“I Work in Social”: Community Managers and Personal Branding in Social Media

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Information
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Welcome to a world of networking, hustling, coffee, cupcakes, and cocktails; a world where social media is not only an interest, but a way that people meet, become friends, make money, and stay connected. Here, social media is both a passion and a profession, but there is also an unspoken tension. My research analyzes how social media managers—those who manage online communities and create content across digital platforms—work in social media (referring to the work practice of social media managers), and also do the work of social media (referring to the curation of their personal brand using social media to leverage a strategic advantage in the job market). Using a mixed method approach, including three years of fieldwork in Toronto and semi-structured interviews with social media professionals, this dissertation analyzes the “social media scene” and identifies elements of the changing landscape of work and self-presentation in an age of social media. The research examines the practice of community
management across various industries, including marketing agencies, entertainment, not-for-profit, education, government, telecommunications, retail, and sports.

The dissertation uncovers an emerging feminization of social media within the profession. I argue that social media management represents the next iteration of the devaluation of women’s work in the tech industry, mirroring the history of women’s labour in technology. I uncover how people are adopting personal branding practices on social media as a strategy to gain control of their own lives and careers against conditions of increased corporatization, job insecurity, and precarious economic times. I explore the influencer economy and introduce the term “casual influencer” to refer to an ordinary person who posts sponsored content on behalf of a brand, and are typically compensated with free “swag” or experiences, which points to the commercialization of community. The dissertation contributes to our understanding of the inherent contradictions and binaries of living and working in a digitally mediated world: the double labour of working on personal branding as an integral aspect of being an employee; the dissolving divide between the personal and the professional; and the visibility of influence and invisibility of disclosure inherent in social media.
Acknowledgements

To this day, I am often asked, “You can get a PhD researching social media?” One of my participants who works in social media explains, “People think I just sit on Facebook all day, which I do, that’s not a lie. There’s just more to it than that.” This is true of both working in social media and researching social media…there is certainly more to it than that! This research would not have been possible without my network of accomplished mentors, respected colleagues, generous participants, and continual supporters who have been part of my doctoral journey. The goal of this research was to take social media work seriously, so a heart-felt thank you to my fantastic research participants and people I met in the Toronto social media scene who generously shared their experiences, opened my eyes to their world, and offered critical insight into their working and personal lives. I continually strived to do them justice in writing their stories and amplifying their courageous voices.

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Dedication

To my mother, Dr. Robyn Jacobson, for giving, editing, and doing everything.
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Introduction: Social Media Managers and the Work of Social Media Management

Social media manager \([\text{soh-shuh l + mee-dee-uh} + \text{man-i-jer}]\):

1. a person who works to manage the online presence for organizations, brands, or individuals by creating and monitoring published content across social media platforms.
2. also called a community manager.

Social media does not sleep…and neither does she. Melanie keeps her cracked smartphone under her pillow to check on her social media clients when she anxiously wakes in the middle of the night. She’s a freelance social media manager and responsible for managing the online presence across all social media channels for her three clients (two local restaurants and an independent bookstore). On a sunny Friday morning, she heads downstairs to see her retired parents drinking tea while reading the newspaper. They ask her what time she got home last night, which she always finds hilarious, as she is 29 years old. She merely answers “late.” She was at a car launch media event; although she has never owned a car, she gushed about the event on Twitter while posting photos of
herself next to an elaborate cupcake tower. Her parents genuinely worry about her future, and ask her when she will get a “real job” (that is not just playing on Facebook all day) and have enough money to move out. She casually laughs it off to avoid the recurring conversation as she scrolls through posts from last night with the event hashtag. She pays careful attention to how others posted about the event as she is always looking for ways to improve her social media strategy—both personally and professionally. While some influencers in the “social media scene” received hundreds of likes, her post received only 84. She wonders how can she express more authentic excitement over a fancy car she can never own.

Grabbing a protein bar from the cupboard, she heads to her local coffee shop and sets up in her usual spot: street-facing, near a power outlet. With a zero-dollar operating budget, she only uses free tools; she logs on to her free social media management tool and conducts an overall scan and assessment of each of her clients. Some clients pay to merely have a simple social media presence, while others stress different strategic goals, such as increasing brand awareness or engaging in customer relations. After some time, she takes a moment to post on her personal Instagram account: a colourful photo of her coffee, sunglasses, and her new notepad embossed with the quote, “She believed she could so she did,” all carefully positioned on the table.

Melanie designs a funny “hump day” graphic (referring to Wednesday: the middle of the work week) for her client’s bookstore account, crafts the accompanying

______________________________

1 An influencer, or social media influencer, refers to a person who has built credibility, a large audience, and/or the ability to influence and persuade their network on social media. As I discuss in Chapter 6, influencers capitalize on their personal brand by sharing branded content on behalf of organizations in return for some form of compensation.
text in the bubbly brand voice, and finally clicks “post.” Instantaneously, she grabs her phone and “likes” the post on her personal account because she hates to wait for the first person to “like” it. She’s cultivated a small, but tight community of book lovers who enthusiastically engage with each other and share stories about reading; she loves working on this account, as she is really proud of the community she has built. She switches gears and continues to strategically brainstorm, creatively design, and post content for each of her clients on various social media platforms.

A sea of social media notifications constantly interrupts her work. She notices an irate tweet from a customer of the restaurant account that she manages. It is a best practice to move the negativity off social media so that it is not publicly available, so she profusely apologizes and asks the customer for his email so she can help to resolve the issue. In all-caps he replies that he does not want an email, he wants his money back. She sips her coffee, takes a deep breath, and carefully crafts a polite reply. The customer-turned-keyboard-warrior begins a multi-tweet rampage saying she is an idiot, “just like the f*cking restaurant staff.” She works to placate the man, while flipping between social media platforms and clients in an attempt to stay on top of the endless flow of messages.

After five hours straight of staring at a screen, she leaves the coffee shop and heads to the gym for a quick workout, then moves to a different coffee shop. She repeats the morning activities while also applying for two full-time social media positions (it’s her daily personal quota in an attempt to find a more secure job). She loves the flexibility of the freelance life, yet feels constantly overwhelmed with juggling the demands of her clients’ social media, learning about social media analytics so that she can report the
impact of her work (in an attempt to get paid more), as well as attending the barrage of networking events or media events that she gets invited to.

She’s behind on her work, but she eventually goes home, heats up some leftover dinner her mom prepared, and takes her laptop into bed with her and continues working on managing her clients’ social media. Her day does not begin or end, but ebbs and flows. Her pay is finite, but her clients’ expectations are not.

Across the city in a trendy downtown condo, Rose wakes up on the same Friday morning to her daily alarm set on her iPhone at 6:30 a.m. Before the sun is up, she takes a quick shower and puts on a fashionable, yet business-formal, monotone outfit. Ready for her day with a tall non-fat soy latte sprinkled with cinnamon in hand, she flashes her ID badge at security, and takes the elevator up to the 41st floor of her corporate offices. She’s already checked her email on the way to work and mapped out the day ahead. She logs on to an integrated social media management platform and reviews all of the mentions that the company received across all social media platforms. Working as the community manager for a large international corporation, she has developed a system for identifying the most important social media posts. Aligned with the corporation’s brand image and tone, she has pre-scheduled the day’s posts that will be automatically published across the various accounts: two Facebook posts, four Twitter posts, and two Instagram posts. The organization’s social media profiles show Rose’s name, profile photo, and states that she is available 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Using an in-depth social media analytics report that points to the ROI (return on investment), she has finally convinced her boss that they need to hire a second person to help manage the company’s growing social media accounts. She spends some time
reviewing more than 150 applications for the entry-level position. The job applicants are predominantly young women, but there are also many mid-career communications and public relations (PR) professionals applying.

At lunch, she Ubers to the advertising agency’s office to finalize a large social media campaign involving multiple partners and several social media influencers in Toronto and Vancouver. She is excited as she has been tirelessly creating this new influencer program and has worked to personally foster a relationship with each influencer. As she heads back to the office, she forwards the final plans to the legal team for one final check before the program officially launches next week.

She responds to the necessary social media posts, replies to emails from various teams that update her on their upcoming happenings so she can integrate them into her social media strategy for the next business quarter, and heads home. She’s too tired to make dinner, so she picks up two sushi burritos and heads home to her fiancée and a glass of wine. With Netflix on in the background, they both work on the couch where she schedules interviews with four job applicants for the following week, keeps an eye on all the social media mentions, comments on several influencers’ posts, replies to a few late night emails, and prepares for another day.

These composite sketches, based on my research, represent a day in the life of two young women who live and labour behind the tweets and screens as social media/community managers. They are part of a growing workforce in new media work and personify the participants in this dissertation. While their workplaces, pay, and day-to-day practices are seemingly quite different, both women are passionate about their work, eager to continually learn about social media, and engage further with their community
beyond the parameters of their paid work. Social media, which lies at the core of their blurred personal and professional identities, is where they work on both their personal brand and their employers’ online presence. Sometimes they are the online face for their employer, yet at other times they toil behind an anonymous screen. Using social media, they become the digital voice for the organizations they work for, yet their own voices are unheard.

1.1 Organizational Social Media
Welcome to a world of networking, hustling, coffee, cupcakes, and cocktails; a world where social media is not only an interest, but a way that people meet, become friends, make money, and stay connected. In this world, “social” is shorthand for social media and, in the Toronto social media scene, people are often introduced by their Twitter handle. Here, social media is both a passion and a profession, but there is also an unspoken tension within their working conditions, which is characterized by perpetual hustling, devalued work practices, and increasingly precarious work. In this dissertation, I examine how social media managers—those who manage online communities and create content across digital platforms—work in social media (referring to the work practices of being community managers), and how they also do the work of social media (referring to the curation of their personal brand using social media to leverage a strategic advantage in the job market). Using a mixed methods approach, including three years of fieldwork in Toronto and 20 semi-structured interviews with social media professionals, my research focuses on the “social media scene” and identifies the changing landscape of work and self-presentation in an age of social media. This dissertation examines social
media professionals who work in various industries, including marketing agencies, entertainment, not-for-profit, education, government, telecommunications, retail, and sports.

Social media is “a phenomenon” and also “a buzzword” (boyd, 2015, p. 1) that has been repeatedly discussed and analyzed in scholarly literature, yet is imprecisely defined. Rather than understanding social media as merely a set of digital tools supporting computer-mediated communication, I use the term to refer to “a set of tools, practices, and ideologies” (boyd, 2015, p. 1). Identified by the affordances of user-generated content, social media is often colloquially understood by the platforms themselves: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, or the latest addition to the evolving suite of tools. In 1991, the World Wide Web was developed by Tim Berners Lee, which became the foundation for networked communication (van Dijck, 2013). In 1997, the first social networking site, SixDegrees, launched and was promoted as a tool to connect people to send messages within their social networks (boyd & Ellison, 2008). From 1997 to 2002 various tools, including LiveJournal, Ryze, and Friendster, were developed; in 2003, social networking sites became mainstream with the notable introduction of MySpace (2003) and Facebook (2004) (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The growth and prevalence of social media as a vital conduit for information and communication has encouraged diverse organizations to adopt social media as part of their practice. For example, over 70 million businesses are using Facebook Pages to connect with customers (Facebook, Inc., 2017).

When social media was newly emerging as an organizational communications tool, corporations on the vanguard of technological trends identified an opportunity to
establish a presence on social media. The original motivation for many corporations to adopt social media was merely to serve as a social placeholder, or as a “free” and convenient informational broadcast. By 2010, 50% of global organizations had adopted social media initiatives (Huy & Shipilov, 2012). In Canada, 46% of all businesses use social media (UFCW, 2017). As social media has grown and evolved, businesses are using social media for numerous objectives, such as to build community, deliver information, harvest data, and provide customer service, which points to the conflation of community building and advertising to derive financial profit. As a result of this growth, a new job has emerged and proliferated: the online/digital/social media community manager. Companies hire community managers to strategically manage their online presence.

1.2 Community Managers

Social media managers are responsible for managing an organization’s brand and presence on various social media platforms. They are engaged in a diverse set of tasks including developing the social media strategy (referring to the comprehensive approach to social media that is aligned with an organization’s objectives that typically include developing measurable goals, identifying social media channels, conducting an assessment of the organizational landscape, and planning content); creating compelling digital content; identifying social media influencers to collaborate with; building brand awareness; and dealing with customer questions or complaints.

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2 As I describe in Chapter 2, a brand is a “cluster of strategic cultural ideas” (Grant, 2006, p. 27).
“Community managers” do not constitute a stable category of workers, which is a tension I tease out in discussing the job titles. Rather, the blurry category that loosely falls under community managers is what the research is focused on—as it is under-researched and under-theorized. As with other work in the creative industries, those who work in social media have diverging job titles, employment arrangements, and compensation structures. However, unlike more established professions, such as administrative assistants or journalists, there is a lack of understanding of this type of work. Accordingly, I introduce the “social media industries” to open up the analysis of this space to focus on all forms of work using or producing social media content. In the following section, I describe the varying tasks, experiences, roles, and responsibilities of those who broadly work in community management in order to situate their work and provide a starting point for critical engagement.

Their responsibilities are wide-ranging and diverse, but primarily entail publishing content and engaging with individuals by building and managing online communities around a client (including an organization, brand, or individual). For example, a community manager working for a company that has yet to embrace social media would set up the company’s social media accounts on selected platforms (such as Twitter and Facebook), produce tweets and posts to attract a large following, and engage the community in conversation. The goal of community management differs across sectors, yet all involve using social media as a tool to create content, communicate, and build relationships with the community or customers. Some for-profit organizations seek to use social media to raise awareness of a brand to increase customer sales, whereas not-
for-profit organizations may seek to improve brand awareness and create community engagement around an issue, campaign, or endeavour.

Community managers are digital creators and producers who are heavily engaged with social media management and personify the digitally savvy individuals leading social media trends. They were typically early adopters of social media and their work necessitates staying up-to-date on the newest social media platforms and tools on their own time. They enter the job with the necessary skills as companies often do not want to or need to invest in training. The deployment of social media has dramatically changed and raised the profile of the community manager role: in a survey of 250 U.K. companies, 69% have or plan to hire a community manager (Episerver, 2012). The limited research that exists on the profession through industry surveys continues to point to the growing use of social media for business. For example, in a 2016 survey of over 5,000 marketers, 90% expressed that social media is important to their business (Stelzner, 2016).

Social media managers are “lead users” of social media. The term lead user refers to extreme users of a product or service who have needs that the general public will face in time (von Hippel, 1986). The lead user method is traditionally used in product development and improvement whereby the deepest understanding of new products and needed new products comes from a few users (Herstatt & von Hippel, 1992). Beyond product improvement, as lead or extreme users of social media, community managers provide insight into the practices of an emerging technology industry. This dissertation explores new media work, highlighting how community managers—working for corporations, brands, government, not-for-profit organizations, individuals, and other
entities (see Table 1)—have a unique perspective through which to understand engagement with social media and how they position brands using social media.

Community management appears at the crossroads of communications, strategy, digital marketing, and public relations, and represents a new type of work in information technology. A few participants in my study considered community management to be allied with public relations, while many others recognized it as distinct. As one of my participants, Sabrina, explains, “I think for me, I am first and foremost a PR professional and a communications professional. So probably communications over anything else.” While communications and public relations practitioners have long worked to promote brands, the introduction of social media has afforded a new kind of new media worker: community managers. They are responsible for developing digital content for their organizations, including the creative production of photographs, graphics, videos, and integration of text.

They also have the critical community/customer-facing role, serving as the intermediary between an individual and the organization by engaging in customer relationship management—a type of service role—through communication via social media. One of the participants in my study, Dale, describes the multi-faceted skill set that is required to be a social media manager:

You need to be able to do photography, video editing, graphic design, even logos…So, you need to have all of those creative side[s], and then at the same time coding, website creation. I have to recode on a regular basis so that I can optimize Open Graph and Twitter cards and things along those lines. Even learning SEO [search engine optimization] and website design and what works and what doesn’t work. You have to understand that your site has to be responsive. How does it read? What does your copy look like? Is it “all the
things?” And I’ve kind of just learned all of that stuff over time, right? But then you have to learn each social medium, what works within those, what’s available to you, like, YouTube with annotations—you can’t just cut a video, hammer it up there, and be like, “This will be viral.” You need to stack on top. Where are you going to embed that? What are you going to do with it afterwards? What’s your description like? What tags did you put in there? What annotations are you adding? What’s your call to action at the bottom? Do you have your social there? Have you branded all of your channels? And that’s just creating your YouTube account! Then actually coming up with the content that goes into the actual videos so that you gain subscribers, and then where you push that out, how you position each of those tweets and Facebook posts, and all of that stuff.

Dale’s expansive description of his everyday tasks as a social media manager illustrates the numerous tools and apps he needs to be knowledgeable about, but also the ability to identify the professional needs of the organization and community he is working for. His work highlights the need for organizations to have a social strategy that encourages people to communicate with one another effectively with the appropriate tools, rather than merely using social media to advertise products or services (Piskorksi, 2014).

Community managers develop and execute this social strategy. Some of the specific activities of a community manager involve: (1) writing social media posts—such as blogs, Facebook posts, tweets, and Snapchat stories—and creating audio-visual content—such as podcasts, videos, and Instagram photos; (2) analyzing social media metrics to quantify their social media performance, such as tracking engagement and identifying social media reach; and (3) engaging the community, especially prominent customers, bloggers, and influencers, in conversation about the brand. As I discuss further in Chapter 6, an influencer is someone who has captured attention on social media and has the ability to persuade or influence their network. The goal of community
management is also to develop, and be, the brand voice online. In this dissertation, I critically examine the role and practices of social media management that comprises various forms of emerging work in the social media industries. Like other professions that are located in various organizations (such as administrative assistants), community managers can be found across many organizational sectors.

While the role of community manager has existed since the 1990s—as some companies hired employees, often referred to as community moderators, to build a community around a brand on early message boards (Hagel 1999)—the growth of social media has resulted in a reclassification of the online/digital/social media community manager role. Writing before the advent of what we now refer to as social media, Ruth Williams (1999) identifies that OLC (“on-line community”) managers work to keep the community “afloat and value-generating” (p. 54). Corporations need communities to derive financial profit, which explains the corporate desire to build a vibrant and engaged community. The emphasis on profit is highlighted in the industry discourse of “ROI” meaning “return on investment” (Drury, 2008). For some community managers, building a community online entails the creation of a space where people communicate with one another and providing support is their goal. Sabrina, a participant in my study, explains that people who merely “like” or “follow” a brand on social media do not constitute a community. With hundreds of thousands of “likes” on Sabrina’s employer’s Facebook account she asks, “Is it a community?” And responds, “Absolutely not, because those people aren’t really engaging at all times.” Riley, another participant, further explains

3 See Tali’s description of working as a community moderator in the 1990s in Chapter 4.8.
that community exists when the community of people starts interacting amongst themselves without the direct involvement of the community manager:

Initially, you always have a lot of interaction between you and the community and you’re really sort of slogging to sort of push that and have those interactions continue. But when the community starts interacting with each other, without any interaction with you, that’s both exciting and it can be really rewarding depending on what it is that they’re doing.

The interactions that Riley refers to include when members of an online community communicate with each another about a company’s products or services, when a person comes to the company’s defense (such as during a public relations disaster or criticism), or when someone answers a question posted to social media.

While the goal of community building may be similar over time, the language, roles, and jargon surrounding online communities have vastly changed since 1999 with the introduction of “Web 2.0” and social media. The word “online” is typically not used in the job title of social media positions, even though the tasks chiefly involve engaging people and communities online. While much of the work of community management is online, some community managers also speak at conferences and events on social media.

The introduction of social media has dramatically changed and raised the profile of the community manager. The job title of “social media manager” is often used interchangeably with the community manager title. While there are differences, both terms point to an employee/individual who is responsible for social media platforms through developing social media strategies, communicating with the audience, and conducting social media management. There is tremendous overlap in the terminology of the job, yet an important distinction is that social media managers and community
managers are responsible for creating social media content and engaging in the interactive “front-line” work, whereas digital or social media strategists create the overall social media strategy, but may not execute or create the content to the social media platforms. Roberto Montalvo (2011) defines social media management as “the collaborative process of using Web 2.0 platforms and tools to accomplish desired organizational objectives” (p. 91). Kristian Tørning, Zeshan Jaffari, and Ravi Vatrapu (2015) state that social media management “is concerned with the operational issues, managerial challenges, and comparative advantages that ensue from the adoption and use of social media platforms for organizational functions such as marketing and sales, customer support, product innovation etc.” (p. 1). Community strategist Connie Bensen (2009), states, “A community manager is the voice of the company externally and the voice of the customers internally.” A community manager monitors, engages, and leads discussions surrounding a brand or company in external communications with clients, customers, and the public at large. As terminology in the industry is not well defined, the job categorization for those professionally working in social media production is also changing as the marketplace and the job itself develops.

People who “work in social” have various job titles, such as social media manager, community manager, social media editor, digital strategist, and director of community. When asked about her job title, Tali, a community manager I interviewed, stated, “Social media management, community management, digital media management, whatever you want to call it,” which reflects the ambiguous terminology surrounding this emerging form of work. Ted similarly describes his work in social media, “I’ve been creative services and social media coordinator—and then I was digital media
coordinator—and so this fell underneath digital—and I was like manager of digital media—digital and social media—and now I’m manager of social media content.”

