strategies that were unique to particular platforms.

Imagined Abilities and Affect: Reflections on the Self

At the same time that interviewees considered platform features and their audiences when making decisions about their digital self-presentations, they also exhibited reflexivity about their own self-constructs. Such perceptions included ideas about their skills and abilities, their affective responses to certain platforms, and what they hoped to communicate about their self-brands to networked publics. Thus, platform-specific self-branding was partially contingent on the imagined notion of the *self* in relation to the wider platform ecology.

Creative workers regularly considered whether their skill-set aligned with the demands of a particular platform, that is, whether they perceived themselves as being *able* to effectively use emerging platforms to accomplish specific branding goals. Naomi thus chose to promote herself predominantly on Twitter because she "had some sort of natural understanding of nuances and stuff in it . . . [and so] under[stood] how it works." Elaine, similarly, took stock of her personal strengths and weaknesses while deciding which platform to use: "I don't use Instagram at all. And this is just, again, this is just leading from strengths. I'm just not a visual person. I'm a text person, and so I just don't bother with Instagram."

Not only were creatives self-reflexive about their current skills but they also felt compelled to keep abreast of new strategies (e.g., learning how to use the new feature Instagram stories) for effective social media marketing. As Mindy explained, social media was "something that I had to learn as I went along—what works well on Pinterest, how active you have to be to be continuously gaining followers . . ." Delta was more ambivalent about the incessant need for technical upkeep: "With the technology changing, you have to be constantly educating yourself on what's coming out and then playing around with it." Tracy, too, explained that "all these new and different channels" become "a lot to keep up with." Gill (2010) identifies such forms of "keeping up"—and "DIY learning" (relying not on formal education, but instead learning on the job) as key features of the contemporary careers of creative professionals, for whom "life is a pitch."

Crucially, though, creative workers' proficiencies evolved within the larger social media environment. Lacy, drawn to Instagram while developing her photography skills, recalled "falling in love with that whole community and the whole thing of Instagram," but later, she "diversified, and . . . got a set of skills now that can cross barriers with different social

media platforms.” After Lacy’s professional skillset widened, so, too, did her branding strategies; she perceived herself as possessing the right skills to effectively use a variety of platforms. Trent, however, was reluctant to follow the vagaries of social media by moving onto the newest platforms in recent succession: “Every time some new platform pops up, I just want to die inside a little bit. So I literally cannot bring one more of these things into my life . . .” His resistance, leading to late adoption of new social media sites, gave him the self-perception that he did not possess the right skills to optimize specific sites for successful self-branding. In fact, he noted that he was “probably horrible” at Instagram, insinuating that he had not yet developed the correct skills for taking advantage of this platform. Of course, to actualize the affordances of a platform, a person must be *able* to use the features of a platform (Davis & Chouinard, 2017). Our findings show that it is not just abilities but also the *perceptions* of abilities that play a part in platform-specific self-branding, highlighting the importance of imagination in human–technology interaction.

Specific abilities and skills, such as those required to navigate particular platforms, are hitched to workers’ sense of professional identity. Accordingly, interviewees highlighted their professional proficiencies when discussing the utility of particular platforms; creatives thus perceived themselves as having particular professional strengths which were best showcased by specific platforms, and this self-awareness drove their platform-specific branding. Lena tended toward Twitter; she reasoned, “because I’m a writer, I really like working with words.” Creatives also spoke about the importance of having a strong professional presence on particular platforms that were associated with their chosen careers in broader culture; for instance, Instagram was viewed as important for showcasing the work of designers.

