Platform-Specific Self-Branding: Imagined Affordances of the Social Media Ecology

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ABSTRACT
Despite the recent uptick in literature on self-branding across the fields of internet studies, business/marketing, and media/cultural industries, the ways in which the digital self-brand gets reproduced across a sprawling social media ecology remains comparatively under-theorized. Our paper draws upon in-depth interviews with 42 creative workers—including designers/artists, bloggers/writers, online content creators, and marketers/publicists—to understand how independent professionals present themselves and their work in the digital economy. We show that despite the common refrain of maintaining a “consistent” online persona, creative workers continuously negotiate their self-presentation activities through a logic we term platform-specific self-branding. The platform-specific self-brand, we contend, is based upon the “imagined affordances” of individual platforms and their placement within the larger social media ecology. Such imaginations are constructed through the interplay between: 1) platform features; 2) assumptions about the audience; and 3), and the producer’s own self-concept. We conclude that creative workers’ incitement to incessantly monitor and re-fashion their digital personae marks an intensification of the “always on” laboring subjectivity required to vie for attention in a precarious creative economy.

CCS Concepts
• Information systems  
Social networking sites  
• Social and Professional Topics  
Employment Issues

Keywords
Self-Branding; Affordances; Social Media Ecology; Platform; Labor

1. INTRODUCTION
In the two decades since business guru Tom Peters [50] roused Fast Company readers to project themselves as the “CEO of Me, Inc.,” the logic of self-branding has infiltrated employment discourses across industries, professions, and worker categories [13, 21, 29]. Directives to create and maintain a well-defined, distinctive personal brand are especially prominent in the media and creative industries—including advertising, art, design, and journalism—where labor is increasingly temporary, project-based, and individualized [3, 41, 45]. Calculated acts of personal branding dovetail well with the cultures of impression-management and status-building endemic to social networking sites (SNSs) [37; 51]. Indeed, while creative workers of the late 20th century were prodded by the decree, “you’re only as good as your last job” [3], today they follow the guidance that “you’re only as good as your last tweet” [26]. Of course, digital self-branding involves much more than intermittent 140-character dialogues; current and aspiring professionals must showcase themselves and their work across a raft of social networking sites: Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Pinterest as well as networks that cater to the creative set (e.g., Dribbble, Behance, Aquent). The tremendous uptake of these platforms among media and cultural workers is symptomatic of wider culture’s embrace of web 2.0. And, increasingly, users engage with a greater number of social networks—each with diverse features and promises for user experience [54, 62]. Research published in 2016 estimated that 79% of American adults who are online use Facebook, with 24% using Twitter, 31% Pinterest, 32% Instagram, and 29% LinkedIn [28]. Particularly relevant for the present study is the finding that users tend to create and share content across a variety of platforms, with 56% using more than one SNS. Facebook, the most popular site, is also used by the vast majority of those who use Twitter (93% of Twitter users use Facebook), Instagram (95%) and Pinterest (92%), and there is also a high degree of multiple platform usage across the other sites. Although social media users may have initially been called upon to project just “one identity” [64], there is a growing awareness that users showcase discrete elements of their personalities on different platforms [59, 61, 63].

Managing one’s self-presentation amidst such flux seems especially important for independent workers who consider personal promotion essential to their self-starter careers. However, the extent to which the digital self-brand gets reproduced across a sprawling social media ecology remains comparatively under-theorized. Our paper thus draws upon in-depth interviews with 42 creative workers—including designers/artists, bloggers/writers,
content creators, and marketers culled from two separately conducted studies [1, 2]—to understand how independent professionals present themselves and their work across a multi-platform social media landscape.