There is a great deal of fluidity in the job titles amongst those who work in social media. The two job titles that currently dominate are social media manager and community manager, yet there is little consistency in the ways these job titles are applied. Sprout Social and Hootsuite are prominent social media management tools used by community managers to monitor online conversations and manage social media profiles for brands. Hootsuite (2015) describes a community manager as a builder of relationships, whereas a social media manager is more of a strategist. In comparison, Sprout Social identifies that:

A social media manager is responsible for being the brand on social media. They create content, respond to comments, answer questions, and much more as the brand. Social media managers, more often than not, deal with people who have a relationship with, or have heard of, the brand. A community manager is responsible for advocating the brand on social networks. They create their own social persona and actively go out within the online community to connect with potential customers and advocate the brand. Community managers typically deal with those who haven’t heard of the business they work for and boost awareness for the company. (Patterson, 2014)

These varying descriptions point to the lack of definitional precision that exists within the job titles of those who work “in social media.” Some people who work in social media are adamant on the classification and precise nomenclature surrounding job titles. Some community managers distance themselves from the work of using social media as a pure marketing tool to derive profit, and instead identify their job as community
building with a focus on the work of building relationships with and between community members. Riley, a community manager I interviewed, explains that, to her, social media managers are more focused on ads, marketing, and converting their work into financial profit for the company, rather than community building. She reiterates that neither the community manager nor the social media manager job is intrinsically “better” than the other, but as a community manager, she sees her role as that of support, rather than that of advertising. She continues:

I feel like sometimes you’ll be talking to someone and they won’t know the difference between a community manager and a social media manager, and those are two very different roles and it does mean a different thing in different businesses, but at least vaguely, you should know perhaps the difference between those two things.

The shifting nomenclature reflects the intrinsic difficulty of an emerging profession that lacks formal recognition and some form of classification (Jansen, Jacobson, & Resch, 2015). Job titles for people who work in social media include, but are not limited to: community manager, community strategist, community moderator, director of community, social media manager, online community manager, social media specialist, social media consultant, social media coordinator, social media marketer, and social media freelancer. Using the terminology interchangeably reflects the industry language and the understanding of the work, while also recognizing that new terms will emerge as others fade away (Kennedy, 2016). As I discuss in Chapter 5, the lack of precision in job titles in the social media industries serves a more insidious role in capitalist and branded society; a promotion by way of a new job title serves in lieu of financial compensation.
In this dissertation, I use the terms social media professional, community manager, and social media manager interchangeably. This is not done haphazardly, but rather is a linguistic choice to most accurately reflect my fieldwork experiences and participants’ voices. While academic practice emphasizes definitional precision, the reality is that it just does not exist in the current configuration of the social media industries because of the evolving and dynamic nature of the field. The lack of employment categorization to date has implications for the public’s recognition, corporatization, hiring, and overall valuation of social media professionals. My research aims to lay the foundation to help illuminate precisely what is meant when people say they work in “social.”

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, there are over 80 job titles that require the use of social media with a projected growth rate much higher in comparison to other occupations (Kwon, Min, Geringer, & Lim, 2013). The evolution of this field is demonstrated by various professional development events, such as the Community Manager Appreciation Day, established in 2010 by a community strategist, Jeremiah Owyang, and celebrated on the fourth Monday of January, or the first Community Managers Conference in Canada—entitled CM1 and developed by DX3, The Tite Group, and FITC (Future. Innovation. Technology. Creativity.)—in November 2013 in Toronto. These developments indicate a professionalization and formalization of an emerging job categorization. This is further indicated in new continuing education programs at colleges and universities that offer programs in social media management, such as the Social Media and Online Community Management program offered by The University of
British Columbia and a Social Media for Business Performance Certificate by the University of Waterloo.

The Community Roundtable (2014), a for-profit organization based in the United States, surveyed community managers and found that community managers: (1) have an average of eight years experience in the workforce, and three years of experience with community management; (2) make an average salary of US$65,778; and (3) identify engagement and people skills, content development skills, strategic and business skills as the most important assets of a community manager, while technical skills were prioritized least. Owyang (2007) notes that the four tenets of the community manager are: to be a “community advocate” by listening and monitoring customers, to act as the “brand evangelist” by promoting the brand, to employ “savvy communication skills” by understanding how to effectively use the technologies, and to gather input from the community for the company to develop or improve products and services.

Problematically, the industry focus is directed at determining who is a community manager and what a community manager does, rather than providing any in-depth critical engagement concerning the work and surrounding practices in social media.

While research on the interpersonal use of social media has proliferated (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Whiting & Williams, 2013), organizational-level research on social media is less developed (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Piskorski, 2014). Social media management is growing as a field and as an emerging profession, yet to date there is little research that examines social media or community management as an occupation in information and communication studies. Tamara Shepherd and Jeremy Shtern interviewed digital strategists to understand how the workers conceptualize their work as
“cultural intermediaries” in the digital media economy (Kruse et al., 2015). Montalvo (2011) identified the skills necessary for a social media manager. Silva Robles (2017) analyzed the job ads of a Spanish Association of Online Community Managers and Social Media Professionals and identifies the main responsibility of community management is to update social media content. Tørning, Jaffari, and Vatrapu (2015) interviewed social media managers in Denmark to identify the challenges of organizing social media and perceptions on the ROI of various social media activities. Based on an analysis of Australian job postings and interviews of social strategists, Anthony McCosker (2017) found that social strategists work in-house for various organizations and that social media work is diffused across industries. Ojoung Kwon, Daihwan Min, Susan Geringer, and Sang-Kyu Lim (2013) surveyed 400 students at a business school in the United States to gauge what qualifications were expected of a Social Media Coordinator and argued that universities need to prepare students for jobs in social media.

While the previous research serves to identify a specific sector or the managerial perspective on an emerging profession, and has implications for how effectively community managers perform their job, there has generally been little research on the work practices and professional identities of community managers. Furthermore, the research has primarily focused on the social media output, rather than the production of social media, including the role of the community managers and their work practices. In this dissertation, I identify how people experience their work in community management. I do so by exploring the social media scene they are embedded in, and by analyzing the personal—rather than the managerial—side of work in social media. My research shines
a light on the emerging personal branding and influencer practices in social media.

Community managers—working for individuals, corporations, startups, government, organizations, and diverse agencies—have as their primary duty the critical customer-facing role and thus have a unique perspective with which to understand engagement with social media.

Community managers live and breathe “social,” yet social media management is an emerging and ever-evolving field. The rules for what are required, expected, and off-limits perpetually shift. Further, the ethics of social media and the best practices within the workplace of social media managers are perpetually unfolding. Young adults (aged 18–35) are increasingly entering into social media as a profession: globally, 69.7% of social media managers are millennials (Payscale, 2013)\(^4\)—defined as those born 1981 to 1997 (Pew Research, 2015)—yet there is limited research that examines the professional lives, work practices, and perspectives of those who work in social media.

It is important to recognize that organizations are hiring people to use commercial tools (such as Facebook and Twitter) created and owned by for-profit organizations. These social media sites wield tremendous power and value: Facebook is valued at US$369.3 billion, LinkedIn at US$25.8 billion, Twitter at US$14.4 billion, and Snapchat is estimated at US$25 billion (Ovide & Molla, 2016). As the largest social network, Facebook claims it has 1.28 billion visitors every day, generated US$8.0 billion in Q1 revenue for 2017, has 18,800 employees, operates nine data centres, and also owns the messaging app WhatsApp and the photo sharing app Instagram (Facebook, Inc., 2017).

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\(^4\) Payscale is a company that has the largest database of individual salary profiles, including information on 15,000 job titles across 365 industries.
Social media platforms capitalize on the massive amounts of user-generated data by harvesting personal information and selling it to advertisers (Trottier, 2016). In an evolving and turbulent digital labour market, the role of community managers is in flux and may change as more complex social media analytics tools are introduced and the social media platforms evolve (Gillespie, 2010). The changes that are made are in the interest of the platforms’ business model and characterized by monetization of users’ personal content. Given the centrality of social media in the digital economy and for organizations, understanding the lived experiences of social media managers is key.

1.3 Working in the Social Media Industries

In this dissertation, I propose and make use of the term “social media industries” to include all forms of work that focus on using or producing social media content. The social media industries are made up of multiple professions. The term is used as a way to critically analyze both the distinct work performed in the social media industries and the work practices of those working within the social media industries. Much like the internet industry (where new media firms develop software and hardware (Neff, 2012)) or media industries (including information technology (IT), television, radio, gaming, and advertising), the social media industries are developing. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (2009) have similarly advocated for “media industries” (focusing on the audiovisual media) to be identified as a distinct field, and I contend that an argument can

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5 For example, each user on Facebook is worth approximately $3.73 per quarter because of the value of their data (Gibbs, 2016).

6 In his introduction to an edited volume, Albarran (2013) refers to the social media industries as a way to approach social media from a business and economic perspective.
be made for specifically mapping out work in the social media industries. As I describe in Chapter 2, the social media industries are situated at the intersection of new media work, virtual work, and the creative and cultural industries, yet operate with distinctive properties. Importantly, the social media industries are widespread in that the work is distributed across other industries, which means the impact is pervasive.

Given the widespread adoption and growth of new jobs in social media, the social media industries include the behind-the-scenes work of commercial content moderation and social media mining; the front-line work of social media managers and community managers; as well as new forms of work of those who use social media to promote and advertise, such as influencers (Gillen, 2008; see Chapter 6). Being a professional social media influencer may not have seemed like a “job” a few years ago, and even more remote was the idea of influencer managers, yet with the proliferation and popularity of social media use and shifts in advertising industry practices, these jobs are becoming widespread in the industry. The use of the term social media industries, as I use it, is intentionally flexible recognizing that the social media industries are expanding and will continually evolve as the tools, work, and uses of social media mature—particularly in a changing and turbulent labour market.

Beyond a snapshot in time, this research serves as an introduction to work in the social media industries by focusing on social media managers who manage communities and brands using social media. At the start of my fieldwork, people were merely

7 Roberts (2016) writes that commercial content moderators “act as digital gatekeepers for a platform, company, brand, or site deciding what content will make it to the platform and what content will remain there” (p. 147). The work is marked by invisibility and low pay as the commercial content moderators filter out racist, homophobic, sexist, pornographic, disgusting, and other content that is deemed damaging to the brand. Community managers may also work to clean content, but this is not their only job as they also work to produce social media content.
beginning to have formal jobs working in social media, hence the articulation of the statement: “I work in social.” Most organizations began with (and continue to hire) a person who is responsible for all things related to social media. As described earlier, social media managers are responsible for creating, maintaining, growing, and strengthening the community and online identity of companies using social media. As with the evolution of any industry, there is a stratification and further classification that carves out niches and breaks apart the social media industry into discrete positions. Consequently, just a few years after my initial fieldwork and at the time of writing, most of my participants had different jobs that ranged from influencer manager to head of digital, which further illustrates how work in the social media industries is becoming more prevalent, standardized, and professionalized.

Why study social media professionals? Rosalind Gill, writing in 2002 and reflecting on her research on web designers states, “Indeed, despite the importance of new media workers for arguments about the transformation of the economy and the future of work, there have been very few studies which have actually examined new media workers’ lives” (Gill, 2002, p. 75). Similarly, Mark Deuze (2011) argues, “Scholarship on the production side of media industries is relatively scarce” (p. x). While studies of new media workers previously received little attention in academic scholarship, there is a renewed focus on new media workers, particularly in the cultural and creative industries (for instance, the EU collaborative research project, Dynamics of Virtual Work). Research on various forms of new media workers—freelance journalists (Cohen, 2016), web designers (Kennedy, 2012), women’s magazine producers (Duffy, 2013), tech workers in San Francisco (Marwick, 2013), and unpaid interns (de Peuter,
Cohen, & Brophy, 2015; Shade & Jacobson, 2015)—is critically important in understanding the shifts in work practices. By specifically focusing on social media managers as digital creators, I respond to Gill’s plea to study new media workers and contribute to the developing research agenda on technology and work. Research with a deep understanding of the work, experiences, and beliefs of social media managers is a gap in information and communication studies. Because social media management represents an iteration of new media work, it is important to understand the context and texture of this work and how it reflects on the impact and spread of creative and cultural content in news, entertainment, and information. The work of community managers is crucially important in the network of digital media production, yet as I uncovered in my research, the work is often done anonymously (workers’ real names are not acknowledged), by women, and on limited work contracts (see Chapter 4).

Trends that begin in the technology industry are likely to migrate to other industries. Accordingly, the practices and lessons learned from this research may speak to larger societal changes in work and technology. Open-office environments, “flexible” work hours, and work perks (like free snacks) have migrated out of the high-tech industries into various office environments seeking to mirror the “cool” factor of these high-tech industries in Silicon Valley that are heralded as “workplaces of the future” (Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005; Ross, 2004; Silicon Valley Rising, 2016). As Gill (2002) explains, “There is a further reason for examining the lives, experiences and working practices of new media workers: they have come to have an iconic status in terms of representing the future of work” (p. 72). Tech culture permeates and has a lasting impact on other industries in more subtle ways (Hardy, 2016), such as the
workplace “flexibility” afforded by new technologies that results in employees being constantly accessible to employers (see Chapter 5).

Community management is an iteration of new media work, which necessitates recognizing this trajectory and not presupposing the novelty in this type of work. Analyzing the patterns of sociality necessitates tracing the technological lineage to highlight the continuities and convergence of “old media”; as scholars have documented, many of the affordances of new media are also present in traditional media. It is important to historically situate the study of social media because only focusing on current technologies and neglecting technological history results in what Graham Murdock and Michael Pickering call “cultural presentism” (as cited by Morley, 2011, p. 748). Rather than sudden shifts from one era of communication technologies to another (Morley, 2011), studies of social media should acknowledge that there are numerous continuities between, and convergence of, old and new media which implicate the application of both a theoretical and methodological framework (Jenkins, 2006; Papacharissi, 2011).

Accordingly, the study of social media work necessitates an understanding of other forms of media work over time. Community management is situated within the trajectory of the history of information technology (IT) work, specifically new media work, and virtual work (Baym, 2010; Fortunati, 2011; Mandiberg, 2012; Marwick, 2010; Neff, 2012; Rheingold, 2000; Scott-Dixon 2004; Scholz, 2013; Senft, 2008; van Dijck, 2013). Ursula Huws defines virtual work as “labour, whether paid or unpaid, that is carried out using a combination of digital and telecommunications technologies and/or produces content for digital media” (as cited by Webster & Randle, 2016, p. 5). New
media work refers to the range of new forms of work that emerged after the development of the World Wide Web (Gill, 2002). Aphra Kerr (2016) states, “Community management (CM) can be conceptualised as a new form of virtual work given that the workers are dependent on, and work through, networked digital technologies and support the creation and circulation of content by developers and users” (p. 117). Unlike other forms of virtual work that is largely outsourced to low-income countries, such as commercial content moderation (Kerr & Kellegher, 2015), community management work is often located in major western cities with a high concentration of finance and media industries. Social media work is situated on a continuum with commercial content moderators operating at the low end with lower wages and some community management work operating at the higher end with higher wages.

Social media managers have a unique perspective to reflect on their own personal branding, as well as the personal branding of others they encounter in their online community. Thus, this research contributes to an understanding of the complex dynamics of personal branding. Personal branding is the practice of marketing oneself as a brand—developing and communicating an individual identity—to strategically position oneself for a career and to build community (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gehl, 2011; Hearn, 2010; Kietzmann et. al, 2012; Marwick, 2013; Page, 2012; Thumim, 2012; Wee & Brooks, 2010). In an increasingly mobile and networked society, branding extends beyond for-profit corporations and has become a pervasive individual practice (see Chapter 2.2.1 for a description of branding); individuals market themselves as a product to enter or secure employment in a competitive labour market or to earn money. As employers turn to social media for job screening (Gruzd, Jacobson, & Dubois, 2017), the practice of
prospective employers “Googling” names of potential hires highlights the importance of personal branding using social media. Under the guise of various names, such as self-branding and identity branding, personal branding refers to “the construction of identity as a product to be consumed by others, and an interaction which treats the audience as an aggregated fan base to be developed and maintained in order to achieve social or economic benefit” (Page, 2012, p. 82).

There is limited empirical scholarly research that directly focuses on personal branding using social media. Some early critical, theoretical literature (Gehl, 2011; Hearn, 2010) helps to lay the foundation for the current research. Alice Marwick (2010) analyzed the San Francisco technology scene during the initial days of social media and ends her dissertation by suggesting further research: “How do micro-celebrity, life-streaming, and self-branding exist in other social contexts, such as high school students, ‘mommy bloggers,’ or in other countries?” (p. 439). Considering Marwick’s question, my dissertation analyzes the personal branding of community managers who are extreme users of social media. As personal branding is largely discussed by industry professionals, there is a need for empirical research on personal branding that examines young workers’ own experiences using social media. My research fills this gap by analyzing how people working in social media brand their own identity, how their personal branding is used to market themselves to gain and maintain employment, and considers the implications of these practices on community (see Chapter 7).

In a pilot study, I learned that community managers are acutely aware of the necessity of personal branding for career success (Shade & Jacobson, 2015). One community manager in that pilot study told me why she began tweeting: “It was for my
career. It’s for my online brand, personal brand, and presence.” The practice of personal branding is especially prevalent now in an unstable economy with spreading precarious work. Precarious work is marked by “income instability, lack of a safety net, an erratic work schedule, uncertainty about continuing employment, the blurring of work and nonwork time, and the absence of collective representation” (de Peuter, 2011, p. 419). As the majority of my participants were young adults navigating an unstable job market, social media managers serve as a case study to explore the personal branding that is emerging in a challenging labour market for young university graduates (see Chapter 2).

1.4 Dissertation Overview

My dissertation explores the work of, and work in, social media. The research contributes to an understanding of the inherent contradictions and binaries of living and working in a digitally mediated world: the double labour of working on personal branding as an integral part of being an employee; the dissolving divide between the personal and the professional; and the visibility of influence and invisibility of disclosure inherent in social media. In this chapter, I outline the practices of social media management and introduce the social media industries.

In Chapter 2, I develop a framework to understand social media work. I describe the socio-cultural and economic context that includes a growing mistrust in advertising and organizations, the widespread use and commercialization of social media, and the rise in precarious employment. As a scholarly contribution, I extend the application of the cultural industries to specifically include the social media industries. Furthermore, I
introduce the dissertation’s theoretical framework, which includes symbolic interactionism, political economy, and gendered labour.

In Chapter 3, I outline the methods used to collect and analyze the data for this research. I extend Will Straw’s (1991, 2001, 2004) concept of a “scene,” and identify the “social media scene” in Toronto. The research makes use of informal online and offline fieldwork that was conducted over three years, as well as the formal semi-structured in-depth interviews that I conducted with new friends, strangers, and acquaintances from the social media scene that work in social media. They generously shared their stories of living and working in social media. I have strived to do justice to their stories throughout this dissertation—not only by constantly reflecting on my ethical practice throughout the work, but also in preserving the richness of their accounts through quotations.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the work of community management and identify the feminization of this form of social media work. Responding to Brooke Duffy’s (2015a) question, “But to what extent may various forms of social media production be understood as gendered?” (p. 710), I identify the feminization of work in social media management and provide a window to address this question. The research uncovers an emerging feminization of social media management as a profession. Mirroring the history of women’s informational labour, I argue that social media management represents another iteration of the devaluation of women’s work in the tech industry.

In Chapter 5, I outline the use, impact, and implications of personal branding as a practice. This research identifies how social media is used as a tool of personal branding and impression management by identifying how and why social media professionals use social media to position themselves to enter and succeed in the labour market. I analyze
the “presence bleed” (Gregg, 2011) or collapse of separate personal and professional lives, while navigating the complex relationship between personal and professional identities on social media. This conflation sees the personal as professional, much like the offline is the online. In analyzing personal branding practices on social media, I contend that people use curation as a storytelling practice across platforms in a process of self-presentation and archiving. I define curation as strategic and purposeful self-presentation and self-archiving on social media to foster positive impressions. People curate their social media activities to target “the future audience,” which includes unknown and unanticipated audiences. As a result, the blurred lines between these spaces represent new ground where identity is played out and what prevails is the workplace identity, which benefits social media platforms and employers.

In Chapter 6, I analyze influence in an age of social media. I identify “the influencer economy” to refer to the broad spectrum of roles and activities that capitalize on individuals’ social media audiences for commercial purposes. In exploring the influencer economy, I introduce the term “casual influencer” to refer to an ordinary person who works with a brand to share sponsored content that is not part of their paid job. While the internet has allowed people to present themselves to a “worldwide audience” (Solove, 2007, p. 5) for the first time in history, not all people can equally gain access and attention. Some community managers have earned the status of being an “influencer” and many community managers collaborate with influencers in outreach campaigns on behalf of companies. An influencer occupies a somewhat privileged position by being able to attract a disproportionate share of the audience’s attention (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Senft 2008, 2013). These are the young, “cool,” and attention-
getting people who are highly active on social media, have a large online following, get
invited to corporate events, and embrace brand sponsorships. These are the people who
attract a considerable share of online attention by the public and, consequently,
companies, but this emerging form of work requires constant work for limited rewards.

In Chapter 7, I analyze the impact of social media, influence, and personal
branding on our conception of community. Community managers build community
online for their organizations and, therefore, have a unique understanding of community
on social media. This research identifies how social media analytics are used to
understand, harness, and grow social capital in unprecedented ways online as individuals
leverage, quantify, and capitalize on their community. After reviewing the three
traditional views of community: community lost, community saved, and community
liberated (Wellman, 1979), I introduce the notion of “community quantified,” that shows
what is at stake when an individual’s personal brand and community are leveraged by
corporations for their strategic advantage.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I conclude by arguing that a detailed exploration of work
practices in the social media industry can shed light on the future shaping of work;
situated in the current socio-cultural economic context, the workplace is changing with
the normalized and necessary use of digital and social technologies.