Interestingly, not all participants were focused on projecting strictly professional identities. Lindsay saw Instagram as a “window into you *as a person* and you as a professional” (italics added). She liked to keep her content on the platform “less formal and showcase not only the things I’ve been working on, but places I’m going, even faces I like to make . . .” She reasoned that beyond the “really professional facade,” it was important to her that she was seen as “an approachable person.” The notion of relatability as intricately connected to promotional activities on social media demonstrates an impetus toward “calculated authenticity” (Pooley, 2010)—the felt need for creatives to present a curated (polished) but simultaneously “authentic” self in order for the brand to be sellable. Alongside platform and audience considerations, our participants engaged in frequent self-reflections on their ideal identity. They strove to make sure that their projected brand accurately aligned with their (ideal) self-identity, because they wanted it to paint them as *people* (not just as professionals) in a positive light. Thus, they chose to use platforms that they felt best showcased their authentic identity.

In addition to considering their talents, abilities and their self-identity, interviewees took into account how certain platforms made them *feel*, illuminating the importance of affect in imagining the utility of platforms (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Candice pointed out, “You have to like [the social media site]. If you don’t like it, then what’s the point of it?” Conversely, some interviewees abandoned self-promotion on certain platforms because of the emotional toll on their sense of self. Janet, for example, stopped using Twitter because she “would find [herself] getting jealous . . . anxious that I didn’t work as much as the other people that I was seeing on Twitter.” Ultimately, she left a platform because of negative feelings about herself when using it. Naomi, meanwhile, stopped using Instagram because “when I go in, I get anxious. My shoulders go up. It’s a physical reaction. I don’t know how to—it’s too much information for my day.” Such comments illustrate how affect plays a significant role in guiding self-branding decisions across the social media ecology. As such, creatives gravitate toward platforms that make them feel good and avoid platforms that lead to negative emotions, considering their affectivity alongside reflections on their abilities and professional self-identity when deciding where to devote their energies.

Self-branding Labor: Investments and Returns

In reflecting on their digital self-branding practices, interviewees acknowledged the substantial demands on their time and attention. Naomi explained that she was on Twitter and LinkedIn “all day long,” while Myra dedicated a “significant part of her day”—typically 60–90 min—to burnishing her social media presence. She reasoned, “If you don’t tend to them all [various social media platforms], they lose their value.” Blogger Haley, meanwhile, bemoaned the fact that “every channel is different . . . [with] a different audience [and] a different way of communicating things.” She concluded, “it’s a vast, vast, vast amount of work.” Moreover, the labor requirements of online persona management were exacerbated by the erratic nature of social media. Addressing the anxieties of self-branding in such a dynamic, cross-platform environment, Josh noted,

The fact that you have to do it for one medium, and then another medium, and then another medium, and then another, and another, and another and every day, there’s a new network that [one] has to worry about it. Like, how many times am I going to reformat this one image to show off? It’s frustrating.

Simon, meanwhile, noted the mandate to remain nimble in the face of incessant change: “. . . it’s always changing, so I’m trying to constantly adapt to that, and that’s why I have multiple social media sites so I can put my work in more places. That way, I would hopefully get seen by more people.”

As Simon's comment about visibility ("seen by more people") attests, participants' promotional efforts were guided by the perceived return on investment of discrete platforms. Tracy, despite "having a presence on all of them," focused her efforts on Instagram and Facebook, because they gave her "the best return on investment (ROI)." In a similar vein, Naomi explained that she found Twitter valuable for finding work so "you make time for Twitter and LinkedIn and figure out what else to drop." To gauge these returns, participants deployed various tools and techniques. Some turned to analytics programs; Mindy, for instance, used Google Analytics to determine "what people are interested in, what's working well, what people are clicking on the most," which in turn helped her figure out what works "best" on a specific platform.