We show that despite the common refrain of maintaining a “consistent” online persona, creative workers continuously negotiate their self-presentation activities through a logic we term platform-specific self-branding. The platform-specific self-brand, we contend, is based upon the “imagined affordances” [43] of individual platforms and their placement within a larger social media ecology. Such imaginations get constructed through the interplay between: 1) platform features; 2) assumptions about the audience; and 3), and the producer’s own self-concept. These materially-directed, other-directed, and self-directed perceptions shape users’ behaviors and experiences within a vast platform ecosystem—one that is multi-level and recursive, constructed through the interplay of imagined and material features. We conclude that creative workers’ incitement to re-fashion their digital personae in platform-specific ways marks an intensification of the “always on” laboring subjectivity required to vie for attention amidst a precarious creative economy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Social Media Self (Brand)

With the astonishing growth of SNSs in recent years, scholars have explored the complex—and at times contradictory—ways that social media culture compels particular expressions of the self to digitally networked publics [8, 17, 31, 36, 38, 49]. A common thread running through this literature is the extent to which social mediated self-expression defies the kind of discrete impression management associated with offline, face-to-face communication. Internet studies researchers have invoked Goffman’s [27] stage-boundary metaphor to think about the blurred social contexts of online media environments. As boyd [7] writes of the collapsed contexts of social media, “The lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts’ [see also 31, 38, 49]. The pervasiveness of social media thus means that one’s family, friends, coworkers, and potential employers are often privy to the same digital persona.

Recent research suggests that digital users may react to the reality of collapsed contexts by maintaining various socially mediated “selves” [63]. Wilken [59], for instance, found that social media users vary the content they share with audiences on different platforms. Van Dijck [61], meanwhile, contends that users consciously present discrete versions of themselves according to explicit and implicit understandings of the platform. In other instances, an individual may maintain multiple accounts on a single platform; adolescents reportedly create “finsta” (fake Instagram) and “rinsta” (real Instagram) accounts to control how they present themselves to different Instagram audiences [15, 60]. As a reporter for The Guardian explained:

“Account users have their real-Instagram (their rinsta) which has high follower numbers and offers a more polished and performative visual narrative. Think classic Instagram. Filtered selfies. Pleasing photos of food. Drink poised in air, quixotic rural or seaside landscape in the background. Their fake-Instagram (their finsta) is a second Instagram account reserved for their close friends. With low follower numbers (followers are usually kept in the low double figures), they use this account to share more candid pictures of their lives – often willfully unattractive ones, pulling faces and the like” [60].

The calculated deployment of multiple social media “selves” seems especially significant for those who rely upon digital self-presentation for professional reasons. In today’s hyper-competitive “attention economy,” workers of all stripes are encouraged to understand their “reputation [as] a key commodity, [with] networking and maintaining contacts a key activity for nurturing it” [14, 20]. Yet the experiences of cultural workers, in particular, are guided “by the promise of one Big Job being right around the corner” [45, p.319].

Social media have amplified the opportunities for—and expectations of—these reputation-building and networking practices [16, 20, 37]. Workers are thus socialized to promote themselves and their work in earnest as they project their distinctive self-brands [21, 29, 37]. As Gandini argues to this end, “The equating of self-branding practice to the construction of social capital is ever more central for the understanding of self-marketing in the contemporary digital knowledge economy” [20, p. 126].

There is a growing body of literature that critically explores creative workers’ digital brand-building labor on particular platforms, including Pinterest [35, 55]; blogs and Instagram [16]; Twitter and LinkedIn [20]; and Xing (a German site) [56], among others. Despite the insight of this work, scholars have yet to understand how the self-brand takes shapes and evolves within an expansive social media ecology, where individual platforms have distinctive (imagined) affordances.

2.2 Imagined Affordances and the Social Media Ecology

In recent years, scholars have drawn on the concept of affordances to map out the complex relationship between technology’s material and social factors; affordances represent the opportunity for an interaction between the technical properties of an object and the actions of a social agent. In the original formulation, affordances were understood as the objective, latent possibilities present in an environment that actors could act on in specific ways [23]. Although Gibson articulated the concept within evolutionary psychology, scholars from design [46]; technology studies [22]; and communication [33] have highlighted how material artifacts rely on people’s interactions with them. Hutchby’s [33] work on “communication affordances,” in particular, moved the focus away from affordances as design or technical features to what we can do (or not do) more broadly with specific technologies.