1.5 Contributions to the Field

The research makes a contribution to information and communication studies by
providing a critical understanding of a salient aspect of current work in the social media
industries. While there has been tremendous speculation and a growing body of research
about the use of social media to date (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Bruns, 2008; Chayko, 2016; Christakis & Fowler, 2009; Gauntlett, 2011), there is still a need for academic research and systematic evidence that focuses on specific networks of people working in social media. By building on previous scholarly literature in information and critical communication studies, the research provides insight into a facet of the digital economy. Overall, the research develops a nuanced understanding of how social media managers navigate their networks through their social media use, influencer practices, and personal branding activities online. The research develops a foundation for further research on community management, social media work, and personal branding.

The research showcases the perspective of a unique group of digital media producers who are heavily engaged with social media. I identify how community managers, as extreme users of social media, employ digital technologies both personally and professionally to build identity, credibility, and community. Marwick (2010) explains, “Like movie producers or television show runners, the creators of new media shape the images and frameworks through which we see ourselves and others” (p. 48). A focus on community managers provides a lens through which we can understand personal branding in a shifting social media landscape and the blurring of personal and professional lives in an increasingly commercialized sphere. The work of engaging in social media professionally mirrors the work of living on social media personally. Community managers work in social media and, by extension, serve as extreme examples of living on social media. Accordingly, while the research is situated in social media work and the social media scene, the findings can be useful in understanding how use of social media shapes both work and community practices.
As a contribution to scholarship in critical communications, social media, and new media work, this dissertation highlights how work, gender, identity, and community are implicated and exploited in the social media industries. This research offers a snapshot in time that introduces the social media scene in Toronto and describes emerging employment in social media. Social media is always in flux: the affordances, tools, applications, regulations, scene, and people. This research points to the inherent contradictions that are conflated in the social media world, or amongst those who “work in social.”
Framework: Theoretical and Conceptual

2.1 Introduction

This research is situated in the contemporary socio-cultural and economic context characterized by a growing mistrust of advertising and organizations by consumers (McCarthy Group, 2014); the growth and commercialization of social media (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011); and a challenging employment situation, post 2008-financial crisis, characterized by an increase with precarious, unpaid and underpaid employment, especially for young adults (Cohen, 2016; Gandini, 2015). The current context in which community managers operate and work helps to position and situate the lived experiences of young people living in a world saturated in branding, pervasive social media, and increasingly precarious work. In this chapter, I outline the context for this research within the given scholarship: (1) branding, (2) social media, (3) new media work, (4) virtual work and youth employment, and (5) creative and cultural industries. I outline the theoretical framework I draw on in this dissertation including, (1) symbolic interactionism and self-presentation as it relates to personal branding, (2) political
economy as it relates to social media, social media industries, and the commercialization of the labour of social media, and (3) feminist theories as related to digital labour and feminist political economy perspectives on digital labour.

2.2 Socio-Cultural and Economic Context

2.2.1 Branding
The practice of promoting goods and services through marketing, public relations, and advertising is embedded within the fabric of modern capitalism. Individuals are exposed to thousands of ads per day. Over two decades ago, it was estimated that people were exposed to over 3,000 advertisements per day (Twitchell, 1996), and this has increased over time with stealth techniques and the advertiser-driven business model of digital media. Due to the sheer plethora of advertising in day-to-day life, people have developed both passive and active strategies to defend themselves against the invasion of these unwanted messages (Verlegh, Fransen, & Kirmani, 2015). Marketers and advertisers have long recognized the public’s growing fatigue and mistrust of advertising; Al Ries and Laura Ries’ (2004) *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR*, and Sergio Zyman’s (2003) *The End of Advertising as We Know It*, have argued that traditional advertising, which includes television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and billboards, has lost credibility and is “dead” (Rust & Oliver, 1994). An industry survey found that 84% of millennials (18–34 year olds) in the U.S. do not like advertising, but the same report found that people have tremendous trust in their personal relationships (McCarthy Group, 2014). Similarly in Canada, an industry survey by the public relations firm Edelman
(2017) identified that Canadians have shown decreasing trust in media organizations; 30% trust institutions versus 70% trust individuals.

The normalization of promotional culture has supplanted advertising; branding, marketing, and public relations are used to promote individuals, ideas, or organizations (Davis, 2013). Industry observers suggest a shift in focus from paid advertising to public relations, which refers to strategic relationship-building with stakeholders to influence the public’s perception of an organization (Public Relations Society of America, 2017). Marketers recognize that branding is an extremely valuable intangible asset for corporations (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). A brand is a “cluster of strategic cultural ideas” (Grant, 2006, p. 27); branding refers to the process whereby an entity seeks to differentiate itself from the competition by having a recognizable identity (Jobber & Fahy, 2003). Beyond economic relations, we live in a brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Schroeder, & Salzer-Mörling, 2006) where branding is embedded into the fabric of day-to-day life. In an era of unfettered capitalism and globalization, Naomi Klein (2000) identifies the emergence of brand marketing that began in the mid-1980s and tracks how corporations shifted their focus to creating an image for a brand; rather than selling a product, a company sells itself to build brand loyalty. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) explains, “Building a brand is about building an affective relationship with a consumer, one based—just like a relationship between two people—on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations” (p. 8). Drawing on Banet-Weiser’s (2012) and Klein’s (2000) perspectives on branding, I maintain a critical distance to branding in this dissertation as a way to understand how brands sell more than
products, and use this to understand the implications when branding is transposed to individuals in personal branding via social media.

Due to the rise of mistrust in advertising, corporations are seeking alternative strategies to promote and sell products and services. Furthermore, as new forms of media emerge, companies seek to capitalize on new opportunities to increase profits. Anthropomorphism refers to ascribing distinctly human characteristics or traits to non-human entities, such as objects and this is frequently used in branding to build the affective relationship (Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2009). Marketers and advertisers seek to humanize brands because the humanizing process makes brands more distinctive and memorable; this has previously been achieved by creating brand mascots like the Pillsbury Doughboy or Tony the Tiger (Aggerwal & McGill, 2012). The widespread use and adoption of digital media introduced a host of new tools that organizations could use to deliver branded messages, which is more accessible and often more affordable than traditional advertising. Specifically, social media has been identified as effective tools for marketing and building brand communities (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012)—the relatively low cost of using social media is particularly appealing for organizations that seek to colonize new profit-generating opportunities.

Community managers work to anthropomorphize the brand on social by giving the brand a voice—their voice. By following, liking, or “friending” an organization on social media, individuals elect to receive the organization’s branded messages, while also building a relationship between a brand and themselves, the customer (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004), and enhancing the brand’s personality (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003). Community managers are hired to do this work; they use social media to positively brand
the companies they work for. Recognizing the pervasive branding that is taking place is important in understanding the work of community managers, and how they also brand their own identities (see Chapter 5).

2.2.2 Social Media

The widespread adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs)—specifically social media—has shaped our understanding of identity, work, and community as people become active media producers to attain both a livelihood and status in the digital economy (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). People are readily adopting social media—including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube—to facilitate social interaction. With one half (49.7%) of the global population having internet access (Internet World Stats, 2017), everyday life increasingly includes an online dimension (Weber & Dixon, 2007). Online social networking sites have been extensively adopted and adapted since their emergence in the late 1990s. Social networking sites are a type of social media that boyd and Ellison (2008) define as:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)
Social media have become widely used; of U.S. adults who use the internet, 79% use Facebook, 24% use Twitter, 31% use Pinterest, 32% use Instagram, and 29% use LinkedIn (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Similarly, Canadians use the following sites at least twice per week: 71% use Facebook, 27% use Twitter, 23% use Pinterest, 20% use Instagram, and 12% use LinkedIn (CanadiansInternet, 2016).

Web 2.0 is an earlier term that described the tools for making new media (Mandiberg, 2012; O’Reilly, 2005), and encapsulates sites that welcome the co-creation of content by the audience (O’Reilly, 2005; Walther et al., 2011). Instead of using the internet to broadcast as in the Web 1.0 model, Web 2.0 invites user participation (Gauntlett, 2011). The terminology of Web 1.0 and 2.0 sets up a dichotomy, when in reality, sites are situated on more of a spectrum of interactivity and participation. Furthermore, the Web 1.0 versus 2.0 dichotomy creates an artificial historical break between various iterations of the web (Jarrett, 2016). As a result, the term “Web 2.0” does not serve as a particularly useful lens through which to view and understand the social media landscape. Bernie Hogan and Anabel Quan-Haase (2010) instead propose analyzing “social media practice,” which seeks to overcome the changing shape of social media to focus on the practices in which people engage (p. 309).

Henry Jenkins (1992) first operationalized the term “participatory cultures” when analyzing how media consumers in fan cultures desired to become media producers. By encouraging user-generated content (UGC), successful sites erode the traditional dichotomies of “consumer and producer, audience and author, user and creator” (Andrejevic, 2011, p. 98). Samuel Trosow et al. (2010) outline three types of UGC: firstly, there is UGC that is developed by an individual to be displayed on an individual
online site (such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube); secondly, there are small-scale tools or apps developed by a small group of people (such as a mod in the virtual game Second Life); and finally, there are collaboratively produced UGC that is self-regulated (such as the online encyclopedia Wikipedia). It is important to recognize the capitalist underpinning of these commercial social media platforms that create profit by harvesting and selling users’ data to advertisers (see Chapter 5.7).

There is a growing body of research seeking to explore the use of social media from users’ perspectives (David & Cambre, 2016; Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012). Some researchers reject the passive connotations of media reception: Axel Bruns (2008, 2012) appropriates the term “user” to refer to any person using participatory websites and coins the term “produser”; Jay Rosen (2006) refers to the “people formerly known as the audience” to detach the passivity associated with watching; Dan Gillmor (2006) articulates a shift in power to “we, the media” and I describe “networked spectatorship” to move away from the dichotomy of active and passive participation and reflect the ways people engage in media events including social media moderation (Jacobson, 2016). The current media landscape involves people engaging in three related activities: consuming, producing, and sharing (Shirky, 2008). People are socializing, searching for information, and communicating online; social media affords the ability for people to engage, interact, and communicate in a networked environment (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006).

People have repeatedly approached new technological innovations with both trepidation and celebration due to the unanticipated social and cultural changes. In exploring how people use social media as a tool to foster a presentation of the self, it is
important to recognize the affordances of the technologies. Affordance theory has offered a “third way” (Hutchby, 2001) or middle ground (Nagy & Neff, 2015) to approach this relationship; affordances are not positive or negative, but merely refer to what is possible (Gibson, 1977) or what the medium “calls forth” (Parks, 2011, p. 109). The concept of affordances has been used to recognize that different social practices and relationships emerge with different technologies (Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011; Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). However, in communications and technology scholarship, the term has been used in inconsistent ways to understand the possibility for action between a technology and the user (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017). Social affordances are a special type of affordance (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010) that refers to how people perceive the affordances in a social context. Mark Ackerman and Leysia Palen (1996) first used the term “social affordance,” but the term was later defined by Erin Bradner, Wendy Kellogg, and Thomas Erickson (1999) as “the relationship between the properties of an object and the social characteristics of a group that enable particular kinds of interaction among members of that group” (p. 154), and later elaborated by Wellman (2001) to describe “the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure” (p. 228). Technologies are always socially produced; accordingly, it is important to analyze the ways in which people use social media (Castells, 2000, 2009). Technological affordances specifically recognize the “materially-based constraints” of a technology (Hutchby, 2001). The technological affordances speak to the need to take into account the design of the technological tools and their functions in understanding how technologies constrain or enable particular practices.
In this dissertation, I use the concept of “imagined affordances” as forwarded by Peter Nagy and Gina Neff. Nagy and Neff (2015) recognize that the dichotomy of social and technological affordance is a fallacy, and advocate for an approach that includes the features of devices and the characteristics of the human-technology interaction. They introduce “imagined affordances” as a more flexible concept to “better incorporate the material, mediated, and emotional aspects of technological artifacts and their implications for affordance perception tendencies” (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 7). They state, “imagined affordances emerge 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). The novelty of this approach is in mediating both technological and social affordances, but more importantly, recognizing the role of users’ perceptions of, or imagined affordances in users’ interactions with, technology. Joshua McVeigh-Schulz and Nancy Baym (2015) similarly identify “vernacular affordances” to account for users’ perceptions and recommend that researchers ask individuals how they interact with technologies or platforms. As I describe in Chapter 3, I asked participants about their use of technology and embrace the imagined affordances approach in this dissertation.

The affordances of social media can either be viewed as a new form of sociality (boyd, 2011), or merely an extension of what previously existed (Pooley, 2010). Rather than question the effects of technology, it is more useful to understand the “patterns of sociality” that emerge both online and offline with new technologies (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 309). Analyzing the patterns of sociality means tracing the technological lineage to highlight the continuities and convergence of “old media”; many of the affordances of
traditional media are also afforded by new media. For example, the television is a cultural technology (Gilpin, 2011) that affords: a shift in people’s sense of place (Meyrowitz, 1985), domestication (Spigel, 1992b), collapsed contexts (boyd, 2008), information to be transmitted across long distances (boyd, 2011), “multiplied space” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 71), and “mobile privatization” by the ability to travel while staying within one’s own home (Williams, 1974/2013). Many of these affordances of social media are heralded as being revolutionary—as highlighted by the popular expression, the “Twitter Revolution” (referring to the impact of social media on mobilizing public response against the Tunisian government) (Morozov, 2009)—however, others represent a continuation of the affordances of traditional media (such as the ability to communicate over space and time).

Just as there are continuities between old and new media, there are continuities between online and offline spaces, which was reinforced by my fieldwork. Since the introduction and early adoption of computer-mediated communication, people have understood “virtual” activities to be inherently inferior in comparison to the “real” world. As Nancy Baym (2010) describes, “The common use of the term ‘virtual’ to describe online relationships and groups, and of the acronym ‘IRL’ (in real life) to describe offline connections, are evidence of this deep-seated presumption” (p. 30). The underlying presumption is that online interactions are disembodied and, therefore, less real than offline interactions (Miller & Slater, 2000). If offline activities are valourized as real and

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8 Gibson’s (1986) use of the term “cyberspace” similarly elicits an alternative space that is less than real. The concept of “virtual communities” dates back to Rheingold’s (1993) research.
online as unreal, then one starts from a place of prejudice (see, for example, Turkle, 2011).

Online and offline are often situated as distinct and opposite realities. This dualism, or “digital dualism” (Jurgenson, 2011), is predicated on the belief that there is a sharp divide between online and offline. Nicole Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe (2010) explain, “Conceptualizing ‘online to offline’ and ‘offline to online’ as dichotomous and mutually exclusive constructs prevents these important distinctions from emerging, stymieing our ability to describe and understand these communication processes” (p. 876). Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) state, “We need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces” (p. 5). It would be a fallacy to assume that individuals lead completely different lives online as offline (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Not all activities that begin online stay online (Hampton & Wellman, 2003), and similarly, offline activities can transfer online. Given the changing shape of technology, in this research, it was important to consider the ways community is understood as operating both online and offline (Fischer, 2005). In an “always-on” culture (boyd, 2012) where people are constantly connected to mobile technologies, the boundary between offline and online space is blurred and the arbitrary distinction is neither useful nor accurate. For community managers, their work and lives traverse the online and offline, and there is a tenuous balance needed in their professional and personal lives, which reflects the constant connectivity via commercialized systems.

Within these commercialized systems encompassing social media platforms, the ability to collaborate and create is made possible by lowering the technological, economic, structural, and societal barriers. There has been a shift from a society that is
“informed” to a society that is “involving” (Lievrouw, 1994). Instead of a one-way channel of communication to a large anonymous audience (Walther et al., 2011), new media technologies have afforded participatory bi-directional communication. While individuals use social media to communicate, learn, and connect with others, social media is also harnessed by organizations. With the functionality of providing information, community, and action (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), organizations have embraced social media for their business purposes. As a business intelligence platform, organizations have used social media for product design and innovation (Zeng, Chen, Lusch, & Li, 2010), customer-relationship management (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014), brand management (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011), crisis communications (Coombs, 2014), marketing (Kaplan & Haenlin, 2010), human resources (HR) and recruitment (Sivertzen, Nilsen, & Olafsen, 2013), strategic communications (Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2016), and internal communication (McAfee, 2009), among others.

Community managers, responsible for managing the social media for their clients, are physically, emotionally, and technologically tied to the tools—the mobile devices and the social media apps—which consequently affect their work. The materiality of the technologies and the affordances of the technologies themselves influence the working practices of community managers. Jeffrey Treem and Paul Leonardi (2016) identify four affordances of social media use in organizations: visibility, persistence, editability, and association. Visibility refers to the ability of information, such as behaviour and networks that were once invisible, to become visible; persistence refers to the permanence and consistent form of the original display of content over time; editability identifies the
varying ability to take time to craft or revise messages before and after publishing on social media; and association refers to the visible public connections or ties between individuals or accounts (Treem & Leonardi, 2016).

There are further affordances of social media including: brevity (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010) as the content is typically constrained, such as Twitter’s 140 character limit; spreadability (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) in the mechanism to easily share content or repost other people’s content, such as the retweet on Twitter; and two-way engagement (Cabiddu, Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014) which enables personalized customer interaction. Considering that social media platforms necessitate operating on hardware, typically mobile phones or laptops, there are also transferable mobile affordances, including portability (Fortunati, 2001) as the technology can easily be carried and moved; perpetual contact (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) as the technology facilitates instantaneous access; and synchronous mediated interaction (Rettie, 2009) as the communication can be immediate on social media. Beyond how these attributes affect the organizational process, these affordances impact and constrain the work practices of community managers in particular ways.

These affordances mean that community managers’ work takes place in public and is permanently and easily accessible (visibility and persistence); they can work at creating content, yet have limited ability to revise or fix content once posted (editability); the success of a community manager in developing relationships with influencers and growing a community is publicized (association); the creative process of writing structures the form of their work (brevity); there are opportunities for viral success, but also viral public failures (spreadability); individualized responses to community
members are expected by employers as information can be gleaned from users’ profiles and other public data (personalized customer interaction); their work can take place anywhere and typically does not require a large initial investment in infrastructure by their employer (portability); there is an expectation for community managers to be permanently available (perpetual contact); and the speed at which mediated communication takes place is expedited (synchronous mediated interaction). Social media managers are required to perpetually learn the ever-evolving algorithms of the various social media platforms, which takes constant effort and time. It is, therefore, important to take into account the properties of the technologies and platforms themselves in order to understand the influence on the work practices of social media managers situated in the digital economy.

The digital economy, taken up by pundits and governments, refers to the economy that is based on digital technologies for the facilitation of business development and has an impact on how organizations operate and individuals interact (Tapscott, 1996; Industry Canada, 2010). In order to situate the trajectory of community management, in the following sections I outline the scholarship in new media work and virtual work, and the creative and cultural industries.

2.2.3 New Media Work and Virtual Work

Social media work is situated amongst the ever-evolving nature of media production—specifically new media production. The new media industry does not fit within traditional industries as new media work covers a plethora of various industries reliant on the internet, computers, social media, or digital technologies. New media professionals
produce various types of information, communication, and entertainment products (Batt et al., 2001). As the work is wide-ranging, rather than focusing on the type of work, an understanding of new media work often focuses on the environment and ethics of the work. As my dissertation reveals, the participants in my study are new media workers that experienced elements of precarious work in their lived experiences as social media managers.

Gill (2010) outlines ten key features of new media work that workers are pressured to embrace: love of the work; entrepreneurialism; short-term, precarious, insecure work; low pay; long hours cultures; keeping up; DIY (do-it-yourself) learning; informality; exclusions and inequalities; and no future. While some community managers do not have low pay, many of these tenets and structural elements of social media work were echoed by my research participants: participants professed their love of their work and took to social media to state their pride in their work (see Chapter 5.7); participants were in various forms of insecure employment situations, yet they internalized the insecurity of the work and internalized the “always-on-the-job-market” mentality (see Chapter 5.5); participants expressed the constant need to fight to get paid for their work as their work was devalued (see Chapter 4.6); participants stressed the 24/7 requirement of social media and the mentally and physically exhausting nature of the work (see Chapter 4.6); participants felt the necessity to always “keep up” to date on the latest social media tools out of fear of obsolete knowledge and readily sought out DIY opportunities to continually learn and improve (see Chapter 7.6).

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, my research participants were eager and committed to working in this sector of new media work. Gill (2002) explains: “It is
popularly regarded as exciting and cutting edge work, and its practitioners are seen as artistic, young and ‘cool’ – especially when compared with the previous generation of technologically literate IT workers (e.g. programmers and software designers) who had a distinctly more ‘nerdy’ or ‘anoraky’ image” (p. 70). Rosalind Gill and Diane Dodd (2000) cite the appeal of new media work involving representations and beliefs about the work relating to youth, dynamism, and informality (as cited by Gill, 2002).