Others derived meaning from audience feedback: a high follower count was cited as evidence that promotional activities on that platform were effective. For instance, Naomi presumed that the "very impressive" number of followers she had amassed on Twitter led to contract work—because it shows "you know what you're doing." Beth explained that she got "most of [her] jobs through Instagram," as some of her followers hired her for projects. Gaining clients and creative project inquiries through platforms, along with the receipt of direct feedback from audiences, provided evidence that self-promotion was *working*. Accordingly, Mason, a graphic designer, explained how he *perceived* upticks and "dry spells" in project inquiries as directly connected to his time investment in the creative platform, Dribbble:

If I put up a little shot once every other day, which is pretty frequent, then within the week or two weeks that follow, someone will reach out. Whether that leads to real work is another thing [. . .] Whereas, if I'm a little bit more heads down and really doing production work and I don't get around to posting something, I'll notice a dry spell of no inquiries.

Mason thus believed that increased efforts in platform-specific branding would "pay off" with additional client inquiries. Such examples reveal how creative workers individualized the success—and consequently the failure—of their self-promotional labor.

Not all of our interviewees valorized digital impression management; some were quite ambivalent. Mark assumed that he received "probably 10% to 15%" of commissions from Bēhance, but that it was "hard to tell with other [social media platforms]." Similarly, Delta, a high-end portrait photographer, conceded it's "hard . . . to gauge whether it's worth going after social media marketing." She pointed out that clients were not likely to hire her through Facebook, because they preferred personal referrals for such a "big investment." She also questioned whether social media marketing was effective; she thought that "other types of marketing" would "probably do a better job because they're more specific in who I'm targeting; where Facebook is just . . . throwing it out

there and hoping people see it." Jessica similarly signaled the capriciousness of social media self-branding by comparing it to "a casino":

The amount of effort and time that it takes and trying to parse the value . . . You sort of get into it and you get a little bit back. If I keep interacting with it, will it give me more? It is kind of like a casino. Why am I doing this? I'm not ready to let go of it. I have this push/pull with it [social media].

Not only was the uncertain outcome of social media marketing confounding, online self-promotional practices could have an profoundly *negative* impact on creatives' business activities. Janet noted a tendency to get distracted while being on social media for professional purposes, because of the lure of cyber-stalking on these platforms:

I hate the tendency to, like, me fall, like, ten months back on someone's Twitter feed or Instagram feed that I don't even like, I'm just, like, fascinated by . . . a lot of it is a time waster under the guise of me being productive because I *have* to be online, but it wastes a lot of my time and it makes me fall back into these habits of mine that I don't like.

Others were uncertain about their *potential* to harness the possibilities of a particular platform; for instance, Kieran explained that he feels anxiety in the form of "slightly more of a pressure" when posting on Instagram than on Twitter, because it "stays there" compared with Twitter, whose "feed replenishes much faster." The pressure to optimize the features and cultures of various digital platforms and the risk of getting it wrong was experienced as anxiety-provoking by our interviewees, as their social media marketing was viewed as critical to achieving specific career objectives. Ultimately, however, most of our participants conceded that, despite the uncertainty and the labor involved, they would continue platform-specific self-branding activities—because a presence on social media signaled to others, "Hey I exist," as graphic designer, Mark, put it.

Conclusion

Social media was once mostly just for fun, but not anymore. Social media is now. . . a key part of how work gets done. *The New York Times*' guide on "How to Use Social Media in Your Career" (2017)

Amid a hyper-saturated job market, "self-branding" is widely venerated for allowing would-be employees to rise above the flood of competition. We contend, however, that the "self-brand" is not enacted singularly, but rather as part of a vast social media environment that spans Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and more. Our interviews with cultural workers reveal how producers vary their self-presentation strategies in patterned ways, based upon the imaginations of (1) platform features, (2) assumptions about the

audience, and (3) the producer's own self-concept. Indeed, interviewees noted how both the material qualities of platforms ("low-level affordances") and more abstract assumptions about the platforms' cultural features ("high-level affordances") shaped their personal branding practices (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Algorithms emerged as especially salient forces that threatened creative workers' visibility, with numerous interviewees suggesting that perceived algorithmic changes negatively impacted their self-promotional efforts. Often, they responded by trying to amp up their social media activity in hopes they could outmaneuver the platform algorithms.