The rise of “platform studies” [4] and growing awareness that “platforms” represent particular political-economic configuration [24] has led to renewed interest in affordances for understanding the role of SNS in social life. Networked technologies, writes boyd [7, p. 45], “introduce new affordances for amplifying, recording, and spreading information and social acts. Responding to the recent increased use of the term “affordances” in communication technology research, Evans et al. [19] (2016) advocate for consistent use of the term and develop guidelines for approaching affordances.

Bucher and Helmond [11, p. 12], meanwhile, differentiate between abstract high-level affordances—“dynamics and conditions enabled by technical devices, platforms and media” and concrete, feature-oriented low-level affordances, which are material and design oriented. These low level affordances are features or characteristics of the platform design that provide cues as to what types of actions are possible [43, 63]. While the design
of technologies “can, and often do put users on particular paths” [32, p.3]. affordances are largely understood by users through “design characteristics of the platform, observation of how others use the platform, and previous personal experience” [63, p. 97].

Nagy and Neff [43] provide a corrective to the concept of affordances as objective features (whether high-level or low-level) 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” (p. 1). That is, properties of a technology are not only ones that actually exist but ones that are “imagined” by users. An important characteristic distinguishing Nagy and Neff’s concept of imagined affordances from previous theorizations is the idea that affordances are not presented to everyone equally, that there are some affordances that are recognized by or relevant to only some individuals. This highlights the importance of subjectivity, the notion of perception, in the actualization of affordances possible in an environment. In this vein, asking users directly how they interact with technological devices and platforms is key to understanding what McVeigh-Schultz and Baym [42] describe as “vernacular affordances.” Against this backdrop, the aim of our project was to interview users on their perceptions and imaginations of social media platforms as part of their self-branding practices.

3. METHOD
This paper brings together a subset of interview data (n=42) from two separate studies: the first focused on the digital self-presentation practices of female entrepreneurs [1]; the second explored how designers utilize social media as they curate their professional identities [2]. Our interview sample includes women (n=27) and men (n=15) working across the creative industries, including designers/artists; professional bloggers; marketing consultants/publicists; entertainers/content producers; and small business owners. Participants were recruited online, and interviews took place over Skype/phone: they were recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed by either the researcher or a professional transcription service. Our participants identified a wide range of platforms that they used, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, Béhance, Dribbble, Tumblr, Periscope, Pinterest, Google Plus, and Snapchat.

Topics of discussion included participants’ education and professional background, use of platforms, work routines and conditions, digital creative processes, and evaluation of creativity online. We used an interactive coding scheme to categorize and analyze our data inductively. The process was guided by a grounded theory approach, which consists of ‘simultaneous data collection and analysis, with each informing and focusing the other’ [12, p. 508, 25].

4. FINDINGS: SELF PROMOTION FOR CREATIVE WORKERS
Nearly all of our interviewees highlighted the importance of using social media to promote themselves, their businesses, and their creative products. As Noah shared to this end, “As a freelance artist, I’m constantly looking for where the people are at. That’s because you…have to get your work out in front of people. Even just to let them know that you exist.” Elaine, meanwhile, embraced the logic of self-branding as a key element of securing a foothold in the creative industries amid a flood of competition. As she noted,

“I ruthlessly self promote. I promote my business. I promote my book. It’s very important to me that I get visible and get known.”

To be sure, there were patterned disparities in participants’ self-accounting of these practices. Females content creators seemed compelled to engage in what (Authors) [1] call self-sell promotion, whereby hyping one’s work was done in a more relational, less “aggressive,” or traditionally masculine manner. Some of the artists and designers in our sample, meanwhile, were reluctant to use the term “branding.” likely because such an explicit marketing orientation sits uneasily with the artistic principle of creative self-expression above all else. Confessing the uneasiness that accompanied pure marketing, designer Keith explained “I would start to hate myself being a marketer just pushing and pushing my stuff. To your point, that is why I try to keep it unique.”