Scholarship on new media production has provided a trajectory for research in the social media industries. Some notable scholarship in this area that I have drawn on to understand social media management includes: Mark Deuze’s (2007) detailing of the changing work practices in various industries (advertising, public relations and marketing, communications, journalism, film and TV production, and game design and development), towards increasing precarity and short-term contracts, and the need for media workers to train themselves on new skills; Bridget Conor’s (2014) analysis, through in-depth interviews, of screenwriting as a form of creative labour and the gendered inequality that exists in this work; Alice Marwick’s (2010) exploration of the high-tech scene in Silicon Valley where she identifies the microcelebrity as an emerging online practice; Gina Neff’s (2012) analysis of how workers in New York’s internet industry in the late 1990s framed risk in their jobs; Angela McRobbie’s (2016) focus on the ideology and policies within new creative work in Europe and the UK that identifies happiness as compensation for young creative professionals; Brooke Duffy’s (2015b) work on digital cultural production in highly feminized industries, such as beauty vlogging, that points to digital media reproducing problematic gender relations; and Sarah Roberts’ (2016) scholarship on commercial content moderators which unearths the
“dirty work” of this labour. This scholarship on new media work helps to lay the foundation for understanding and situating social media management, which similarly draws on virtual work.

Social media management is also a form of virtual or digital work, which is defined as “labour, whether paid or unpaid, that is carried out using a combination of digital and telecommunications technologies and/or produces content for digital media” (Huws, 2012, p. 3). Virtual work is transforming how, where, and when people work. Michelle Rodino-Colocino (2008) describes this “technomadic” work as work that can be done anytime and anywhere using digital technologies.

The combination of insecurity and risk characterize the contemporary work experience (Wajcman & Martin, 2001), which is now prominent in the “gig economy.” The accumulation of skills and personal reputation are important in “portfolio careers” (Wajcman & Martin, 2001; Handy, 1994), or what Michel Lutz calls “patchwork careers” (as cited in Deuze, 2007). Portfolio careers represent non-traditional forms of work that consist of individuals contracting themselves and their skills to organizations or individuals (Fenwick, 2006). Moving out of organizational employment into independent work, the individual creates a portfolio of their work activities (Cohen & Mallon, 1999). The ideology of flexibility in these portfolio careers means that the lack of job security is likened to opportunity, which makes the work attractive (Neff, 2012).

The downside to this alternative and flexible work form, in contemporary capitalism, is precarity and financial instability, which characterize the new forms of work in the digital economy that increasingly involve part-time, contract, freelance, temporary, casual, intern, or gig work. This type of work is increasingly marked by
“precariousness, hyperexploitation, mobility, and hierarchy” (Siapera, 2011, p. 45). Leah Vosko (2010) defines precarious employment as “work for remuneration characterized by uncertainty, low income, and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements” (p. 2), and virtual work is marked by its precarity (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Cynthia Cranford, Leah Vosko, and Nancy Zukewich (2003) enumerate the dimensions of identifying precarious work: (1) degree of certainty of continued employment, (2) control over one’s working conditions (including the wages, pace of work, and whether one is part of a union), (3) degree of regulatory protection through the union or the law, and (4) income level (citing Rodger, 1989). Guy Standing (2011) introduces “the precariat” to refer to the growing number of people who live and work precariously with no job security. Insecurity is “a trademark of several types of virtual work, cultural and creative work, and new media freelancing in particular” (Webster & Randle, 2016, p. 10–11). My research participants experienced some elements of precarious work outlined above, but this was not consistently experienced as they had different forms of employment and working conditions. Many participants expressed uncertainty of continued employment (and, in fact, many people lost their jobs; see Chapter 5.5). All participants expressed a lack of control due to the extreme fast pace of the work. While many of the participants in this research had good incomes (as displayed in Table 7), the majority of participants took on freelance social media work in order to supplement their incomes, which accounts for their higher incomes. Some participants worked exclusively as freelance social media managers, which was typically not by choice but rather because of an inability to secure full-time employment in social media.

In the Government of Canada’s interim report of the Expert Panel on Youth
Employment (2016), young people identified that they were concerned about the rising gig economy, which is defined as, “An economy characterized by short-term contracts, no benefits, no stability, and no vacation” (p. 14). Often interchangeably described as the gig economy, sharing economy, or platform economy, there has been a rise in alternative work arrangements, defined as “temporary help agency workers, on-call workers, contract workers, and independent contractors or freelancers” (Katz & Krueger, 2016), which are often facilitated through platform-based intermediary companies, such as Uber and Task Rabbit. As of 2016, 8% of Americans engaged in technology-enabled gig work, but this is anticipated to increase over time (Smith, 2016). Much like many of my participants, the majority of people who engage in gig labour do so because they need the money, in contrast to casual gig workers who live comfortably without the extra income (Smith, 2016). Yet there are important disparities across age, race, class, and gender. This is by no means the first time that people have sought to engage in work outside of the traditional labour market as the informal economy grows in tough economic times (Leonard, 1998). What differs is the scale and popularity of this type of work afforded by new technological platforms that facilitate this type of on-demand labour and the excitement around it.

Together with the growing precarity and increasing amount of gig labour, Canadian university and college graduates will continue to face a challenging labour market for several years to come (Fong, 2012). In Canada, 12.8% of youth are unemployed (Statistics Canada, 2017). The trend towards more precarious, contract, and online work has emerged at an exponential speed (Policy Horizons Canada, 2016). This form of work is worrying across generations, but is of particular concern to young people
who are entering into this new labour market that is marked by gig labour and precarity—especially in the creative and cultural industries.

2.2.4 Creative and Cultural Industries

In this dissertation, I identify the social media industries as situated within the cultural industries because they are involved in the production of knowledge (McKercher & Mosco, 2008). As David Hesmondhalgh (2007) describes, “Studying the cultural industries might help us to understand how texts take the form they do and how these texts come to play such a central role in contemporary society” (p. 3). I extend the application of the cultural industries to explicitly include the social media industries. Scholarly definitions of the creative and cultural industries are contested (Ross, 2013). In 1944, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer introduced the term “cultural industry” to critique the changes and downfall of art and culture due to the capitalist system that afforded processes such as mass production. There is significance to the shift from the singular “cultural industry” to the plural “cultural industries” (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Justin O’Connor (2010) explains:

It allowed an understanding of the connections between technologies of production and distribution, changing business models, the emergent connections between symbolic and informational goods, and between culture and communications systems. It made more clear the connections and contradictions between the production and circulation of culture and the wider ideological needs of the State; and it focused attention on the ambiguous status of creative labour within the whole system. (p. 26)
The shift from cultural industries to creative industries is connected to the New Labour party in the U.K. that set up a “creative industries task force” that linked the creative industries to national cultural and economic policies (O’Connor, 2010, p. 49). The use of creative industries as a term, versus cultural industries as a term, tends to be less politicized (Cohen, 2016), so many scholars have opted to use the more politicized term cultural industries.

According to the North American Industry Classification System, the Information and Cultural Industries include “establishments primarily engaged in producing and distributing (except by wholesale and retail methods) information and cultural products” (Statistics Canada, 2016, para. 2). The information and cultural industries include the following subsectors:

| 511: Publishing industries (except internet) |
| 512: Motion picture and sound recording industries |
| 515: Broadcasting (except internet) |
| 517: Telecommunications |
| 518: Data processing, hosting, and related services |
| 519: Other information services |

Furthermore, the Government of Ontario (2016) identifies that “cultural industries are the businesses engaged in creating, producing, and distributing cultural goods and services” (p. 30). The output of the cultural industries produces “ideas, knowledge, values and beliefs,” which can “exert considerable influence on societies and peoples” (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013, p. 187). The cultural industries have the power to
influence the organization of how work is experienced in other industries (Lash & Lury, 2007). David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2008) write:

> It follows, then, that cultural producers are, from one point of view, very powerful. They constitute a relatively small number of people who have the capacity to communicate to many others; in some cases, literally to millions of people. Combined with the prestige attached to artistry and knowledge, this gives cultural workers influence, recognition and occasionally prestige and glamour, at least relative to nearly all other workers earning similar wages. Even relatively unsuccessful workers confess to the appeal of this potential influence and recognition in interviews, though of course some disavow it. (p. 102)

While I include social media work within cultural labour, there is debate as to how wide the definition of cultural labour should be. For Hesmondhalgh (2007), cultural labour deals “primarily with the industrial production and circulation of texts” which involves industries such as publishing, film, music, games, advertising, and so forth (p. 12). Vincent Mosco and Catherine McKercher (2009) argue for a wider definition of cultural labour to include anyone who is involved in the production of knowledge products in order to not privilege some types of workers in these industries. The work of social media is often considered less “real” or tangible than the work of traditional media as social media can be seen as more ephemeral and frivolous. Earlier models, definitions, and descriptions of the creative and cultural industries did not account for social media (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Throsby, 2007; O’Connor, 2010). I argue for an update and

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9 In Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s book published in 2011, the authors change “cultural workers” to “creative workers.” The change points to the shifting nomenclature of the creative and cultural industries. Similarly, the authors changed “occasionally prestige and glamour” to “often prestige and glamour” (p. 165), which may point to the rise of influencers who receive prestige and glamour.
inclusion of social media industries, specifically social media management, in the creative and cultural industries. The inclusion of social media management in the creative and cultural industries is important as it situates the current field within scholarship that has sought to understand the working practices, as well as the impact of information and communication technologies, on work and employment.

As I discuss in the previous sections, branding, social media, new media and virtual work, and the creative and cultural industries are outlined to provide the context and foundation to understand the theoretical framework.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is derived from information and communication studies. The “bricolage” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) of my interdisciplinary primary research uses multiple standpoints, theories, and representations to understand the evolving landscape of social media and community. In the following section, I introduce key scholarship that is employed to conceptualize the theoretical framework and orientation for the research. As I outline below, I draw on symbolic interactionism, political economy, and feminist theories to understand the work and practices of social media management.

2.3.1 Symbolic Interactionism and Self-Presentation

Symbolic interactionism as a theoretical lens is useful in understanding presentation of self on social media. Symbolic interactionism asserts that the conception of self is created
in the interactions with others. The social interactionist perspective has its sociological roots in George Herbert Mead’s work that claims, “Our sense of self is really our perception of society’s evaluation of us” (Robinson, 2007, p. 95). Personal branding is largely about self-presentation and impression management (Gergen, 1991, 2009; Goffman, 1959; Paparachissi, 2011; Robinson, 2007). I use Goffman’s presentation of self as a theoretical lens and extend it to understand personal branding on social media.

Identity theories proliferate in the social sciences, as there is continued interest in identity creation, identity performance, and identity politics; for example, research explores how the Big Five personality dimensions applies to social media profiles. The concept of identity is exceedingly complex, and the debates surrounding identity attests to this (Brown, 2000; Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005). At the most basic level, Seidman (2002) suggests, “Identities refer to the way we think of ourselves and the self image we publicly project” (p. 9). Identity is related to the creation of who we think we are and the subsequent presentation of the self to others. Social actors engage in a performance where identity is negotiated and developed, which Goffman (1959) calls impression management: “Thus when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey” (p. 4). Goffman’s dramaturgical model suggests all actions are socially performed with the purpose of the audience developing and maintaining a positive impression of the actor. Individuals actively and purposely engage in strategic actions, which allow them to construct and

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10 Often employed in psychology, the Big Five personality traits—openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—have been used as predictors of social media use (Bogg, 2017).
preserve positive impressions that encourage the audience to see them in favourable ways.

Symbolic interactionism has also been adopted as a contemporary theory to study the sociology of work: Andrew Abbott (1988) developed a theory to understand the evolution of professions; Ulrich Beck (2000) decried the “end of the work society” with the decrease in full-time secure employment; Randy Hodson and Teresa Sullivan (2011) analyzed the high-tech workplace; Richard Sennett (1998) explored work and identity based on how employees develop narratives to find meaning in their working lives; Matt Huffman and Lisa Torres (2002) describe how work is gendered, and socially and arbitrarily constructed; Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2010) employ symbolic interactionism to understand the collapsed audience and the imagined audience on Twitter; and Arlie Hochschild (1983/2003) embraced Goffman’s performativity theory and Marxist theory of alienation to understand “emotional labor.”

Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model serves as a theoretical lens to study online impression management (Hochschild 1983; Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010; Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011; Pooley, 2010). Goffman (1959) describes how people foster specific impressions in other people’s minds through information management by analyzing the impression given (signs that are intentional) and given off (the unconscious or non-deliberate signs). In every interaction, information is presented and absorbed, and it is through this process that the self is actually created; there is no “real” self, but rather a multiplicity of selves. I use Goffman’s dramaturgical model to assess personal branding as perpetuated by the personal branding gurus (communications professionals capitalizing on the trend by providing personal branding advice and strategies). While
Goffman (1959) specifically states that he is only dealing with face-to-face interaction, his model has proven useful to understand computer-mediated communication and online identity (Gergen, 2009; Hogan, 2010; Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011; Pooley, 2010; Thumim, 2012).

Goffman (1959) describes the process and meaning of ordinary interaction whereby social interaction is viewed as performance with an actor entering on a stage and performing for an audience. There are various self-presentation tactics that individuals make use of, as actors present to their audience with idealized performances. A key rationale for maintaining a consistent audience impression is to avoid embarrassment; impression management, and the avoidance of embarrassment, is achieved through audience segregation to “ensure that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting” (Goffman, 1959, p. 49). Audience segregation is important because an individual can undermine the integrity of their performance if their presentation is not consistent.

Goffman (1959) suggests that there are two regions of a performance: the front and back. The front stage is “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (p. 22). The front stage is where the performance takes place before an audience. In the backstage, a person can perform activities that would undermine the integrity of the front stage and their impression management. In this dissertation, I use Goffman’s presentation of self as a theoretical lens to understand personal branding;
specifically, in developing the concept of the “future audience” as a way to understand the presentation of self on social media (see Chapter 5.3).

2.3.2 Political Economy

In the last decade, there has been renewed attention to labour in the political economy of communication research, which analyzes macro-level power structures (Duffy, 2013). In 2011, Vincent Mosco argued that “labour remains the blind spot of communication and cultural studies” and urged that scholars focus on issues of labour (Mosco, 2011, p. 230). Various scholars have responded to this call theorizing digital labour in media, cultural, and communication studies (see Banks, Gill, & Taylor, 2013; de Peuter, Cohen, & Brophy, 2015; Fuchs, 2015; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gregg, 2011; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Huws, 2014; Maxwell, 2015; McRobbie, 2002, 2016). With a focus on power and capitalism, the political economy perspective seeks to analyze “the study of the social relations, especially the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources” (Mosco, 1996, p. 25). Broadly, “Political economy is the study of control and survival in social life” (Mosco, 1996, p. 25), and includes the analysis of capitalism, privacy, surveillance, and labour. In her work on freelance journalists in Canada, Nicole Cohen (2013a) states that “this approach retains a commitment to identifying dynamics of capitalism as being at the core of contemporary conditions of life and labour” (p. 46). Applied to social media, questions arise regarding the role that users’ labour plays in developing user-generated content for for-profit corporations (Fuchs, 2010).
In this dissertation, I utilize commodification to understand the impact of personal branding and influencers and describe the quantification of community (see Chapter 7). Commodification, as Alison Hearn (2017) describes, “names the process whereby things, services, ideas, and people are transformed into objects for sale in a capitalist economic system” (p. 42). Aspects of human life that have previously remained outside of the capitalist market are now increasingly subsumed under economic logic, in what Vincent Mosco (2009) calls “extensive commodification” because of the way digital technology is used. The impact of extensive commodification is that commodification becomes normalized in everyday life and people consent to being watched as more of our lives are commodified (Andrejevic, 2007). However, a power imbalance, between those who produce content on social media and the companies that profit from it, exists even if the producers enjoy or get pleasure from the online activities (Terranova, 2010). People engage in unpaid labour by building profit for commercial social media sites (Cohen, 2013b; Fuchs, 2009). The free labour performed by social media users produces profit for the social media companies (Dyer-Witheford, 2015), as wealth accumulates to those who own the media, not those who labour at its production (Rey, 2012). While user-generated content creates value for these organizations, people unknowingly engage in exploitation or “immaterial labour 2.0” (Côté & Pybus, 2007; Kang & McAllister, 2011). Hyunjin Kang and Matthew McAllister (2011) similarly discuss Google’s commodification of the audience, and Kenneth Werbin (2012) develops the “political economy of Web 2.0” as sites aggregate information from across social networking sites to develop an “auto-biography” of an individual that can be sold. The “theory of exploitation for the era of commercial social networking” (Andrejevic, 2011) or
“overexploitation” (Fuchs, 2010) identifies the relationship between labour and willing participation. Much of the work in this area has focused on social media users, describing the business model of social media, wherein average people labour for free on these commercial platforms, leading to exploitation. Moving the research agenda forward, the focus of this dissertation is rather on social media producers—the community managers—who are paid workers for diverse organizations.

The political economy of social media perspective explores issues surrounding labour, including: free labour (Hearn, 2010; Terranova, 2000; Trosow et al., 2010), immaterial labour (Andrejevic, 2011; Lazzarato, 1996), emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983/2003), relational labour (Baym, 2015), venture labour (Neff, 2012), hope labour (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), and unpaid labour (Banet-Weiser & Sturken, 2010; Shade & Jacobson, 2015). Free labour refers to “voluntary activity whose affective qualities are colonized for value by capitalist interests” (Hearn, 2010, p. 434). As I discuss in the following section, emotional labour refers to the management of emotions required in one’s workplace (Hochschild, 1983/2003). Building on emotional labour, Nancy Baym (2015) describes relational labour as managing others’ feelings across multiple encounters, rather than single encounters as is often the case with emotional labour. Immaterial labour refers to a series of activities that lie outside of what is typically understood as “work” and, as such, leisure time and work time are combined (Lazzaratto, 1996). Rather than thinking of audiences, Marc Coté and Jennifer Pybus (2007) introduce immaterial labour 2.0 as “a better conceptual lens to understand the qualitative shift in which culture, subjectivity, and capital come together in new networks of ICT” (p. 98). Neff (2012) states, “Venture labor is the investment of time, energy, human capital, and
other personal resources that ordinary employees make in the companies where they work” (p. 16) and is used to describe how employees see their job as an investment in their future, take on risk, and attend networking events to support their employer and themselves. Related to this, hope labour is defined as “un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow” (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013, p. 9). These applications of critical perspectives on labour to social media provide a theoretical foundation that I use to understand a group of workers that have been understudied: social media managers.

While political economy of communication is recognized as an important approach, which is particularly useful in understanding commodification, the dissertation is not wholly situated within this framework. In digital labour scholarship, there is a tension between the macro-level and micro-level of analysis (Hughes, 2014; Rodak, & Mikołajewska-Zając, 2017). Further, the mezzo-level approach to the research “foregrounds the processes of media production rather than macro-level structures or micro-level issues of reception” (Duffy, 2013, p. 14). Rather than purely focusing on the individual social actors’ experiences or the larger power structures, I draw on all three levels (macro-, mezzo-, and micro-) to inform my analysis.

It is important to recognize the distinctiveness of the digital labour of average users, which overlaps but is distinct from the digital labour of professionals who work in the creative and cultural industries. In political economy research, there is often a focus on the conditions and social relations of work rather than a focus on the individualized experiences of digital labourers. Feminist theories in combination with Marxist theories
have been used to expand the critique of digital labour to account for the relationship between online work and unpaid labour in social reproduction (Jarrett, 2016). This literature helps to lay the foundation for understanding the work of social media professionals.

### 2.3.3 Gendered Labour

The research makes use of feminist theories as related to work, and draws on feminist political economy perspectives on digital labour. I use the social constructivist approach to technology put forward by Judy Wajcman (2004, 2007) as a framework to conceptualize the link between and intersections of gender, technology, and work. Prescribing to neither technophobia nor technophilia, technofeminism is an approach that combines feminist and technology studies and foregrounds the need “to investigate the ways in which women’s identities, needs and priorities are being reconfigured together with digital technologies” (p. 295). This approach is embraced in understanding the gendering of social media work.

Guy Standing (1989) first conceived of the feminization of labour to refer to women’s increased participation in the labour market since the 1980s and the erosion of labour regulations that protect workers. This feminization of labour has been attributed to industrialization and globalization processes (Hossfeld, 2009). Since that time, Standing (1999) revisited the argument to nuance the articulation of feminization of labour as the argument was critiqued for too narrowly focusing on women’s increased participation rate in the labour force and concentrating on developing countries (Fudge, 1991; Vosko, 2000). The concept of the feminization of work not only accounts for the quantitative
increase in women’s work around the world, but also increasingly infers “the qualitative and constituent character of this phenomenon” (Morini, 2007, p. 41). The feminization of work is linked to women’s historic relegation to particular kinds of gendered labour that has been repeatedly undervalued, such as care work. In this dissertation, I use feminization of work to refer to work that is significantly devalued, emphasizes emotional labour, and/or is associated with domestic duties (Mayer, 2014).

In gender and technology studies there has been a resurgence of attention on affective labour. Much of the current scholarship in this area has been inspired by Hochschild’s (1983) work. I draw on the concept of emotional labour, which was first identified in her 1983 book, The Managed Heart, where she referred to the management and manipulation of emotions at work, often for the purpose of positively influencing colleagues and clients. There is a tremendous amount of emotional labour involved in various types of service work, such as faking or suppressing emotions. Hochschild (1983/2003) identifies emotional labour as the use of bodily displays and facial expressions to produce the desired emotional state on customers, which has no true connection to workers’ emotions, but workers come to embody the emotions they are trying to produce. Service work refers to front-line labour that directly interacts with customers and clients; social media management is a new iteration of digital service work. Service work in offline positions has been well studied, including flight attendants (Hochschild, 1983/2003), retail sales clerks, restaurant servers, bank tellers, accountants, HR consultants, nurses, and social workers (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). Researchers have also analyzed more hybrid and technologically mediated jobs, such as those in call

11 See Grandey (2000) for a summary of work theorizing emotional labour.
centres (Korczynski, 2003), where technology is used to mediate the interactions between the customer and the company. Social media management largely operates within a computer-mediated space where interactions take place behind the screen, yet, as detailed in Chapter 4.5, requires emotional and affective labour.