Considerations of the "audience"—be it clients, peers, or general followers on social media—also directed creative workers' online activities, illustrating the importance of the (imagined) social structure of various platforms. To some, the deployment of platform-specific personae helped circumvent the inevitability of collapsed social media contexts. That is, because personal and professional contacts share the same (digital) spaces, workers utilized different platforms to shore up contextual boundaries (for example; Twitter, for "professional," Facebook for "personal"). The emphasis on audiences, ranking, and reputation is endemic to our larger reputational or attention economy where work assumes an "eminently social element" (Gandini, 2016, p. 136; see also, Hearn, 2010). Finally, creatives reflected on their skills/abilities, their professional self-identity, and their emotions when deciding where to devote their time and energy, highlighting how imaginations of the self drive content sharing across platforms. Self-awareness and self-monitoring are emphasized on social media and are arguably intensified for those professionals—such as freelancers and independent workers—who rely on an identifiable self-brand for income.

Together, these findings reaffirm the utility of understanding digital media activity within a wider social media ecology (Zhao et al., 2016), whereby users consider the totality of platforms available to them when making decisions about communication and content sharing. Of course, the temporality of this ecosystem must not be overlooked. With the breakneck pace of social media evolution, including processes of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) among the industry players, creatives are compelled to constantly adapt and reframe their expectations. Our interviews suggest that understandings of platform culture (materiality) are tied to specific moments in time and vary based on assumptions about where the industry "buzz" (audience) is and on the producers' evolving skills, feelings, and self-concepts. Creatives' use of these platforms thus initiates a feedback loop whereby as designers and cultural producers promote their content in platform-specific ways, they contribute to the shaping and reshaping of *platform ideologies*. Such a recursive process reinforces the significance of perceptions of, rather than (or as much as), the realities of digital media technologies (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

While some creative workers laud social media's dynamism and find it is "really worth [their] time," for others, it's akin to shifting sands entailing "a vast, vast amount of work." Accordingly, the demand to deftly manage platform-specific presentations of the self amplifies the obligation to partake in the work of incessant self-promotion. This labor is largely uncompensated—and thus invisible—prodding workers to devote time and energy as part of their entrepreneurial self (Flisfeder, 2015). Discourses of *investment* are often deployed to justify unpaid aspirational (Duffy, 2017) or hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) activities; participants believe that their investments will yield a payoff. A payoff could be a new gig or the right "connection" or a new "collaboration" (Gandini, 2016)—all of these assets are highly subjective, framed within a larger economy which privileges certain subject positions. The fact that our participants tended to occupy privileged social locations reaffirms the class-based nature of such notions. After all, considerable resources—time, energy, capital, and technological prowess—are necessary to undertake the oft-incessant labor of social media self-branding.

We conclude that this incitement to monitor and re-fashion one's digital personae in platform-specific ways presages larger trends in an independent neoliberal economy, where so many of us are hailed as entrepreneurial free agents (Lane, 2011). The strategically branded self is thus upheld as "a bulwark against an uncertain future" as traditional social safety nets continue to fray (Gehl, 2011, para. 109). Against the wider forces of precarity, explains Hearn, "we come to recognize that the ability to attract attention—to garner a reputation might provide us with a modicum of personal and financial security" (p. 426; see also, Bueno, 2016; Gehl, 2011). And, accordingly, the above-mentioned *New York Times* guide, which included bulleted advice for the calculated use of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat—as well as the industry go-to, LinkedIn—wasn't just pitched to creatives or entrepreneurs. Rather, the platform-specific advice manual cast a wide net, billing itself as a resource for *anyone* "looking to expand your network, build a business or find a new gig" (Sreenivasan, 2017). In this way, all of us become beholden to the logic of platform-specific branding. But the so-called "word of caution" buried on the last page is arguably the most telling: "Just keeping up the various platforms—and coming up with multiple things to post every day—can be exhausting" (Sreenivasan, 2017).

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