Despite such hesitancy, interviewees’ digital self-promotional activities were structured by a pervasive sense of necessity. As Lorraine noted to this end, “I have to be online.” Although Ali suggested that there is “a lot of noise to sort through” in a multi-platform ecosystem, she, too, acknowledged the brand-building potential of “all these new and different channels.” Accordingly, many of our participants found it essential to have “a presence on all of [the social media networks].”

When discussing the particular format that self-promotion assumed online, several of our informants highlighted the importance of projecting elements of themselves consistently across Facebook, Twitter, and more. Isabelle, for instance, offered, “Consistency is everything; I always have the same voice and message across Twitter, Instagram, AngelList and LinkedIn, my platforms of choice.” Ariel, similarly, explained of her social media distribution strategies, “I am basically being me across them.” Yet she later noted, “I tweak my message a little bit so that it fits the platform. So it’ll be a little bit different on Facebook than it will on Twitter.” And, accordingly, other self-accounts seemed to puncture this common refrain of consistency. In particular, we found that creative professionals tailored their messages across the social media ecology as part of a strategy we call platform-specific self-branding. That is, self-promotional activities were constructed through the imagined affordances [43] of individual platforms and their placement within the social media ecology.

As we detail below, the imagined affordances were constructed through assumptions about platform materiality and environment; constructions of the audience; and reflections on the creators’ self-concept. These imaginations overlapped within and across categories. Our decision to disentangle them below is thus for analytic purposes and does not belie the co-constructed nature of the platform-specific self-brand.

4.1 Platform Materiality and 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 (what Helmond and Bucher call “low-level affordances”), the site’s culture (what Helmond and Bucher call “high-level affordances”), and the interplay of these elements within the larger mediated environment. The former category includes the technical features of individual platforms—including textual and image parameters—as well as perceptions about algorithms.
Affirming the swelling importance of the visual in the social media sphere [30], our interviewees acknowledged how the technical specificities concerning the image informed their online self-promotional activities. Reflecting on the wide range of image orientations afforded by various platforms, Mindy explained: “There’s a huge difference between all of the social platforms...even when 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 these imagined technical affordances. She noted: 

“I don’t share the same image on all the platforms, I vary it based on, you know, the requirements. And there are certain images that do better on Pinterest than they will anywhere else... I was doing some research on things that do better on Pinterest, and one of them was shots that don’t have your face in them. Whereas, on Instagram, you know, it’s selfies and, you know, that kind of thing [...]”

Mindy thus approached these platform-specific perceptions of size and content type as fixed “requirements,” editing and tailoring her images to fit to the technical features of each platform. For visual designer Will, similarly, the image size features indicate possibilities for the display and communication of visual art. He shared, “When I work on a project I have to think of three perspectives at the same time. So when I construct the image, [I think]: would it work in a square format on Instagram? Would it work vertically on Béhance, ’cause it’s a bigger screen, and also, would it work horizontally on my personal website?” For Will, the size parameters afford aesthetic meaning as part of the display. Moreover, as these comments indicate, platform image size constraints were often fused with content norms for visual content sharing—Pinterest for “detailed shots,” Instagram for “selfies,” and so on. Kacie, meanwhile, sought out the text-based context of Twitter to draw attention to her visuals and stated, “To me the fact that it doesn’t dictate a visual, leaves more room for my visual.”

In other cases, platform affordances were seen as a constraint that could either foster or inhibit creative expression. Alana, a writer, highlighted how a design feature such as Twitter’s 140 character limit took on new meaning as a creative affordance: “I think the constraint that Twitter puts on you forces creativity, like that’s part of its success as a social network is they decided to limit it to 140 characters...Think about how it changed news, how it forces you to be concise in your headline. And then personally it just forces you to distill your idea.”

In addition to more discernible technical affordances, including textual and visual constraints the content creators routinely brushed up against, our interviewees also acknowledged the role of algorithms in shaping social media self-presentation activities. Algorithms are, of course, concealed to users—an evocation of Gaver’s [22] “hidden affordances”—yet they were rendered perceptible to our interviewees at moments of change (for a discussion about public understanding of algorithms in Facebook, see Rader et al.) [52]. More specifically, shifts in the display or ordering of content led creative producers to infer changes in the platform’s algorithm. For instance, Elaine attributed the perceived lack of interaction on Facebook business pages to the fact that “the Facebook algorithms changed so the business pages just became ghost towns. There was just nothing happening.”