Emotional labour is one form of affective labour. Melissa Ditmore (2007) explains, “Affective labor can be understood as work that aims to evoke specific behaviors or sentiments in others as well as oneself, rather than it being merely about the production of a consumable product” (Ditmore, 2007, p. 171). Affective labour “is labour that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt & Negri 2004, p. 108). Historically, women have been tasked with doing affective work and the long-standing presumption and assertion of women’s “natural expertise” of managing and expressing emotions has been perpetuated with digital technologies (Arcy, 2016). Kathi Weeks (2007) argues that the affect is more useful than emotional labour as “the category of affect traverses the divisions of mind and body, reason and emotion, and confounds the ontological containment these dichotomies enable, it can better register the power of the subjectification effect that Hochschild’s analysis reveals” (p. 241). The use of affective labour has gained prominence in media scholarship; notably, Jarrett’s (2016) theorization of the “digital housewife” that outlines the parallels between (women’s) reproductive labour and labouring in the digital economy.

Community management involves a significant amount of emotional and affective labour. In the practices of community management, “affect is both something that is worked on and something that constitutes a kind of work” (Rentschler, 2017, p.
13). The customer—or community—is both a key driver of pleasure and pain for service workers (Korczynski, 2003). My participants remarked that being able to connect with individuals, share experiences, help solve problems, and influence the community were the best parts of the job, yet the situation quickly changes when dealing with troublesome negative cases. In addition to the extreme cases, the day-to-day work of community management requires emotional and affective labour.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented a socio-cultural and economic context, as well as the theoretical framework I use to understand work in the social media industries. I situate the context for this research within branding, social media, new media work, virtual work and youth unemployment, and the creative and cultural industries. By teasing out the creative and cultural industries, I extend the cultural and creative industries to specifically include social media industries. Discussions of digital work and virtual work lay the foundation for understanding social media management as a form of new media work and I explore these issues as they manifest in the work of community management. Furthermore, I identify the theoretical framework for the research, including (1) symbolic interactionism as it relates to personal branding; (2) political economy of communication as it relates to the social media industries; and (3) feminist theories on digital labour.

Building on the theoretical framework, in the following chapter, I describe the methods used to explore the “social media scene.”
Methodology: The Social Media Scene

3.1 Introduction

What is the social media “scene?” (Bennett, 2004; Straw, 1991). Scenes refer to local clusters of cultural practices and activities that co-exist (Straw, 1991, 2001). Scenes have been used to describe music, dance, theatre, chess, and other sorts of cultural events and happenings (Straw, 2004), and in this dissertation, I draw on Straw’s notion of the scene and identify the “social media scene.” Straw (2004) describes what a scene is:

Scene designates particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them. Scenes may be distinguished according to their location (as in Montreal’s St. Laurent scene), the genre of cultural production which gives them coherence (a musical style, for example, as in references to the electroclash scene) or the loosely defined social activity around which they take shape (as with urban outdoor chess-playing scenes). Scene invites us to map the territory of the city in new ways while, at the same time, designating certain kinds of activity whose relationship to territory is not easily asserted. (p. 214)
Some of my participants look back nostalgically on the early days of the social media scene beginning in 2008 when Twitter was newly emerging and a niche community. People (mostly young adults) attended meetups, parties, professional networking events, and so forth, which pushed the online community offline and was open to anyone active on social media. In Toronto, participants reflected on the organic emergence of the social media scene, as people were genuinely interested in connecting with others whom they knew online—largely from Twitter. At the time (around 2008), the social media community was much smaller, and since then the social media scene has evolved to include larger more established events. Today, there are established influencers from the early days of social media, and emerging influencers, but the scene is now dominated by brand-promoted events. The social media scene has become commodified and corporatized as companies recognize the value of social media and seek to harness the social capital\(^\text{12}\) of bloggers and social media influencers to promote their brands through strategic collaborations with influencers.

With a critical mass of people using and working with social media together with their personal and professional connections and network, social media scenes invariably exist in most major global cities. In this research, the clusters of cultural and social activities are distinguished by the location of Toronto, as the fieldwork is situated in the Toronto social media scene. As with other scenes, the Toronto social media scene is unbounded, elusive, and ephemeral (Straw, 2004). Marwick (2010) conducted her dissertation fieldwork in, what she calls, the San Francisco tech scene, describing it as “sprawling and inclusive, containing founders of venture-backed startups, rank-and-file

\(^{12}\) Social capital refers to the useful aspects of one’s social networks (Erickson, 2001, p. 127).
corporate workers, freelancers, people in other industries who love social media” (p. 26). A larger, more generic “tech scene” certainly exists in Toronto, and there are also other niche scenes, which can be characterized as the startup scene, the independent gaming scene, the social innovation scene, the wearable and VR scene, etcetera. My research is focused on the social media scene; however, it is important to recognize the overlapping, permeable, and loose boundaries that exist within and between scenes. In reality, a single event may pull different networks together—such as social media people, women in tech people, and independent gaming people—due to overlapping interests. Noah, a social media manager I interviewed, explains his involvement in the social media scene: “I enjoy being a social person, and sometimes I still go to these things that sort of seem social media-y, and I think it’s also just expanded. There’s a good start-up scene in the city. Start-up people are very into the social media scene.” Those who participate in these scenes often have hybrid identities and interests, which are evidenced in the overlap of events.

Much like a community that is no longer geographically bounded (Wellman, 2001), scenes do not take place in an isolated physical location. In adding to Straw’s (2004) scene, I push the concept of scenes to apply to both the online and offline communities. As I witnessed, the scene is generated, produced, and performed both online and offline. The online and the offline community mutually reinforce each other in the social media scene.

The research questions that guided the research in the social media scene included the following:

(1) How do young adults become and work as community managers?
(2) How do community managers define and build community?

(3) Are community managers using social media as a tool for personal branding, and if so how?

(4) How do community managers delineate the boundaries between their professional and personal lives?

(5) Is a community manager’s personal brand taken up by the companies they work for?

While these initial research questions existed in the background as I conducted my study, I was not beholden to them. Rather, the richness of my fieldwork and interviews afforded new insights.

3.2 Online and Offline Fieldwork

The research employs ethnographic methods of a multi-sited field site—both online and offline—in order to develop a nuanced understanding of the lived experience of social media professionals. While the interviews, which form the core of the data for the research that was coded, took place from 2015–2016, they were preceded by three years of orienting fieldwork, including attending industry events, tech meetups, and participating on social media. The fieldwork added context that informed interviews with my participants about their lived experiences. In turn, the scholarly literature that I engaged with provided theoretical support for what I observed. The fieldwork was critically significant in enabling me to understand the concerns of my participants, build trust and rapport, create a stronger interview design, and understand the evolving terminology of the social media industries. It also afforded me the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of many more people than those I formally interviewed, which helps to
support the findings.

A critical part of my orientation is to not create an artificial divide between online and offline experiences. It was necessary for me to have a strong familiarity with the platforms and practices in order to better inform the questions that I could ask of my participants; accordingly, I spent considerable time on social media—particularly Twitter. Perceiving online spaces as completely different from offline spaces could lead one to assume that wholly new methods are required to study social media. Social science methods seek to understand human behaviour and it is now commonplace to describe how social technologies play an important role in the day-to-day lives of many people (Baym, 2010; Brake, 2014). Understanding that people live with, on, and through digital technologies means that social media is viewed as another space where people develop community and a perception of self. As a result, researchers have employed existing methods, which have previously been used to study offline social space, to the study of social media. Additionally, new methods to study social media will emerge as the technological tools to conduct research develop and evolve.

While many of my participants operate in precarious work situations, they also operate in “a continuum of precarious wage work” (Cranford, Vosko, & Zukewich, 2003, p. 7), as some of them can be considered more privileged in that they have social status and higher paying jobs. Marwick (2010) explains that, “Ethnographies of privileged groups can provide a sophisticated understanding of the operation of power in spaces where access is typically restricted, and thus made invisible” (p. 48). Moving beyond a multi-sited ethnography to “the field site as a network” (Burrell, 2009, p. 181), the geographic boundaries are lifted to trace a social phenomenon (Neff, 2012). This is
particularly true with regards to social media: “The everyday life of the social media ethnographer involves living part of one’s life on the internet, keeping up-to-date with and participating and collaborating in social media discussions” (Postill & Pink, 2013, p. 6). While the researcher needs to be actively present and participate online, I embrace a more networked approach as I did not live online or offline, but rather there is a thread that continually connected and seamlessly interwove the online and offline experiences. As my participants were constantly connected, it was increasingly difficult to define “going online” as there was no need to connect and disconnect. For example, quickly checking a Facebook message, sending a tweet, and uploading a photo on Instagram, constitute online activities, but there is no clear delineation of what is online and offline. As a result, I embrace an integrated approach to fieldwork that traces the social media scene, rather than the bounded situated space. boyd (2009) reinforces this approach, when she writes that “Internet ethnography is not about the technology—it is about the people, their practices, and the cultures they form” (p. 31). Using ethnographic approaches to explore the social media industries, therefore, necessitated carefully weaving the online lived experiences with offline lived experiences.

There are challenges to using ethnographic methods in social media research. The strength of ethnographic research lies in what Geertz (1973) calls “thick description,” yet many online ethnographies do not involve enough immersion to engage in “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1973). Some ethnographies of new media become unintentionally auto-ethnographic as the researcher becomes the main subject in the narrative (Howard, 2002). For this research living online, with and through social media, meant participating on Facebook, tweeting on Twitter, posting on Instagram, and otherwise immersing myself
into the field site. While I did not participate in all types of social media platforms, it was necessary for me to have a strong familiarity with the platforms in order to make sense of the research site and to better inform the questions that I could ask of my participants. The internet has afforded a new social space for human interaction; using ethnographic methods on social networking sites is the strategy I employed to understand and embrace online communication, community, interaction, social media work, and the presentation of self.

In comparison to both the U.S. and the U.K., Canada has “the largest share of creative economy employment, the largest share of workers in creative occupations, and the largest share of creative workers embedded in non-creative industries” (Nathan, Kemeny, Pratt, & Spencer, 2016, p. 7). Toronto is an ideal locale for this research because of its diverse multicultural population and as one of Canada’s major high-tech hubs, it has a thriving social media scene (City of Toronto, 2011). As Straw (2004) identifies, scenes vary in different cities. This was echoed by one of my participants, Ava, who explains how the social media scenes in different cities may be different, “I have a coworker in the U.S. and he’s extremely active in the social media scene, transcending just New York but going across border—but his is purely on social media and never in person. Ever. He is best friends with the people from online only.” The social media scene in Toronto, however, involves both online and offline interactions and events.

I was exposed to the research site before I recognized it was the research site. At the early stages of the research development, I wanted to understand personal branding, but did not know where to look to explore this. I immersed myself in the social media
scene by attending tech networking events, meetups (an informal gathering organized using social networking sites), and conferences in Toronto, and getting introduced to countless people. The focus of events varied: wearables, how to get a job in social media, personal branding, coding, and so forth, but the driver was often networking with other people interested or working in a similar space. The events were attended by people of diverse ages, but the predominant group was young adults. After immersing myself in the scene, I stumbled upon a network of key players: social media managers. Typically the people I met merely said, “I work in social,” which was well understood as social media: in, on, or with social media in some capacity. While the terminology is very flexible (as I discuss in Chapter 1), they largely fell under the title of “social media management” or “community management.” However, what tied these diverse networks of people together was a shared lived experience working in social media in a newly emerging profession. As I wrote in my fieldnotes: “Social media: it’s not a job or a platform, it’s an industry.”

Community managers were active in the social media scene and this became my field site. Fieldwork was not bound to a single locale and I used participant observation at the multiple field sites. Participant observation refers to “the study of people in their own time and space, in their own everyday lives,” rather than an artificial setting like a laboratory or interview (Burawoy et al., 1991, p. 2). As I made contacts through the participant observation, I was able to learn about new events, get invited as a speaker on personal branding at a few events, and immerse myself in the social media scene. In the three years in the social media scene in Toronto (late 2012–2016), I went to tech meetups, networking events, industry conferences, girls in tech events, influencer events,
company parties, and product launches—accompanied by the latest food trends. The offline scene is an ephemeral loosely bounded network of events related to social media that range from more formal tech conferences to casual meetups. Jill describes:

I don’t know if there’s necessarily a clique; I think there’s the trailblazers in Toronto who went to the first Toronto tweetups that existed and there’s some of those people who joined Twitter early and were really active in “the scene.” They were some of the first local influencers; whether or not they have a blog is irrelevant…Whenever I go to, let’s say a social media conference, I always feel like there are other people who know each other better than I know people—and the more I go to events, the more I get to know people as well. But there definitely is a scene that exists.

Ava similarly states, “There are some conferences where you know people that are very active on social media are going to go to. A lot of people who are active on social media tend to work within the industry in some way, which is why you tend to still see them more even if you’re not part of the scene.” The conferences, meetups, and events serve as the offline spaces of the social media scene, but social media is used as the communications tool that binds the social media community together online. Dionne enthusiastically describes, “There were just a lot of opportunities to meet in real life. So when I used to tell people that 90% of the people I was friends [with] I met on Twitter.” Amira similarly explains how she was introduced to the social media scene on Twitter:

There used to be a very interesting social media scene. So I got involved in all of that…through Twitter obviously. I talked to one person there and “Hey! You’re here from Toronto and you’re new here.” So I started going to a lot of parties and

13 A tweetup refers to the offline meeting of Twitter users.
got involved in the whole media blogging scene and all that stuff. So I am aware of that and new friends would—I mean you know a lot of those people too…That’s how I got to know those people, through Twitter as well. I’m pretty ingrained in that whole community like initially started tweeting a lot. They used to have Twitter chats and Twitter meetups and stuff.

This research would not have been nearly as rich without the kindness of various people—new contacts from the social media scene—who provided access to and insider knowledge of various events. They told me about interesting public events, invited me to industry experiences, and gave me promotional codes to paid conferences. They introduced me to a world that I did not previously know existed: the social media scene. The exposure to the social media scene served to familiarize me with the context and also situate myself as a researcher, which was particularly useful when I conducted the formal interviews with community managers. For example, one morning during my early doctoral work, I sat at home alone, slowly browsing on Twitter, when I noticed a “friend” tweet that she was at a major tech event, had an extra ticket, and invited anyone on Twitter to attend for free. The term “friend” is loosely applied, as she was someone who I had previously met once and “friended” on social media, but she was not a friend in the conventional sense. I jumped at the opportunity, recognizing that the day ticket cost several hundred dollars and it would be an interesting social media event. I publicly replied to her on Twitter saying, “I’m in.” Even though I had only met her once before, in the context of the social media scene at the time, it was a perfectly typical series of events. Hua Wang and Barry Wellman (2010) refer to a “migratory friendship” as a friendship that begins online and moves offline, and they found that migratory friendships happen less often than “virtual friendships”: friendships that are online only.
In contrast, in the social media scene, because migratory friendships are plentiful, there should be a de-emphasis on the origin or initial place of a friendship; migratory friendships should be extended to also refer to friendships that begin offline and move online.

In the social media scene, I learned a convention that well illuminates this culture. Instead of saying to someone you meet offline for the first time, “Hi. Nice to meet you,” it is more appropriate to say, “Hi. Nice to see you.” While two people may not have met offline, they may have previously “met” on social media or been introduced to one another on social media. For example, two people may have been introduced to one another by an online tie on “follow Friday” (#followfriday or #ff), which was a Twitter practice every Friday to identify and recommend users that you think your network may be interested in following. As Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012) state, “People’s lives offline and online are now integrated—it no longer makes sense to make any distinction” (p. 146). This conversational etiquette signals the confirmation of online spaces as real and important.

Throughout my experiences I crossed paths with countless people, and when asked how I knew a particular person, it was not always possible to identify when or how I had met them. More often than not, people would merely say that they met me in the scene, which does not distinguish between the online and offline. In this hyper-connected scene, an individual can meet and re-meet someone online and offline and it may be ultimately impossible to distinguish the origin of the contact. In much the same way, the line between contact and friend is blurred.

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14 In 2017, Follow Friday was less prominent as a practice on Twitter.
Throughout the research, I was an active participant on various social media, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest; and I use this as part of my research methodology to understand social media experiences firsthand. Actively participating on social media meant creating a profile, observing community interactions, recognizing influencers, learning the technological features of the sites, but most importantly understanding the practices and norms on each platform. I strongly believe that it is important to situate oneself in the field site and throughout my doctoral research, I made many acquaintances in the Toronto social media scene, via online exchanges, specifically Twitter. In order to understand the activities of those who work in social media, it was necessary to engage, participate, and reflect on these activities online.

Furthermore, the online and offline spaces collided in the social media scene, which necessitated online participation in order to meaningfully participate offline at events; for example, event organizers promote the use of a specific hashtag for participants to live-tweet the event. A hashtag, [#alphanumeric text], is used to tag a post with a conversational marker and/or add the post to an existing stream of content (Jacobson & Mascaro, 2016). With live-streaming, the hashtag serves as a unifying identifier where those attending or interested in the event can see what others are saying and engage in conversation. I would live-tweet at events, using my Twitter handle @jacobsonjenna, in order to fully participate; this type of engagement is indicative of the traversing of online and offline spaces.
3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews form the core dataset that I used for the research. I developed a series of interview questions that drew from my exposure in the social media scene (see Appendix B). Each interview was tailored to the specificity of the research participant. For example, there was less of an emphasis on influence if the participant did not identify as an influencer. The contextual interview guide was used as a guide, but participants’ responses propelled the conversation. Accordingly, given the fluid nature of semi-structured interviews, not all participants were asked the exact same set of questions.

I interviewed a total of 20 participants for this research: 14 women and 6 men (see Table 4). A diverse group of participants was selected to reflect varied gender, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, participants overwhelmingly identified as white (see Table 6). Even in a diverse multicultural city like Toronto, there is less diversity in the social media scene with community managers being predominantly white. The lack of diversity in the tech scene in other cities and regions, such as Silicon Valley, has been widely noted (Wiener, 2016).

While I recognize that gender is not binary, all participants identified as either male or female. Participants had an average of five years working in social media. The participants were largely educated with most participants having a Bachelor’s degree (see Table 3). Over 50% of participants were between 25 to 30 years old (see Table 5). Participant income ranged from under $30,000 to over $100,000, with the median income $60,000–$69,999 (see Table 7). Importantly, the stated income represents their total income, which typically included multiple sources of income. While a few
participants worked in one full-time position, most others had multiple streams of income including undertaking on-the-side freelance social media clients to supplement their income. It is also important to note that given the sensitivity of income information, participants were not required to disclose their salary. As a result, this statistic is biased and is likely higher than the reality; people with lower salaries may have disproportionately decided to opt-out.

Identifying community managers was at first challenging because there is no formal union, group, or association in Canada to which they belong. Most of the participants interviewed for the research were identified as a result of my involvement in the social media scene, at conferences, meetups, events, and so forth. In addition to the fieldwork that helped to identify research participants, I further developed and recruited participants by placing social media at the forefront of my recruitment strategy. I used the Advanced Search on LinkedIn and Twitter to identify community managers. In addition, I recruited participants by posting the call for participants on social media, specifically Twitter. I encouraged participants to pass my information on to other social media managers in an attempt to facilitate snowball sampling where participants recruit their acquaintances as future research participants. Six people who I initially contacted were unavailable or not permitted by their employer to participate in an interview.

Considering that the social media landscape is so rapidly evolving, I restricted the criterion to those who currently work in social media. I did not define social media/community management, but allowed people to self-identify. The interview guide, developed as a component of my research ethics protocol, included a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions (see Appendix B). The open-ended questions
allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the unique experiences of community managers, while the closed-ended questions captured demographic information in an attempt to gain a balanced perspective of the current industry.

Interviews were on average over one hour and the conversation typically continued after the recorded interview, for an additional 30–60 minutes. I took interview notes throughout both parts of the interview. The insight gained post-interview provided further contextualization of topics discussed during the interview.

In the early iterations of the research, I planned to develop a chronological timeline of the participants’ work by observing them on a typical workday. However, what became abundantly clear through my experiences in the social media scene was that community managers often did not have a typical work day or place of work, and their work was certainly not confined to the typical work hours of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Furthermore, the research sought to understand the experiences, rather than the job functions, of participants. As a result, workplace observations were abandoned and instead, I opted to interview participants in their workplace. Each of the workplaces I visited provided insight into the working conditions of my participants. Gaining access to many workplaces helped to contextualize the interview data and afforded a deeper understanding of the emerging occupation of community management.

I visited a broad spectrum of workplaces. Some workplaces embodied a hipster open-office environment, which supports the mythologized startup tech culture. On the other extreme, at the most formal workplace, I needed to wait in the modern reception area, be logged into the system, and escorted to a private boardroom. Some participants were not comfortable meeting at their place of work, while others did not have a place of
work because they worked as freelancers—often at home or at a coffee shop—therefore, these interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon location. As my study revealed, there is no one type of workplace for social media managers as they work across industries and sectors.

Careful consideration of the ethical issues present in approaching participants, building relationships, establishing a presence in the field, developing insights, and publishing the results was required in conducting ethical research or “doing ethics” (Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012). I received Research Ethics Approval from the University of Toronto for participants to have the option of anonymizing their personal information or having their identifiable information published (see Appendix A for the ethics approval letter from the University of Toronto, Office of Research Ethics). Specifically with internet research, the decision to anonymize or publish participants names is not one to be taken lightly (Bruckman, Luther, & Fiesler, 2015). On the one hand, some participants may believe there is value in having their name published, which may boost their own credibility as an expert in the social media scene. On the other hand, given the precarity of some participants’ work situations, the sensitivity of some questions, and possible unintended consequences, such as revealing the identity of an organization, I decided to err on the side of participant anonymity and I informed participants before the interview that neither their name nor the identity of their employer would be published in the research. In the subsequent writing up of the findings, I developed pseudonyms for both the participants and the companies for which they work. Any names of people, employers, and brands mentioned have been changed in an attempt to further anonymize the data. Throughout the dissertation, I refer to people as “participants” rather than
“subjects” because this recognizes people’s agency in the research process (Bruckman, Luther, & Fiesler, 2015).

3.4 Thematic Coding

All of the 20 semi-structured interviews were professionally transcribed using an online service, resulting in 546 pages of single-spaced transcribed data from the interviews. I checked the transcripts to ensure precision and accuracy, especially as some terminology is specific to the social media scene and may not be understandable to a layperson. Crutch words were removed from the quotations.

I used the qualitative software package, NVivo, to organize, analyze, and code the data. My theoretical framework and my fieldwork drove the coding of the data, in addition to the selection of questions used in the interview guide. Given the timing of the fieldwork and my ability to immerse myself in the field, the theory and fieldwork were co-constructed and co-constituted. The fieldwork oriented me toward topics that I had not anticipated or previously considered, such as influence. The theoretical framework informed the focus of my research by paying attention to identity, gender, work practices, and employer relations (see Chapter 2).

After the data was transcribed, I identified preliminary codes. The preliminary codes were those that repeatedly emerged in the interviews. While the codes often responded to specific questions or sets of questions, the codes also appeared throughout the interview transcripts due to the fluid nature of the semi-structured interviews. What became apparent throughout the interviews were the extremely blurred boundaries between people’s personal and professional lives. Secondary coding, whereby I grouped
codes together using thematic analysis, followed the preliminary coding. The data was then re-coded in an iterative process (see Appendix C). The codes form the foundation for each chapter, which is reflected in the organization of this dissertation. Chapter 4, *The Gender Divide*, reflects the codes: gendering social media, emotional labour, precarity, always-on, analytics, love your job, and ambiguous definitions. Chapter 5, *Personal Branding*, reflects the codes: branding practices, precarity, entrepreneurialism, hustling, and authentic simplicity. Chapter 6, *Labouring Influence*, reflects the codes: influencer ecosystem, performing visibility, scene, precarity, hustling, free labour, and ethical standards. Chapter 7, *Community Quantified*, reflects the codes: commercialization of community, growing up (individual)/golden age of social media (collective), ethical standards, personal and professional, and private and public.

As an example to illustrate the method of coding, the following description highlights the iterative, messy, and tedious process of developing one code. Before my fieldwork, influence was an area that I had not foreseen, as at that time there was limited academic and popular discourse of this topic in the lives of “ordinary” people, rather than celebrities or microcelebrities. Using the interview transcripts, I initially identified the codes: free swag, backlash, disclosure, sponsored sellout, personality, organic experiences, and paid/unpaid. These codes largely emerged from questions around influence (identified by questions 35–41), but were also apparent in other parts of the interview—particularly for participants who identified as influencers. Collating these codes, I created the secondary code of “influencer ecosystem” which responded to the recognition that an entire system of influence was emerging, yet not formalized. Participants were struggling with reconciling working with influencers in their jobs as
social media managers, and the perks of being an influencer themselves (e.g. free swag), yet they also saw and felt a backlash against being perceived as a sellout, which was contrasted with naturally occurring organic experiences.

3.5 Conclusion

The research involved primary data collection from three years of fieldwork in Toronto—both online and offline—and semi-structured interviews. Considering the emerging nature of this field and the dearth of data, primary data collection was used. As described by Rhonda McEwen (2010), there are various advantages in collecting new data:

(i) I maintain control of the research design and objectives and developed the instruments in accordance with the research questions that I developed;
(ii) the data in itself makes a contribution to Canadian scholarship since there is no comparable data-set currently available;
(iii) I own the data gathered from an intellectual property perspective and could use the data in future research;
(iv) I gain valuable research experience in conducting data collection; and
(v) it allowed me to make changes to the instrument design organically before each interaction with participants, without needing to get consent from a second party. (p. 97)

One tenet of qualitative research refers to the researcher’s position in the research. As Ted Palys and Chris Achison (2007) explain, “Many quantitatively oriented research textbooks suggest that the worst event that can befall anyone who engages in field research is for him or her to ‘go native’ or overidentify with those being studied” (p. 5).
Qualitative research, on the other hand, does not demand that researchers depersonalize the research. Beliefs as to the correct “distance” between the researcher and the data/situation differ amongst qualitative researchers. In contrast to the positivist epistemology that requires depersonalization and dispassionate data, Palys and Achison (2007) state that qualitative research requires intimacy with the research participants: “You must spend time with them, get to know them, feel close to them, be able to empathize with their concerns, perhaps even be one of them, if you hope to truly understand” (p. 10). Despite the identified distance between the researcher and situation, I strived for continual reflexivity in my research role by understanding my research position as a white, heterosexual woman, and doctoral candidate.

Definitional precision is often desired in describing a demographic cohort for a research project; for example, youth, young adults, teens, and digital natives can refer to those (a) aged 16 to 24 (Trosow et al., 2010), (b) 2–20 years old (Weber & Dixon, 2007), (c) born into digital technology (Prensky, 2001), or (d) the time of a person’s life after high school (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011). I found that age was not the defining factor I anticipated it to be. While people in the social media scene and those working as social media managers were largely millennials, I elected not to bias the results by delimiting the age cohort of participants for interview.

Through the course of my research, a number of participants moved to new jobs and I was able to follow them through these transitions. In the interviews, participants reflected on their entire working experiences resulting in much richer data than merely describing the specific industry or job they were currently in. Before beginning the research, I assumed that recruitment would be based on pre-determined industries (e.g.
not-for-profit, government, for-profit, and startup). However, as the research unfolded, I learned that work in social media was rather fluid and participants had worked in multiple positions or industries—often concurrently—which serves to illustrate the importance of fieldwork in shaping the interviews. What became apparent was that participants’ experiences and knowledge were not bound to their current job, but they were each able to reflect on their working experiences in the social media industries more generally. For example, while three participants were actively working as freelancers, most others had freelanced in social media as a way to build their portfolio and skills either at the beginning of their career or while they held other jobs as a way to earn extra income. As a result, having multiple perspectives from people who were currently freelancing, as well as those who had previously freelanced, enriched my understanding of freelancing and gig work in social media. Previous freelance positions ranged from running the social media for a company’s cat to the political campaign for an election. Participants’ industries are identified, but their reflections and insights span work in the social media industries more broadly rather than being limited to a particular sector.

The research did not seek to be generalizable to all people who work in the social media industries across all locales, but rather provide deep insight. As Janet Ward Schofield (2002) attests:

…the heart of the qualitative approach is the assumption that a piece of qualitative research is very much influenced by the researcher’s individual attributes and perspectives. The goal is not to produce a standardized set of results that any other careful researcher in the same situation or studying the same issue would have produced. Rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of that situation. (p. 174)
Similarly, Duffy (2011) speaks of “the difficulties of invoking claims about a topic that is always in flux” (p. 35) as this research is situated in a space of constant evolution. Like Duffy, I draw inspiration from the work of Gracie Lawson-Borders (2006) to situate the research as “a snapshot at this moment of time into its evolving history in the media industry” (p. ix). As such, I emphasize the importance of internal validity of the research (Schofield, 2002). The internal validity of this research was supported by the fieldwork, which provided great support for the research findings that emerged from the interviews.

The tables below introduce the 20 participants that I interviewed for this research. This demographic data provides a mere starting point to understanding the participants and social media work. Their stories in the following chapters are illustrative of their experiences—both positive and negative. In the following chapter, I introduce the gendering of work in social media management and identify the feminization of the social media industries.
Table 1: Participant Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Years Worked</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Salary ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Amira</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Startup</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>6+</td>
<td>25–30</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>60,000–69,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Agency(^{15})</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>25–30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>60,000–69,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Certificate or diploma below Bachelor level</td>
<td>5+</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rizal</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Freelance</td>
<td>Certificate or diploma above Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>36+</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>&lt;30,0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31–35</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>60,000–69,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>Certificate or diploma above Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25–30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>100,000+</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Dale</td>
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<td>Not-for-profit</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
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<td>31–35</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50,000–59,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Diya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25–30</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>50,000–59,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Media organization</td>
<td>Certificate or diploma above Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>40,000–49,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tali</td>
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<td>Freelance</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
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<td>70,000–79,999</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Maria</td>
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<td>Telecommunications</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>60,00–69,999</td>
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<td>Technology</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25–30</td>
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<td>Retail</td>
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<td>50,000–59,999</td>
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<td>Liam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Certificate or diploma above Bachelor's degree</td>
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<td>Jill</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Freelance</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Riley</td>
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<td>Technology</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>60,000–69,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25–30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>40,000–49,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Certificate or diploma above Bachelor's degree</td>
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<td>25–30</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>90,000–99,999</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^{15}\) Agency refers to full-service marketing and communications companies.
Table 2: Job Title\textsuperscript{16}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communications Manager</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and Support Manager</td>
<td>PR &amp; Digital Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Manager</td>
<td>Social Media Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Manager</td>
<td>Social Media Manager; Blogger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Assistant</td>
<td>Social Media Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Strategist</td>
<td>Social Media Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Consumer and Digital Marketing</td>
<td>Social Media Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager, Public Relations</td>
<td>Social Media Strategist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager, Social Media and Content</td>
<td>Social Provocateur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and Community Manager</td>
<td>Social Strategist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Education

![Education Chart]

\textsuperscript{16} Job titles are listed alphabetically. For anonymization purposes, the job titles are not linked to participants.
Table 4: Gender

Gender

- 70% Male
- 30% Female

Table 5: Age

Age

- 55% 18-24
- 25% 25-30
- 15% 31-35
- 5% 35+
- 5% 35+
### Table 6: Self-Identification

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Self-Identification</th>
<th>Bar Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>West Asian</td>
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### Table 7: Income

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4

The Gender Divide: Hierarchies of Social Media Work

4.1 Introduction

An emerging feminization of social media management is underway. As I describe in Chapter 2, feminization of work refers to work that is significantly devalued, emphasizes emotional labour, and/or is associated with domestic duties (Mayer, 2014). From the quantitative perspective, limited industry research to date indicates that women represent about 61% of community managers (Keath, 2013). My experiences in the social media scene and my interviews further highlighted that women predominantly occupy roles in community management. However, not only is there an invisible standard emerging whereby social media managers are women, but, as I found in my research, the work objectives and practices are feminized. Vicki Mayer (2014) identifies three criteria used to define feminized work: (1) work that is associated with domestic and household duties and childcare, (2) work that emphasizes the emotional labour of serving, assisting, or caring for others (see Hochschild, 1983/2003), and (3) work that is devalued and
degrading in comparison to non-feminized work (p. 52–53). The feminization of work means that despite the fact that women are doing more paid work than ever before, this work is precarious, underpaid, and reliant on “soft skills,” such as teamwork and interpersonal skills (Jarrett, 2016). Jobs in communications are value-prescribed, as there is a “naturalized” association between communications work and women’s work. In contrast to the feminization of social media management, the field of social media analytics is increasingly ascribed as a male domain with men dominating in the area. Social media data analytics includes more quantitative and analytical types of work and involves digging into and analyzing “big data” to develop strategic insights, using sentiment analysis, influence analysis, and network analysis. Mirroring the history of devaluing women’s work (Gattiker, 1994), specifically women’s work in information technology (IT), I argue that social media management, represents the ongoing and continual devaluation of women’s work in the tech industry. While the work of social media management is new in that the tools themselves have only been in existence for little over a decade, social media management can be understood using Leah Vosko’s (2000) concept of “continuity through change” (Vosko, 2000; see Cohen, 2016) as the devaluation of women’s work is perpetuated and intensified.

I argue that the way social media work is valued reveals gendered stereotypes, which has implications not only for understanding the contours of social media management, but how women are considered within the digital economy. This chapter provides a response to Duffy’s (2015a) question: “To what extent may various forms of social media production be understood as gendered?” (p. 710). While a focus on workers in social media management highlights the lived experiences for many in new media
work, it also points to a further gendered division of work. Importantly, it is necessary to recognize that gender exists as a continuum and I am cautious not to further reproduce the binary of men versus women, masculine versus feminine. As Wajcman (2009), eloquently attests, “This is not to imply that there is a single form of masculinity or one form of technology. Rather, it is to note that in contemporary Western society, the culturally dominant form of masculinity is still strongly associated with technical prowess and power” (Wajcman, 2009, p. 465). The culture of technology and culture of work in technology is deeply gendered.

4.2 Gendered Labour in Technology
The term “pink collar workers” was popularized by Louise Howe (1978) to refer to fields that have historically been dominated by women—such as maids, secretaries, and waitresses (or servers to use the preferable non-gender-specific terminology that does not highlight the gender of the employee). Howe (1978) described the pink collar jobs as those lowest on the hierarchical job ladder that have little room for promotion, and where wages are consistently inferior. The “pink ghetto” has been identified in various industries including: advertising (Grow, Roca, & Broyles, 2012), public relations (Fitch, 2015), early childhood professionals (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2002), teaching (Medford, Knorr, & Cook, 2013), clerical work (Green, 2005), and nursing (Summers & Summers, 2014). The feminization of work also exists with new media industries (Shade, 2014). I argue that an invisible standard is also emerging whereby community management is becoming the newest pink collar job.
In my research, I found that women dominate social media management. Every participant acknowledged that there are more women working in community management, yet there was a reluctance to acknowledge that a gendered issue exists. Gill (2002) identifies “the post-feminist problem” to “capture the reluctance of new media workers – men, but also most women – to understand their experiences as having anything to do with gender” (p. 84). The post-feminist problem exists when individualistic understandings of a person’s experiences are favoured over sociological patterns, so experiences are seen as personal, rather than systemic. Despite the recognition that women dominate in this industry, when asked about the gender of social media workers, participants prefaced that their knowledge was bounded by their individual experiences, and consequently they could not conclusively speak to the actuality of social media labour. Noah explicitly states this: “From my personal experience, I think I’ve probably met more female community managers than men—I think—maybe I just talk to more women than I do men.”

At first, the overwhelming majority of participants did not easily identify a gendered division of labour in the social media industry. More generally in the social media scene, there was no discussion of women in social media (even though women in technology—or how to get more women into technology at the broadest level—certainly was a repeated topic, through initiatives such as Ladies Learning Code and ReThinc Girls). Participants needed to reflect on their individual experiences in higher-level positions, such as their experiences serving in human resources roles or teaching, to provide a broader view of gender in social media work, which reflects Gill’s post-feminist problem. Christina recalled her recent experience in participating on a hiring
committee at her company and said, “We’re interviewing a little while ago here for community managers, and we got, I think, 80% females responding.” In and of itself, having women dominate a particular industry is not a problem; rather, what is problematic is the way value is assigned, the successive feminization of the work, and the troubling repercussions for men and women in the industry, including lower wages, devalued status, increased precarity, and a lack of labour mobility.

### 4.3 Gendering of Technology

Before attempting to understand the process by which social media and social media management is feminized, it is necessary to know how technologies have historically been gendered (Webster, 2013). The gendering of technology process is neither natural nor neutral. A rich history of feminist research has exposed how communication technologies are gendered through their social uses, design, and marketing (Shade, 2007). Maria Lohan (2000) identifies the confluence and social shaping of technology, stating, “gender must be taken into account in a full understanding of technologies. Equally, technologies must be taken into account in a full understanding of gender” (p. 895). Gender and technology do not exist as two mutually exclusive categories, but rather a nuanced understanding rests in recognizing how gender and technology are intertwined. Gender needs to be referenced in order to understand technology (Cockburn, 1992). As I discuss below, the link between technology and gender is well-established in scholarship; technologies do not exist outside of their socio-cultural and technical environment. Therefore, an understanding of social media work necessitates a particular focus on the gendered dynamics of social media.
Technology has typically been gendered male—or masculine. By tracing how gender and technology have constructed each other over the past 100 years, Ruth Olzenziel (1999) outlines the long history of men laying claim to technology as their exclusive domain. Thomas Streeter (2011) explains, “From railroads to radio, to automobiles to VCRs, mastery of technologies has been treated as a sign of male prowess and control” (p. 12). Technology as a domain is chiefly gendered male; however, certain technologies and technological activities have been feminized, such as the gendering of the home phone (Lohan, 2000). When a technology is feminized, the process of gendering the technology follows a predictable trend: masculine technologies are seen as superior, in comparison to feminine technologies that are seen as inferior (Jacobson, 2010).

Gender dichotomies, binaries, and hierarchies also exist in the manner a single technology is used. While certain technologies, and subsequently professions, are wholly gendered male or female, others are gendered based on the activity. As Mia Consalvo (1997) states, “Technologies become gendered through use” (p. 104). For instance, historically, women have been ridiculed for their sociable use of home phones (Lohan, 2000), and this continues in the cultural devaluation of women’s smartphone use with selfies—referring to a self-portrait typically using a smartphone. Anne Burns (2015) explains, “Once the selfie is established as connoting narcissism and vanity, it perpetuates a vicious circle in which women are vain because they take selfies, and selfies connote vanity because women take them” (p. 5). The selfie example illustrates the self-fulfilling prophecy and circular logic whereby women are accused of using technologies in inappropriate, undesirable, or frivolous ways, precisely because they are
women engaging in these practices. A constructed technological discourse prescribes some activities as acceptable while others are deemed unacceptable, which inevitably is tied to the gendered identity of the people who partake in the activity. The ways that the technology is used are then coded masculine or feminine, which shapes the overall understanding and valuation of the use of technology—particularly in the workplace—and these stereotypes can inhibit equitable opportunities for women.

4.4 Feminizing Social Media Work

Based on the interviews with my participants, sex stereotyping is often used as a justification to naturalize why women dominate community management. Both women’s negative stereotypical traits (such as oversharing and exhibiting narcissistic behaviour) and women’s positive stereotypical traits (such as being nurturing and creative) are used to rationalize women’s dominance in social media management. Likewise, the value of women’s cultural practices with technology is used to reinforce a social hierarchy that maintains existing gendered hierarchies (Burns, 2015). Kat explains that the manner in which women use social media is desirable for a community management role:

I think women share more, but I think it’s almost equal. I’d say it’s a little bit more—I would say more women than men, at least in my networks—and I think that women may be just—maybe they’re more of a big—they share more or they overshare more. I don’t really have many men on my social media that will post four photos in one day. I think there are a few. Yeah, I don’t know. I would say, slightly more women.

Ostensibly, women are more “fit” to work in social media than men because women are perceived to be or socialized to be more active users of social media who already share—
or overshare. The latest statistics from Pew Research, however, uncover that men and women use social media at similar rates (Perrin, 2015). The perception that women are well-suited for social media management is further justified in how men and women are presumed to use social media differently. Amira explains that women’s perceived natural personality traits make them desirable for community management:

I think women are more caring and nurturing. That’s the perception. So we tend to hire women. It’s like the voicemail—whose voice goes on it? Lots of companies prefer to have a female voice because it’s just more soothing. And I don’t know, people say women are friendlier. I’ve seen some male community managers, but on average mostly they are females.

While not necessarily believing her own justification, Amira’s comments reflect the reality of community managers performing affective labour. She gives the example of responding to people’s desire to be listened to and providing affirmation “like being a counselor at school.” In pink collar jobs, much of the labour mirrors the traits of reproductive labour, such as housekeeping (Howe, 1978). This trait of caretaking and nurturing is gendered female and mirrors traditional kin-keeping (Jarrett, 2016) or mothering.

Social media managers are required to embody a great sense of responsibility for growing the social media account for their employer. Community managers express a deep sense of commitment and obligation to the social media accounts they created. Liam works with a team, but he is solely responsible for developing content for Facebook and Twitter. He describes, “Everyone sort of plays a hand in everything and all, but that’s my baby.” As Liam describes, like a parent raising a newborn child, a community manager “raises” a social media account. Alison explains:
So finally, [I] got this thing approved, and then finally started it, and then it was a little bitty bee, and: oh we’ve got 2,000 followers—and kind of growing it—it was a pet project that I was determined to do. It was kind of difficult to be like, “Okay, someone else is going to take it now.” It’s like your child—and it was the same with the Instagram account, actually, because I started the Instagram account here as well, and now it’s crazy. Now I think it’s more than 20,000 followers, which is amazing.

As Alison describes, the work is akin to raising a child; a community manager creates social media accounts, nurtures them over time, and watches them grow. While community managers identify a diverse set of skills that are required in order to be effective at working in social media professionally, including the need to be level-headed, strategic, confident, detail-oriented, and to have strong writing, analytical, and decision-making skills, these more gender-neutral skills were absent in the rationalization of why women dominate community management. Rather, community managers explained why women dominate social media management by reproducing the socially normative answers of relying on the gendered traits (such as being nurturing), which may serve as a self-fulfilling process.