Graphic designer Simon expressed frustration about his inability to control when his creative work was distributed, a shift he attributed to a new Instagram algorithm: “There’s a lot more people that are following me, but from the new algorithm that Instagram integrated, I’m not sure, because sometimes my work is seen and now, sometimes it’s not seen anymore because I could post something yesterday and then the following day somebody would see it, like a day late because of this new algorithm.” He concluded, “My work isn’t getting the same interaction that it once was.”

Creative producers like Simon made decisions about which platforms were worth participating in and even inferred the vitality of platforms based on constructed understandings of their algorithmically-driven content display. Even though algorithms are designed to be highly responsive and tailored to individual user interaction [11], these participants perceived the algorithm-driven timeline as a rigid parameter that made interaction unpredictable and placed limitations on users’ ability to control the distribution of their content.

In addition to perceptions of material or technical features, producers also described the different culture of particular platforms, highlighting the importance of integrating affect into articulations of the imagined affordances of social media [43, p.6]. Interviewees thus believed that Instagram is for “food” or “art,” while Twitter was more of a community for sharing ideas. These cultural conceptions of particular platforms were discussed by our participants in terms of “tone,” “feeling,” “flavor,” or “impression” evoked by the platform. For example, Courtney expressed, “Instagram feels more in the moment.” Kenneth had a similar notion about Instagram, “There’s a sense of immediacy. You have to be posting, and you have to be prolific all the time, and that in itself can be pretty stressful.” In these instances, the users constructed a feeling or a sense about Instagram related to perceived temporal qualities of the platform. Although, they are also clearly drawing on observations of content norms, they attribute these feelings more generally to the platform. For Kenneth, the expectation of frequent posting on Instagram evoked emotions of anxiety and stress. However, for Helen, hashtags on Instagram evoked feelings of annoyance: “So, on my Instagram, I'll incorporate the hashtag into the caption and I don't care but, for my clients, you try to do it in a non-annoying way [...] But now I'm trying to be even less annoying and put all the hashtags in the first comment for them so it's still findable but it looks a little cleaner, a little less annoying – makes them look less like a 14-year-old girl.” In addition to associating emotion with the hashtag, the actual platform feature is personified as a teenage girl, highlighting the way technologies are treated like “social actors” [43, p.7].

Other creative producers conceptualized platform culture based on the imagined uses of each platform. These impressions were largely independent of specific design features and, instead, were constructed as part of a larger social media ecosystem. Lauren, 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.” These creative’s associations of community-building as platform-specific to two different platforms highlight the very individualized ways affordances are imagined, materialized, and constructed.

The impressions about a particular platform were always made in comparison to other platforms within the larger social media...
ecology. For example, Alana explained her perception of what Facebook is not for: “Facebook I don’t see as a creative tool at all, and I don’t think there are many people that do. That’s not what it’s really used for.” Alana used her perceived creative associations of other platforms to define Facebook as not being used as a “creative tool.”

For many of our participants, ever-shifting “imagined uses” and impressions of certain platforms were positioned relationally to other platforms to highlight particular qualities. Max, for instance, explained that Instagram’s image-sharing features offered him the capability to showcase his design work better than Facebook’s features: “Because I’m a designer, [I prefer Instagram because] it's purely visual. It's not like Facebook where it's catty conversations on design. It's purely based on visual aesthetics, and that's what I really like.” Assumptions about Instagram guided Max’s use of the platform. He told us, “I don’t really put text, comments on or take pictures of comments (quotes) to put on there. It's purely visual.” Max’s self-branding efforts were structured by his beliefs about platforms based on practice and interaction—Facebook is for “conversations on design” and Instagram is for “work that you’re promoting.” To this end, it was common for our interviewees to develop heuristics or quick shortcuts related to their professions to help them to group, categorize and make distinctions among platforms to streamline their self-branding efforts across an exhaustive social media ecology.