Christina voices the perception of social media as feminine: “Social media is just feminine, or is perceived to be feminine. I don’t think it is. I’ve met a lot of great male community managers, but for some reason, there’s something that—it just draws more women in. I don’t know—what do men do in social?” In justifying why women are well suited for community management, an unspoken question exists as to why there are so few women employed in other forms of social media labour—and why men dominate in data analytics. The stereotypes of women’s caring qualities serve to reproduce the
devaluation of women’s paid work (Bonds, 2006) and also perpetuate the ideology that women are naturally suited for these types of social media management positions.

4.5 Emotional and Affective Labour

While people use social media to share news, stories, and personal updates, people also use social media as a stage for complaints, anger, and outrage. Given the affordances of social media, people are able to quickly and easily voice their opinions online. An online disinhibition effect, which refers to the idea that people feel less restrained and do things online that they would not do offline, further accentuates this reality for community managers (Suler, 2004). Driven by various factors—such as anonymity, invisibility, and asynchronous messaging—afforded online (Suler, 2004), people can become a “keyboard warrior.” A keyboard warrior is a colloquial term to refer to someone who uses the tools of the internet to express rage. While flaming and trolling (Phillips, 2015) are undoubtedly not new to the online space, community managers are responsible for de-escalating and dealing with the negative publicity on social media. Dale explains:

For a real long time, I was used to just having people blast me to my face over something I did not do. Like, “I dropped my phone in my toilet, now give me a new one.” Sorry, I can’t do. “What, how does that work?” And then they lose their minds…Sometimes I rage, not online though. I lose my sh*t here, and then I go back [online] and then I put the smile on and go: okay, how do I come back at this in a way that’s going to rectify this situation?

There is a presumed difference between being lambasted for something that one is responsible for and something that one has no control over. Yet there is a naturalized and
unfortunate acceptance that this type of abusive behaviour should be expected in the job. As a result, community managers engage in tremendous emotional and affective labour. Hochschild (1983/2003) explains, “The females’ supposed ‘higher tolerance for abuse’ amounted to a combination of higher exposure to it and less ammunition—in the currency of respect—to use against it” (p. 179). Much like the service workers Hochschild analyzed that dealt with hostile guests, community management often necessitates dealing with irate people; the difference is that the interaction occurs online and in public rather than offline, which can perhaps exacerbate the hostility. Noah describes, “As much as I love people, sometimes people are the most annoying part of it. People are both the best and the worst part of this job.”

The difference of locale is important in understanding the emotional toll on community managers. Social media is used as a public forum through which complaints can be voiced. Many people have learned to bypass traditional methods of calling or emailing a company, and instead go straight to social media in an attempt to skip the bureaucracy and get a speedier response as community managers are expected to be accessible at all times. The negative experience can take place offline, but is readily moved to social media by someone looking for a stage to share their situation.

A meeting I had scheduled with one participant was delayed over an hour as she frantically messaged me explaining that there was a social media emergency that she urgently had to rectify. Her company had released new print advertisements that were plastered across the city. Unfortunately, there was a spelling mistake. Even though the ads were taken down soon after, a photo of the ad had already been posted to Reddit—a social media news aggregator and discussion board known for its libertarian and raucous
culture—and many people had taken to social media to identify and ridicule the company. The story made local news headlines, which further fueled the online mockery. While the situation did not originate on social media nor was she the cause of the mistake, my participant had to work to rectify the situation online as community managers have the role of being the public spokesperson of the company. She responded to an onslaught of messages, recognized the error, and worked to maintain the brand’s integrity. As social media is a publicly accessible space, community managers expend immense emotional and affective labour both in the day-to-day practices as well as in crisis situations.

4.6 Valuation of Social Media Management

My research reveals that social media management represents a new iteration of the devaluation of women’s work in the tech industry. The feminization of social media work refers to more than just women dominating the profession, but rather the influence on the valuation of social media as a profession. Jennifer DeWinter, Carly Kocurek and Stephanie Vie (2017) similarly identify the undervalued and feminized labour of community management in the video game industry. Pink collar jobs are marked by a societal devaluation of the labour, low wages, and social stigma as they are seen to be easy and natural. The feminization of social media management, and subsequent devaluation of the work, also impacts men who, while in the minority of social media managers, also face the difficulty of their work being undervalued. Ted describes this:

Technically [I] do get paid to sit on Facebook all day, which is what people always make fun of me about, but it’s technically what I’m doing. Facebook is
open on my computer all day, it’s not a lie, that’s how we’re able to chat to make this happen—but that’s not—it’s both the truth, but it’s also not a fallacy. It over-simplifies what we actually do, because there’s scheduling and there’s content strategy and planning and I don’t just f*cking throw something out there.

The work is feminized because creating social media content is seen as easy and natural—as an extension of the work women are already doing. Even in feminized sectors, Colette Henry (2009) explains, “Men are still better paid, hold more senior positions and are more likely to be recognized for their achievements” (p. 144). The gender wage gap still exists in North America. In 2014, the Canadian Women’s Foundation (2014) stated that Canadian women workers earn on average 74 cents for every dollar earned by a male worker; the latest statistics in 2017 show no gains as women made 74.2 cents for every dollar made by a full-time male worker (Grant, 2017).

The reasons for the wage gap are complex, but one important contributor is that “women’s work” is paid less than “men’s work.” The Ontario Equal Pay Coalition (n.d.) states:

One of the primary causes of the gender pay gap is that jobs that are associated with “women’s work” are underpaid. Think of any job in the “caring industry” such as nurses, midwives, and personal support workers. It isn’t that women choose jobs that are in lower-paid industries, it is that women-dominated industries become less respected and less well-paid occupations because women do the work. (para. 3)

Many participants reflected on how social media management roles were undervalued by employers, which was also reflected in the larger social discourse in the industry. Several participants expressed frustration with having to constantly fight for having their work recognized as valuable and the concomitant fight for higher salaries. Diya explained that
she used to work in the U.S. and even though she was promoted to a new higher-level position, meaning she received more responsibilities and a new job title, her pay remained the same. She left the U.S. and returned to Canada in hopes of finding a job that was more aligned with her experience and the level of work. She lamented:

The whole thing is, as a social media person, you’re always fighting to prove that what you’re doing is valuable to the institution. Even though they know it is. I mean, think about it, “I built you all of these channels, and there’s all this happening. If tomorrow, I just wasn’t there and all of this came out—there’s no voice. You don’t have a voice anywhere because these channels are your only voice, that you’re talking to them, you’re talking to people, but when you don’t have that, what do you have to talk to somebody?”

While some community managers have decent wages, their pay does not reflect the always on call requirement of the job, which is not compensated for. Christina remarked, “I don’t think I’m underpaid, luckily, but I think it [community management] is, and I think it’s like hiring a full-time customer service communications person—and sometimes creative team—all in one, and then asking them to work 24 hours a day.” Anthony McCosker (2017) similarly notes the 24/7 labour of social media strategists in the Australian context. Not only is the work unrelenting, but the type of work is emotionally draining. Tali stressed that social media management “is so, so, so labour intensive and people don’t understand that until they’re in it, but then it’s too late. You don’t leave work, ever—like, I am married to my phone, I’m married to it, because I have to be. If somebody posts something on the Facebook page that I’m a manager of, it’s mine to deal with.” Similarly, Sabrina explains how she loves her job, but is quick to identify the worst part about working as a social media manager:
Always being on. You’re always-on. You never get to take a break. There have been times where I received emails from my boss at 9 o’clock on a Saturday—middle of the summer—“Why didn’t you post on Instagram today?” Because I’m off and you can’t schedule Instagram posts and I don’t have it backed up and I’m tired and I’m—you know—at home making dinner. So there’s no real rhyme or reason for why I didn’t post on Instagram that day other than I needed a break.

Despite the always-on labour of community management, most participants engaged in some form of freelance work either in addition to their regular job or because they were unable to find a stable full-time job. As well as her full-time job, Amira explains, “I do my own consulting for social media. As well as run community groups, some of which is paid and some of which is not. And then under consulting work, I do, not just social media, I’ve run crowdfunding campaigns. I do copywriting.” Many of the gigs Amira describes were unpaid. Jill, on the other hand, has not been able to secure a full-time job so she has resorted to freelance social media consulting. She describes her frustration in looking for work and the difficulty in transitioning from freelancing to getting a full-time job because reputable companies do not know how to value the freelance social media work:

It’s interesting because I’ve actually turned down the odd freelancing gig because I want to find a permanent position, and it’s something I struggle with because you don’t know when that permanent job is going to come and you also don’t know if you take on a freelance gig, that it might be they just need me for a few hours a week—well that’s no good if you can’t get another client or a few other clients. So that’s my dilemma right now.

On the one end of the scale of gig work are low paid “clickworkers” who earn money on an online labour market, such as undertaking some tasks on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk,
that require limited skills and finite time (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014). However, the technology-enabled gig work can also involve more sophisticated work, such as social media management. Siou Kuek et al. (2015) make the distinction between micro-work and online freelancing: micro-work involves low-complexity tasks that require no specialized skills whereas online freelancing involves high-complexity tasks that require specialized training like social media management skills that my participants had. Further, a simple search on Upwork (a freelance marketplace) for “social media freelancers” in 2016 found over 200,000 workers with the majority working in the lowest pay bracket of less than $10 per hour. Accordingly, the community manager is a type of new media worker, often a gig worker, who produces new media content that is culturally devalued.

4.7 Social Media Analytics

In comparison to the pink collar labour of community management, social media analytics or data science is gendered male, as evidenced in interviews and the larger discourse in the social media scene. Daniel Zeng, Hsinchun Chen, Robert Lusch, and Shu-Hsing Li (2010) state, “Social media analytics is concerned with developing and evaluating informatics tools and frameworks to collect, monitor, analyze, summarize, and visualize social media data, usually driven by specific requirements from a target application” (p. 14). Montalvo (2011) outlines that, “Social media management analytics extensively use statistical and quantitative data that facilitate fact-based decision making” (p. 93). Using social media analytics, businesses work to transform the social media data
into business intelligence that can be actionable and used for strategic purposes, such as targeting advertisements.

Women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) are severely under-represented (Misa, 2010); Statistics Canada identified that women account for 39% of university graduates (ages 25–34) with a degree in STEM, in comparison to 66% in other non-STEM programs (Hango, 2011). Campaigns and initiatives to attract and retain more women in STEM fields are active.17 Technically, social media management falls within the “Technology” category and, consequently, within STEM. However, as with other forms of pink collar work, the job is devalued within the social media industry, and evidenced in the pay, in comparison to social media data analytics positions. Riley acknowledges that women dominate community management and makes a direct link to the valuation of the labour, “We talk about tech and STEM always being very male-driven, and this particular industry tends to have a lot of women and unfortunately…[it’s] maybe one of the reasons that we see a devaluing of the community role.” Amira explains:

Community is about people…If you can understand that basic need of human beings to be heard, I think you can be a good community manager. I think that’s what all people out there are looking for. I think being part of the community is very powerful and if you can give that sense to people that you belong to something and if you care as much [about them] as you care about delivering your message to them, like hearing them out, I think that’s what it is all about.

17 For examples of Canadian initiatives see: Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology (CCWESTT), Society for Canadian Women in Science and Technology (SCWIST), and the International Day of Women and Girls in Science.
Accordingly, the focus of community management is often placed on the community or people, rather than the technologies and technical skills that are required to skillfully perform the job. As a simplification of the job descriptions, community management focuses on people and words, whereas social media analytics focuses on data and numbers; however, community managers are often responsible for conducting the social media analytics as well. In society, men and women are often understood to have differing relationships with technology: women are the consumers and men are the producers of technology. Liesbet Van Zoonen (1992) observes, “Girls listen to their radios, while boys pull them apart; women play videos, but men set the timer; women use computers, men experiment and play with them” (p. 9). The stereotypes of women’s interactions with technology perpetuate a cycle and norm where women are not expected to be good at developing, hacking, or creating technology, and are relegated to using technology as a consumer. This perception translates into a division of labour in the social media industries.

While community management work is largely devalued, social media analytics is highly valued in society and the job is invariably gendered male. The Harvard Business Review declared that a data scientist is the “sexiest job title of the 21st century” (Davenport & Patil, 2012). While not explicitly painting the data scientist as male, not a single woman is mentioned or quoted in this article, and the magazine cover shows a man dressed like a circus lion tamer, whipping big data to “get control” (see Figure 1). When women are in data science roles they are often invisible; for example, women are less likely to be considered or invited as keynote speakers (Perlich, 2014).
If hard social media work is perceived to be data analytics and social listening, then soft social media work would refer to the community management roles. The hard-soft dichotomy applies to hard sciences—natural sciences—ascribed to male characteristics and soft sciences—social sciences—ascribed as feminine. Wendy Faulkner (2001) explains: “‘Hard’ technology is inert and powerful…this is real technology. ‘Soft’ technology is smaller scale, like kitchen appliances, or more organic, like drugs; most people do not readily identify such products as ‘technology’” (p. 85). The problematic dichotomy of the hard and soft sciences is situated in the supposed rigour and objectivity, which results in the cultural valuation of soft sciences as being less legitimate. A plethora of hard and soft dichotomies can similarly be mapped to a gender dichotomy: hard skills (programming, science, statistics) and soft skills (communication, patience, teamwork); hard news (politics, economics, war) and soft news (lifestyle, entertainment), etcetera. The valuation in these domains is formulaic. As a result, some men have been found to distinguish their use of technology so as to distance themselves from the feminized use of the technology (Lohan, 2000). Working in
the analytics side of the social media industries is strongly contrasted with working in social media management.

There was widespread agreement amongst participants that men dominate social media analytics. Amira states, “I think for community managers, it’s more women. Men tend to be more marketing manager roles where they have to look at more of the analytics. A lot of my guy friends are into that.” Maria similarly explains, “This might be super stereotypical—I don’t know—but I would say, from my experience, there might be more of a slant towards the male in terms of the social listening and analytics, and more women in terms of content creation. That’s been my experience.” These statements are highly contextualized within Maria’s individual experiences, rather than acknowledging the systemic gender discrimination and biases that exist within the work.

People nonchalantly identified “data guys” or “social listening guys” to refer to those who were responsible for social media analytics and measurement. Maria explains, “So there’s two content creators, so that’s me, and then another girl on my team does like the business-side of social media. And then there’s one social listening guy who does social listening and analytics.” The use of the term “guys” reflects the situation of who dominates in these data analytics roles. Language shapes and is shaped by the social environment; one need only look to the gender-suffix or -prefix of positions in an attempt to differentiate the gender-outlier from other male/female-dominated fields (e.g. “male nurse” to describe a nurse who happens to be a man in a profession that is dominated by women).

In much the same way that women are socially positioned for community management, men are socially positioned for data analytics. While recognizing that
generalizations cannot be made about all men and women, Maria states, “I don’t know if it’s [that] males are naturally more analytical and enjoy that type of looking at data and analyzing the data. I don’t know, I don’t know—and if girls just prefer that creative element.” Stereotypical notions of women “naturally” being well-suited for “detail work” (such as textiles and clerical work) has a long history (Hossfeld, 2009). Wajcman (2007) explains, “Technologies have a masculine image, not only because they are dominated by men but because they incorporate symbols, metaphors and values that have masculine connotations” (p. 289). Correspondingly, with new media work, the values of data science and data analytics have embodied masculine connotations.

Within a “prototypical masculine profession” (Jorgenson, 2002, p. 351) people are often ambivalent about pinpointing gender as an issue within the industry. As stated by Faulker (2001), “One obvious stream within feminist scholarship on technology concerns ‘women in technology’ most commonly the question ‘why so few?’ women in engineering” (p. 79). By extension, a similar question can be asked as to why women dominate community management roles, yet why are there few women in social media analytics—or data analytics more broadly? This reality is reflected in other technology sectors (Mundy, 2017). In startup culture, a similar situation is unfolding whereby coders, perceived to be male, receive high salaries, stock options, and prestige whereas, “The people who do community management—on which the success of many tech companies is based—get none of those” (Chachra, 2015, para. 9). Women’s role as social media managers is that of support which reproduces the stereotype of the woman who provides a base for men to succeed (Jacobson, 2010). The gendering of the social media
industries highlights the differential valuations between social media management and social media analytics.

4.8 Inflated Job Titles in Lieu of Rewards

The devaluation of social media management coupled with a lack of terminology and definitional precision in social media management work (as I describe in Chapter 1), contributes to the feminization of this work. I argue that the use of inflated job titles serves to strategically and systematically benefit the employers who can placate their employees in lieu of financial compensation. While the job titles of community manager or social media manager are frequently used, many of my participants accepted that the job title is merely a title, and not indicative of the responsibilities, pay, or valuation of their work. As social media is emerging as an industry, people have embraced outlandish job titles in an attempt to garner attention due to the ambiguity of what social media work entails. One of my participants in this study, Dale, recalls, “At the time, I was calling myself a social media ninja, because why not? I kind of liked it anyway, I still like it now. I mean, I switched it to ‘strategist’ because some people really hate on the term ‘social media ninja.’” Another participant in my study, Noah similarly explains how he would have loved to have a fun job title like “Overseer of Joy.” These acts show the tension that exists between the creativity of the employee and the corporate sector.

Social media is often not taken seriously by employers, and more broadly in society, and by extension social media work has resulted in mockery; this is evidenced in The Social Media Job Title Generator website that randomly auto-generates absurd social media job titles. A click on the “Get a new job” button reveals a plethora of
satirical social media job titles including: Web Domination Teddy Bear, Awesome Overlord of Social Networks, Public Happiness Concierge, Internet Media Guerilla, Web PR Czar, Digital Asset Guru, and so forth. Over time, however, eccentric social media job titles have become less prominent than was seen five years ago as social media work has grown and the job is more recognized in the social media industries; however, this reflects the cultural standardization of social media as a profession.

While the term “community manager” has been in existence since the early computer-mediated communication systems and online communities, the meaning has since shifted with the rise of social media. One of my older participants, Tali, a 36+ year old woman, recalls her early work as a “community moderator/manager” on a now defunct online forum:

I ran and oversaw 115 message boards and 200+ community leaders. So basically, I managed all of the people who, on the day-to-day, posted on those boards, started the [conversations], people who were trying to keep the conversation going. That included everything from content creation to reporting, analytics, way back then, which is way different from now—let me assure you.

Even though she was working very busy 90-hour weeks, Tali reflected fondly that she got more respect in her position back in pre-social media community management than she does now.

Some people view social media management and community management as embodying critical differences. People rarely have the same job responsibilities and tasks irrespective of the varied job titles; an employee at one company could have a similar job function to another person at another company under a different job title. Moreover,
when the job title is the same, the job itself greatly varies. Accordingly, Sabrina, a participant, explains, “You can’t let your job title define you.”

Much of frontline social media management work is at the entry-level, yet the word “manager” is in the job title (e.g. community managers or social media managers). In business, managers typically delegate, oversee, and manage a team/department. “Managers” in social media rarely have this higher level of responsibility. Maria recalls developing the title for her new job, “I surveyed five people, ‘Hey, what should I make my title?’ and I went back and forth between them, and everyone was like, ‘Community management, community management because it sounds like you manage the community.’” Considering that the social media role is still small—by way of both budget and personnel—many community managers manage a “team” existing of only them. Sabrina similarly explains:

My friend was “community manager” and I was “social media manager.” We could never figure out why the two titles were different, but that’s what our bosses were used to hearing, so that’s what they went with. Were we both “managers?” No, we were managing platforms and so [it] almost kind of takes away from what a management role actually looks like, and undervalues that role and then it gives you so much credibility in a role that’s probably not as credible in that space.

Ideological processes in capitalist society can mask working conditions as workers can be blinded to the realities of their social class (Eyerman, 1981). I argue that the use of a “cool” job title—social media ninja—and impressive job titles—manager—serves a more significant and insidious role: in lieu of rewards in the current workplace, the inflated job titles serve to placate workers, while companies are still able to derive
increased profits with relatively low wages. Diya describes, “My title was Marketing Coordinator, but I did A to Z, everything from printing to inventory to event management to social media—and I managed all the channels all at once.” Even though her (male) boss was the Marketing Director, they ended up merely splitting the work evenly. She continues, “At the end, it was just, ‘you take half and I take half, and we just go do it.’” As a result, she was performing equal work, but was not receiving equal pay.

There are various self-defense mechanisms or self-preservation strategies that workers employ to counteract the lack of compensation, promotion, or respect. In lieu of promotion opportunities, Noah changed his title to Director of Social Media, but was subsequently reprimanded by management who patronizingly explained that the title “Director” came with different rights and responsibilities—to which he was not entitled. This attempt to self-promote by way of promotion and self-promote by way of personal branding is also a self-presentation strategy. Many social media managers face few—if any—promotion opportunities within a company as social media still occupies a small portfolio for most companies. Accordingly, an impressive job title serves as a pseudo-promotion.

This is significant in contemporary society as people are increasingly identified by the work they do. In the social media scene, the first question one is asked is, “What do you do?” which is followed by an account of what one is, “I am a…social media manager.” The job title serves as a significant identity marker. This is further perpetuated by the public presentation of self on social media, which is presented as one’s “professional headline.” In this way, what you do is what you are, and this signals your social worth, importance, and capital. As a result, the naming of job titles is important
and the inflation of these titles serves a critical role in capitalist societies.