Helen also described her understanding of new platform technologies in the context of the constellation of other platforms: “Any new platform...teaches [users] the way all the other platforms communicate.” Users such as Helen noticed the evolution of features across ecology of platforms, noticing how platforms borrowed features over time: “Instagram's created a new Snapchat feature. It's not called a Snapchat feature but Instagram Stories is a direct rip-off of Snapchat. [...] And Facebook said, I think, last year, that, in a few years, they fully expect Facebook to be mostly videos. And so things like that -- these platforms all are trying to take from each other -- makes them worth learning.” This continual introduction of new platforms and evolution of features lead many participants such as Simon to conceptualize the social media ecology as extremely fluid: “It's interesting because 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.” This fluidity only increased the feeling on the part of creatives that they needed to adapt their platform-specific branding efforts, resulting in additional, oft-incessant, creative labor.

In the mediated environment, then, imagined affordances are constructed and reconstructed through “adaptation in practice and in interaction” [43, p.5]. As users explore the mediated environment, they develop ideas about the relationships between platform technologies.

### 4.2 Imagined Audiences

Communication scholars have long emphasized the imagined nature of mass media audiences; that is, “the audience” is not a singular, clearly delineated group of individuals but, rather, a socially/industrially defined category that is co-constructed by content creators, executives, advertisers, and more [e.g. 18, 57, 58]. Similarly, social media users tend to have a sense of their audience(s) in mind as they create and broadcast content to digitally networked publics [6, 9, 36]. Much like in offline contexts, the imagined audience on social media is “the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating” [36; see also 38].

Accordingly, our interviewees routinely invoked perceptions of their online audience when discussing content creation and distribution activities for particular SNSs. Some designers and creators drew upon broadly defined demographic categories—gender, age, and geography—to explain why they were drawn either toward or away from a particular social media service. Ariana, for instance, organized her exposition of the social media ecology (see preceding section) 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. I don’t believe people...actively engaged on every platform.”

Helen, similarly, told us that she channels her time and energy to Facebook, based on the premise that the audience for her business—namely professionals aged 30+—is primarily on Facebook. Snapchat, by contrast, was a service she believed she was “too old for” despite the fact that she used the service. Another interviewee—Trent—had a similar perception of the typical Snapchat user. As he quipped, “I’m a freaking man in my 30s, I don't need to be on freaking Snapchat, you know what I mean? But at the same time, I have a bunch of friends that are designers that use it all the time.”

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. Caroline was especially forthright about the importance of monitoring “what your audience is interested in.” She reasoned, “If your audience is just not into Snapchat, then they're not into Snapchat, and you can be on there all day long, and nobody’s going to respond.”

Other designers and creative producers offered qualitative assessments about the imagined audience, including conjectures about the “types” of people who gravitated toward particular platforms. Ashlyn, for instance, believed that Instagram attracted people who are “very superficial in a way,” given their tendency to share carefully curated elements of their lives through “pristine and beautiful” imagery. Elaine, as we discuss below, assumed that members of hate groups prefer Twitter.

A more pervasive trend among our interviewees was to draw upon the dichotomy of “personal versus professional” 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].” Noah, similarly, relayed, “I am on Béhance 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...I just want to make sure that I am kind of a part of that buzz of what’s going on there.” Noah’s professed desire to be “part of that buzz” reveals how participation in certain, career-centric platforms serves a vetting function; that is, members of the community are imbued with credibility and status.

It is perhaps not surprising that creatives and designers directed their attention toward those platforms most likely to yield
favorable results: publicity for a client, kudos from one’s peers, and—amidst a sprawling independent, or gig economy—employment. Crucially, though, such platform-specific imaginations of audience guided the behaviors of our interviewees. Luis offered the following account of how he 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.”

Haley, who shared her belief that, “My audience on Facebook is completely different than my audience on Twitter,” also used subjective markers to provide an explanation of how these audiences differed: “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 meatter part of my story.” On Twitter, she contrasted, “I mouth off quite a bit.” Here, we can see how such assumptions about the audience—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 [36].

As the preceding accounts make clear, these platform-specific imaginations of the audience [2] coincided with self-presentation strategies that were unique to particular platforms. Such findings indicate that platform-specific personas may be used to challenge the context collapse endemic to social networks, particularly for those workers eager to maintain a division between “personal” and “professional.”

4.3 Constructing and Communicating About the Self
Not only did our interviewees consider platform features and audience assumptions when making decisions about their digital self-presentation activities, they also were reflexive about their own self-constructs: ideas about their skills and abilities, their preferences and predilections, and what they hoped to communicate about their self-brands to networked publics. Thus, platform-specific self-branding was partially contingent on the imagined or notion of the self in relation to the platform ecology. For example, start-up founder Ashlyn said that she “naturally gravitated to Instagram”; this decision was not solely based upon her perceived audience or Instagram’s image-sharing capability (for her products) with relevant hashtags but, she explained, also because she considers herself “a very visual person.” Here, her choice to post more content on Instagram was self-directed, based on her perceptions of herself.

Other creatives discussed how they were drawn to certain platforms over others because of the user experience. As Caroline pointed out, “You have to like [the social media site]. If you don’t like it, then what’s the point of it?” She added, “I really enjoy Instagram...I do a lot of family travel stuff, and it’s very easy for me, when we’re doing some traveling with the family to snap a picture, write about it...” Designer Trent, similarly, said that he used Instagram and Twitter the most for his self-promotional activities. He offered, “[There’s] no scientific data to support that. That’s purely just the two platforms that I personally enjoy the most.”

Alternatively, interviewees abandoned self-promotion on certain platforms because of the emotional toll on their sense of self. Claire, 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.” She said that she found those on Twitter “to be like basically me with a different Twitter handle that I find to be so annoying...that I, like, start to hate this person and then I wonder if that’s who I am too.” Ultimately, she left a platform because of negative feelings about herself when using it. This emotional aspect of platform-specific self-branding highlights the importance of “affect” in imagined affordances [43]. In particular, users’ perceptions and attitudes toward their own self-concept interact with the evolving social media ecology.

Elaine, meanwhile, felt “done” with Twitter because of the trolling—an insidious trend which is often attributed to the site’s anonymity and lack of recourse under the site’s initial “free speech” mandate. She recalled:

“I used to be very, very active on Twitter...And I actually made a significant amount of money off...the relationships I built on Twitter. But I had, about two years ago, some pretty awful experiences on Twitter, after I wrote some high profile pieces on Salon. And what happens when you get a bit high profile is that [hate groups] come for you. So Twitter became a bit of a cesspool, and I just was like, ‘I’m done.’ I’m out.”

In addition to reflecting upon how certain platforms made them feel, creative workers also considered whether their skillset aligned with the demands of the specific platform. For instance, enjoyment was frequently related to ease of use of the platform; Joel, for example, posted to “Twitter the most, 'cause it's so easy.” A technology’s ease of use is dependent, of course, on the abilities of the user and such specific abilities and skills are tied to professional identity [39]. As a case in point, Sierra highlighted how different platforms are associated with the perceived skills necessary for success in creative professions: “Chances are, if you really look up to a designer, they also really have a great Instagram ‘cause they're visual. Or the same way that maybe a comedian has a really great Twitter account, it could be a really natural progression.”

Indeed, interviewees highlighted their skillsets when discussing the utility of particular platforms; that is, creatives perceived themselves as having particular strengths, and this awareness drove their platform-specific branding. Andrea thus chose to promote herself predominantly on Twitter because she “had some sort of natural understanding of nuances and stuff in it...[and so] understood how it works.” In a similar vein, Alana tended toward Twitter; she reasoned, “because I'm a writer, I really like working with words.”

Crucially, creative workers’ skillsets evolved within the larger social media ecology. Lauren, drawn to Instagram while developing her photography skills, started “basically 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 Lauren’s professional skillset widened, so, too, did her branding strategies expand to different platforms; she
newly perceived herself as possessing the right skills to effectively use a variety of platforms.

Accordingly, reflexive notions about one’s capacity to effectively use a particular platform, or what Zhao et al. [63] term “perception of literacy,” also factored into self-promotional activities. Elaine, for instance, took into account her strengths and weaknesses into account when 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.” Diana similarly explained, “I really don’t use Twitter much like I just, I’m such a visual person that I can’t get into it the way I get into, like, I really enjoy Pinterest.”

Platform adoption decisions were also impacted by reflexive notions on one’s skills. Trent, for example, was resistant to trying new platforms because he felt overwhelmed by them: “I just, constantly, 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 freaking things into my life…Yeah, I mean, I still, I have not, on purpose, joined Snapchat.”

His resistance, leading to late adoption of new social media sites, gave him the self-perception that his skills were not in line with successful self-branding on specific sites. In fact, he noted that he was “probably horrible” at Instagram because he had resisted it for so long, insinuating that he had not yet developed the correct skills for taking advantage of this platform. Thus, the constant reflection on perceived abilities played a significant part in platform-specific self-branding decisions.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the early aughts, cultural theorist Angela McRobbie [40] argued that creative artists increasingly consider the business side of their professions as part of a “new relation between art and economics [that] marks a break with past anti-commercial notions of being creative” (p. 521). The rise of social media—with its incitement to brand the self with resolve—means that these marketing activities have taken on a new urgency for creative professionals. Our interviews with designers and cultural workers about their digital self-presentation activities reveal that self-promotion is not enacted singularly but, rather, as part of a vast and ever-evolving social media ecology that includes Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, as well as sites specifically designed for creatives.

Such findings reaffirm the importance of understanding digital media use within a social media ecology, whereby users consider the totality of platforms available to them when making decisions about content sharing [63]. We contend that considerations of this ecology are especially important for those who see social media as central to their professional as well as personal self-presentation activities.

The fact that our interviewees engage in platform-specific self-branding within a wider social media culture reinforces the significance of perceptions, rather than (or as much as), the realities of digital media technologies. We have thus drawn upon Neff and Nagy’s [43] framework of imagined affordances to shed light on the extent to which the platform self-brand takes shape and evolves. Indeed, our findings indicate that when creatives think about affordances, they often imagine what is possible, rather than referring to the true (technical) capabilities of each platform. Thus, it is perceptions of platforms that shape these users’ behavior and social practices in the social media ecology.

Such imaginations, we found, are constructed through the interplay between: 1) platform features; 2) assumptions about the audience; and 3) the producer’s own self-concept. In the first category, creative professionals make content sharing decisions by considering material features of platforms (low-level affordances) at the same time as they consider more abstract, high level assumptions about the “platform culture” (high-level affordances). Other-directed perceptions—those of the audience—are similarly important in content sharing decisions, illustrating the interplay between technical features and the (imagined) social structure of the social media ecology. Technology-directed (platform) and other-directed (audience) intersect with a third aspect: self-directed imaginations, ideas around self-concept, related to both the platform and the audience.

We thus suggest that “imagined affordances” can be thought of as being made up of these three categories: materiality-directed, other-directed, and self-directed (which all take into account some aspects of Nagy and Neff’s mediation, materiality, and affect). Moreover, the creation and deployment of platform-specific self-branding practices can be read as a tactic to circumvent the challenges of impression-management in socially mediated contexts. Our interviews thus showed how individuals use discrete platforms as built-in filters to either conceal or reveal particular aspects of their personae. The recursive development and monitoring of these performances of the self can thus be read as a response to the seeming inevitability of context collapse.

Of course, 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, energy, and capital to creating, sharing, and circulating digital content. We conclude that this incitement to monitor and re-fashion one’s digital personae in platform-specific ways marks an intensification of the “always on” laboring subjectivity required to vie for attention in a precarious creative economy. More broadly, the extent to which creative workers must continuously negotiate their self-presentation(s) presages larger trends in an independent economy, where so many of us are hailed as “entrepreneurial free agents” [see 44, 26, 34, 44].

6. REFERENCES

[2] Author 2017