4.9 Conclusion

The gendered discourse structures work and the division of work in the social media industries. As Wajcman (2007) explains, “We live in a technological culture, a society that is constituted by science and technology, and so the politics of technology is integral to the renegotiation of gender power relations” (p. 296). Overall, I argue that social media work is feminized. Women’s work in social media management is devalued, which perpetuates the belief that men construct technology and women merely utilize it. The feminization of social media management has implications for both men and women who work in this industry due to the feminization and devaluation of this type of work. Rooted in a history of sexism, social media management has followed a similar pattern of many other feminized professions where there is cultural devaluing of the job. Social media management involves intense 24/7 emotional and affective labour, yet the work is under-valued. The feminization of social media work exists in contrast to the masculinized data analytics; this serves to create a binary in the social media industries whereby only one form of work is valorized. Further, the inflated job titles in the social media industries works to the advantage of organizations and placates workers who rely on their job title for their personal branding in lieu of rewards. In the following chapter, I introduce personal branding, which emerged as a dominant discourse of the presentation of self using social media.
5

Personal Branding: Identity Curation for the Future Audience

5.1 Introduction

In the early stages of my research, personal branding—which I refer to as the process and practice of developing a branded identity and marketing oneself to others—emerged as a topical subject, as early adopters were exploring how social media could be used to position themselves for personal and professional success. Social media managers and the larger social media scene were at the forefront of personal branding and offered a unique perspective in their reflections on the personal branding strategies they were experiencing and witnessing on social media. Over the last few years, the conversations surrounding personal branding have dramatically changed as the practice of personal branding has become normalized. In the present social media scene, personal branding is simply accepted as a necessary part of promotional identity and a potential for-profit strategy; however, the implementation is still new to many others. Personal branding as a trend has spread to other professions and industries—such as higher education, business,
and law—that tout the importance of personal branding for career and life success—especially in highly competitive labour markets.

In each of my interviews, participants always mentioned personal branding before I initiated it as a topic of conversation. They expressed the importance and necessity of personal branding in their own lives. Personal branding is used to position oneself in the labour market by promoting one’s skills, experience, and personality—particularly when seeking employment. For social media managers, personal branding builds their reputation and is of critical importance; social media is not only their work, but also an important part of their professional portfolio that will follow them throughout their career. The participants reflected on their own personal branding practices, the impetus behind the need to personally brand oneself, and the impact of their personal branding on their personal and professional lives. In Chapter 6, the practices of social influencers—who capitalize on their personal brand—are discussed further. A social influencer is a person that has built credibility, a large audience, and/or the ability to influence and persuade their network on social media.

Individuals engaging in personal branding consider the strategies for personal branding—including positivity, stability, and simplicity (as I discuss below)—but rarely consider the socio-economic climate that has given rise to and perpetuates personal branding. Although personal branding is promoted as an opportunity to move ahead in one’s career (Rampersad, 2009), there is another side of personal branding. Specifically, the rise of personal branding using social media can be linked to the rise of precarious employment after the 2008 global financial crisis (Gandini, 2015; Cohen, 2016). In this chapter, I describe the presentation of self as described by my participants and outline
how personal branding strategies serve to position individuals in consumer capitalism; the expectations of personal branding are simultaneously required by, yet are also at odds with, the current labour market. I introduce the concept of “the future audience” to describe how individuals project their curated brand for all future and unknown audiences on social media. I analyze the perpetual labour required to craft a personal brand. Finally, I identify the culture of positivity that strategically benefits corporate interests, and describe the necessity of “always-on the-job-market.” Responding to the uncertainty of the job market, the performance of a curated personal brand requires constant effort and labour, and becomes an obligatory practice to gain and maintain employment. In this process, the personal identity becomes subsumed by the work personality, which constrains acceptable forms of subjectivity and discussion.

5.2 You are a Brand

Everyone is individually branded: one may not realize, acknowledge, embrace, or manage their brand, but it certainly exists. In North America, the importance of the personal brand has emerged as a recurring topic in popular discourse and academia during the last ten years, under the titles of personal branding (Gehl, 2011; Wee & Brooks, 2010), personal marketing (Kotler et al., 2005), self-branding (Hearn, 2010; Marwick, 2013; Page, 2012), and self marketing (Shepherd, 2005). I use the term “personal branding” in this dissertation, as this is the terminology used in the social media scene. Personal branding refers to the process an individual uses to develop and market themselves to others. Personal branding is an act of agency as an individual actively—consciously or subconsciously—performs an identity.
The concept of personal positioning gained popularity since Al Ries and Jack Trout introduced the idea in 1981.\(^{18}\) They use personal positioning to refer to the clothes one wears, what one does, and the words one uses, but the authors did not expand the term. More than three decades later, personal branding “gurus” are presenting the same arguments with renewed force and focus on social media as the locus of personal branding (Broad, 2016; Marcouz, 2016). While Ries and Trout (1981) provided a starting point for studies of personal branding, they did not foresee the tremendous changes in social interactions that have taken place in the last 35 years. Personal branding has since transformed, which can be attributed to the proliferation of computer-mediated communication and the rise of social media, which have afforded people the ability to use the internet to create and foster self-presentations (Albright & Simmens, 2014). Today, personal branding relies on a combination of the presentation of self offline, as well as, the presentation of self online. Accordingly, personal branding is not the same as the presentation of self that existed offline; however, personal branding is also not completely new and different. The technology itself does not necessitate change (as I describe in Chapter 2); rather, social media has afforded a new arena for identity creation, performance, and management.

Personal branding involves developing, harnessing, and classifying personal information and providing a comprehensive narrative for others to easily understand one’s identity. Using social media, the information is amalgamated and presented in an information exchange system whereby identity is created and consumed by online audiences. Ifan Shepherd (2005) states, “The self marketing territory is currently

\(^{18}\) Positioning was first introduced by Trout (1969), but was focused on product positioning.
occupied by a mix of self-help gurus, job recruitment specialists and career advisors, and practical approaches and job-related advice predominate” (p. 592). Since the time of Shepherd’s writing, the topic has become more prevalent in scholarly research.

Discussions surrounding personal branding largely explore the strategies and, to a lesser extent, the effects of personal branding on society—such as Hearn (2008) and Banet-Weiser’s (2012) critical response to personal branding. Banet-Weiser (2012) identifies the normalization of the feminized self-brand and Hearn (2008) argues that self-branding is a form of labour in post-Fordist capitalist systems that benefits corporations. In tracing the history of brands, Klein (2000) critiques the rise of branding as a phenomenon that has transformed citizens into consumers as companies compete and capitalize on reducing culture to a commodity. The concept of personal branding that I utilize in this dissertation also offers an extension of Klein’s (2000) work contending that personal branding serves as a thread in contemporary capitalist culture.

Social media affords people the ability to communicate online by sharing information about themselves and provides the online locale for personal branding. At the most basic level, each social media platform requires that the user select certain pieces of information to be included in their profile, which serves as the basis for developing a personal brand. The social media profile provides an opportunity for an individual to present themselves to others (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). For example, the “bio” (biography) that is required on sites like Twitter and Instagram facilitates the crafting of a short and simple narrative of who a person is or who they want to be known as, which is often an opportunity for people to put a personal spin and character to their professional identity. However, a personal brand is more than merely the age, race,
gender, and nationality that is often represented on social media profiles; rather, it is the presentation of self, which includes all of the disparate pieces of identified information that are consolidated and used by the network to develop a positive impression of an individual.

Personal branding gurus have emerged to identify the best strategies for developing personal branding, which is largely tied to career success. A search in any (online) bookstore reveals a plethora of personal branding books; some of the publications include: Julie Broad’s (2016) *The New Brand You: Your New Image Makes the Sale for You*; Jules Marcouz’s (2016) *Be The Brand: The Ultimate Guide to Building Your Personal Brand*; David McNally and Karl Speak’s (2011) *Be Your Own Brand: Achieve More of What You Want by Being More of Who You Are*; and even *Personal Branding for Dummies* by Susan Chritton (2014). Even though the specific strategies used to develop a personal brand vary by author, the basic tenets and principles of personal branding are relatively consistent: personal branding takes place on social media where people actively create and project a desirable identity. The supposed best practices are publicly promoted by personal branding gurus, but are well understood and utilized by those fluent in social media, such as influencers and social media managers.

Many of the personal branding books are self-published by people who hope to establish their own personal brand and domain expertise. The personal branding gurus propose that personal branding is about marketing oneself to become a success: “Develop a strong brand and you reap the recognition, respect, and rewards throughout your entire career” (Goodgold, 2010, p. xiii). In Tom Peters’ (1997) seminal article, “The Brand Called You,” he wrote, “Starting today you are a brand. You’re every bit as much a
brand as Nike, Coke, Pepsi, or the Body Shop” (para. 18–19). The vast majority of the personal branding strategies are targeted at professionals who wish to develop a desirable identity, but the practices have moved down the employee hierarchies to also include young people seeking to position themselves for entry-level employment. The cultivation of a personal brand is promoted as being available to anyone who wants to receive more attention, or, in the dramaturgical sense (Goffman, 1959), be in the spotlight. Hearn (2008) states, “Simply put, as the corporate brand becomes a commodity fetish, the self becomes reified — a brand in and for itself, a promotional object — proof positive of the inherent centrality of subjectivity to the current mode of production” (p. 214). Dhiraj Murthy (2013) argues that in an age of “instant publicity,” rather than advertising products, we are advertising ourselves, and an extension to this argument is that we are the product; my participants employed and internalized this form of personal branding as an integral practice in their work and personal lives.

In the following section, I introduce the future audience and thereafter identify some of the strategies of using social media for personal branding that were highlighted by participants and were present—sometimes overtly and other times latently—in the social media scene, and discuss the affiliated implications for individual’s social and work practices.

5.3 The Future Audience

If someone were to Google your name what would they find? Would it be the information you would want to share? I contend that a third audience is important in understanding social media and personal branding: the future audience. Beyond the
current audience—both real and imagined—individuals engage in personal branding to project a curated brand based on future unknown and unanticipated audiences. Scholars have theorized the imagined audience versus the actual audience on social media: the actual audience refers to those who actually view the content, and the imagined audience is the creator’s mental conceptualization of who the audience is (Litt, 2012).

Repeatedly, participants stated that the internet never forgets; public social media posts are archived indefinitely by the platforms and third-party data consumers, such as researchers, governments, or organizations, and this shapes people’s personal branding strategy and what they deem acceptable to post. For example, Ava emphasizes the importance of being professional and “nice”—which also points to the feminization of her work (as I describe in Chapter 4)—as she acknowledges that her personal brand can impact her future work opportunities. Ava explains why she stopped online brand-bashing—a public criticism of a brand typically using social media:

At the end of the day, you never know who you’re going to work for. You never know who you’re going to partner with. You never know where your next connection’s going to be. So if it’s very easily traceable that you were very aggressive towards a certain brand, I don’t think that looks good and you need to maintain your professionalism no matter where you work.

Ava reflects how she not only filters herself online because of her current position, but also for any possible future position—her future audience. Her comments reflect the

19 For example, the U.S. Library of Congress announced, in 2010, that it would archive all public posts on Twitter and make the data available to researchers (Zimmer, 2015), yet as of 2017 the archive had yet to launch and it is uncertain if it ever will (McGill, 2016) due to the immense challenges—both ethical, political, and technical—of preserving such a massive dynamic data-set.
general sentiment in the social media scene that people feel compelled to take ownership of their own brand through selective self-exposure for any and all future and unknown audiences. Rather than a general future audience, her emphasis is on her professional future audience for future employers.

Contrary to the offline “stage” (Goffman, 1959), on the online stage, the actor (or individual) is both the performer and the audience. Lauren Labrecque, Ereni Markos, and George Milne (2011) explain, “Elements within personal Web pages and social networking profiles such as personal information, photographs, design, and layout choices are akin to the wardrobe and props of the theatrical metaphor” (p. 38). Indeed the styled design of personal branding online comprises the “setting” of the performance. Importantly, an individual can visit their personal website, review their Twitter feed, or use Facebook’s “View As” tool to see how their profile would appear to others. In this way, a person can transcend their performance and attend to the performance as both the actor and future audience simultaneously.

Despite the term personal branding, the identity that is foregrounded is one that is first-and-foremost professional. When asked for advice for the next generation, Jill responds, “Keep your social media professional so that when you get to the hiring stage, people will be impressed with what you’re sharing.” Jill’s comments reflect the consideration for the future audience, which is that of future employers. It is not merely a blurring of personal and professional (Gregg, 2011), but rather an intense overlapping, and engulfing of the personal, so that the personal becomes subsumed by the work personality; the professional identity becomes the personal identity.
Personal branding is perpetuated by the allure of future benefits—such as getting hired or upward mobility—but is also perpetuated by societal scare tactics: “If you don’t brand yourself, someone else will. Chances are that their brand description won’t be what you have in mind” (Kaputa, 2006, p. 8). These scare tactics were expressed by participants and were repeated at various personal branding lectures I attended. People are advised to embrace personal branding as a pre-emptive strategy of impression management to avoid the presentation of information that would be destructive to their personal brand. Personal branding strategies attempt to ensure that the individual is in control of information presented to the audience. Thus, one’s performance needs to be carefully maintained and worked on over time because audience’s impressions can easily change. When developing a personal brand online, individuals are positioning themselves more prominently using social media in order to garner positive attention. The scare tactics, of losing control of one’s own brand and insistence that personal branding be continually worked upon, exist; however, the narratives neglect to recognize that positioning oneself more prominently in the public eye creates more opportunity for one’s performance to be discredited.

Horror stories of people posting something inappropriate and getting fired from their job have become commonplace. A highly publicized example was that of Justine Sacco, global head of communications for a large international brand, who posted a racist “joke” and was subsequently fired (Newman, 2015).

20 According to Goffman (1959), destructive information consists of “facts which, if attention is drawn to them during the performance, would discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that the performance fosters” (p. 141). The disruption can be ignored by the audience, be repaired by the individual, or lead to a discredited performance and a shattered impression.
Participants used incidents like these as sharp reminders of what can occur from, even one, inappropriate moment on social media. At the time, Sacco had a mere 170 followers, yet the tweet (see Figure 2) went viral and highlights the unintended consequences and audience of a brief social media message. Participants reflected on how one’s personal social media activities can obliterate one’s career—whether one works in social media or other industries. Noah explains:

The idiocy of some people doesn’t ever really surprise me, but I actually think that’s changed more and that people do understand it more now, because you’re always hearing stories about somebody tweeted this and they got fired from their job—or something like that. People know and that’s why I think you get a lot of younger generations moving to something like Snapchat or they want to talk in more text that people aren’t tracking. [They] move a lot of their conversations to private Facebook messages rather than doing it on people’s walls because it’s sort of understood that “people can see this sh*t, so, I have got to find a way to do it where not as many people can see it.”

21 As seen in Rolling Stone Magazine (Newman, 2015).
As a result, people engaging in personal branding resort to the “lowest common denominator approach” (Hogan, 2010) on social media ensuring their posts are self-filtered to be acceptable to all audiences—which I extend to include the future audience. As Noah suggests, people can move their less desirable posts to more private social networks; however, it is increasingly difficult to segment audiences, even on private social networks. Kat explains the critical conundrum of how one’s “personal” social media accounts inevitably cross over into one’s professional life. Kat was in the process of moving jobs from working as an in-house community manager to an agency and explains:

I haven’t started this job yet and the VP of the agency that I work for followed me on Instagram on Friday night. And I was in such a bad mood—I was staying with my parents, I went to visit them and I was like, “What in the hell, I haven’t even started, she’s the VP, she’s private, so, I don’t even know what the—like, do I follow her back? Because she’s private, is that crossing lines?” So, I didn’t follow her back, but now she can see everything I do, and I do not think that there is one thing on my Instagram that—I don’t post anything that I’m ashamed of. As the years go on, I feel like social media has expanded, so, for example, when I was at university: it’s peers, it’s university students, it’s Facebook. And now, my aunt, who is 60, has all three platforms and she follows me and follows my trips and whatever. So, in a way, I do censor myself, knowing that it’s not just my friends and my peers seeing stuff—it’s my 60-year-old aunt and now, which I hate—it’s the VP of my new company! So, while I still don’t post anything that I consider “out there,” it’s still like that little thing in the back that’s: “Oh, now your VP can see you on a Saturday night—let’s say—wearing a low-cut shirt.” I’m a bit prudish when it comes to stuff like that, and I just hate that. And people are like, “Well, then, why don’t you be private?” I’m like, “Yeah, even if I am private, she’s going to request to me, am I going to decline?” Of course not, you’re almost in that awkward [position]—at least professionally, I feel like it just keeps
getting—social media just keeps getting looser and looser, and I’m in it, and I’m on it—so, I can’t really complain—but stuff like that drives me absolutely insane.

Kat explains that even with a private account, one’s social media accounts are never really private, which points to the work/life blurring that she experiences. As a result, she needs to work at moulding herself into the right kind of subject. She describes she is in social media and on social media, so the choice to have a private account simply does not exist for her. A (future) employer may send a request to friend or follow, and even if one’s account is private, it would be awkward to reject the request given the power differential and the emerging professional norms. While Kat is purposefully cautious about what she posts, she detests the idea that her boss and colleagues follow her and there is nothing she can do about it except further filter her social media posts. Not only did her new boss seek her out on social media, she also sent a welcome email, which is a common practice, introducing her to the rest of the company: “Meet Kat. Here is all her experience in PR.” Kat continued, “It was a really nice email, but the last line was, ‘Feel free to follow her on social media,’ and I’m like ‘Oh my God!’” That day three new colleagues, she had yet to meet, followed her on social media, which she considered to cross the line in terms of etiquette. As illustrated here, one’s social media accounts become professional accounts, which requires preemptively creating and presenting an appropriate personal brand that accounts for the future audience. Furthermore, this is a new form of labour discipline that ensures that an individual is a good work subject.

On public social media, people are always present to all audiences at the same time. Furthermore, with a public profile, it is often impossible to know the composition of the audience, as anyone could have access to the account. The obvious intervention is electing not to use a public profile on social media, as Kat describes, but this publicity is
also a necessity in personal branding. In considering data privacy, Pew Research Centre (2014) found that living a public life is the new default, but living a public life can also be extended to personal branding on social media as there is a trend towards increased visibility across social media platforms for all current and future audiences. In this section, I have introduced “the future audience” to understand the implications of personal branding. Rather than a blurring of the personal and professional or work and life, the professional identity subsumes the personal identity. People engage and present themselves in ways that are aligned with and are of benefit to corporations in contemporary capitalism at the expense of the personal. Beyond one’s work hours and current position, the new form of employment contract extends to be permanently working on oneself for future potential employers.

5.4 Curated Brand

Curation emerged as a recurrent theme in my research to describe self-presentation practices on social media. Traditionally, curation refers to the work done by a curator. Curators have diverse roles within museums, but broadly speaking, the curator selects and collects the objects, interprets the pieces, writes the labels, as well as conducts other tasks associated with the management and interpretation of the collection (Curators Committee of the American Association of Museums, 2009). Digital curation refers to the long-term preservation of digital objects (Abbott, 2008; Rusbridge et al., 2005), and involves effective digital document preservation performed by experts or organizations. Beyond traditional curatorial practices, curation has been adopted by other disciplines: in anthropology, Wesley Bernardini (2008) explores the curation of knowledge in oral
cultures of the Hopi villages; in medicine, Meredith Nahm et al. (2011) similarly use curation to refer to the technology of an open-source content management system for case report forms, which are used in clinical trials; in sociology, Bernie Hogan (2010) understands the algorithms designed by the site maintainers to be the curator; in health, Jonathan Crichton and Tina Koch (2007) explore the curation of self-identity with dementia patients; in information studies, Peter Williams, Jeremy John, and Ian Rowland (2009) have explored how people curate their personal digital archives in relation to personal information management, and similarly, Steve Whittaker (2011) uses the term “personal information curation” to describe the information lifecycle of information curation, whereas I use information curation to describe an alternative information practice, which includes creativity, social networking, and identity creation (Jacobson, 2012). More recently, Jenny Davis (2016) distinguishes between productive curation and consumptive curation to refer to how people curate the content they share on social media and the content they consume.

In this research, curation is articulated as a strategy in crafting a personal brand. Amira explains how online influence is curated and developed over time and reinforces the link between influence and curation (see Chapter 6). Here, curation is purposeful and strategic. Kat explains, “You hear it a lot, ‘curate your personal brand.’ Your personal brand is not your job, it’s how you reflect yourself online, it’s how you build yourself.” Christina similarly reflects on her approach to personal branding, “My strategy didn’t really change, it’s always been to present the curated version of me as a working-in-social-media girl living in Toronto.” For my participants, curation was naturalized and
merely meant selecting what type of content would be used on social media and what type of content was not included in building their personal brand.

The use of social media extends beyond the seeking, using, and sharing of information, but is also implicated in users’ identity creation. People engage in a strategic process that encourages the audience to develop a specific type of curated identity. Social media affords a generation of storytellers; a generation of people who create and share their stylized stories and lives with their networks. Community managers are storytellers for brands and also storytellers about themselves through personal branding. Using the affordances of social media, it is readily accepted that there are some aspects about one’s life and work that are highlighted on social media—such as accomplishments—and other aspects that are largely left in the shadows—such as disappointments. Individuals package themselves and sell themselves to employers, friends, and the public through social media. People use curation as an “authentic” storytelling strategy of personal branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012). In an attempt to counter claims of inauthenticity, participants spoke against “fake” content and in favour of curating their social media presence online in particular ways. Amira explains how she presents herself online:

Am I the same person offline and online? I think so. And people that I’m close [to] in the community management world are the people who are the same online and offline. You talk to them online then you meet them in person. When I first met you…I met you at a conference, I checked you online, what’s your social media presence, and you’re the same person. I can tell. You are not like, “Hey look at me”—you’re like a real person. And I think that’s the same for me.

The backlash against personal branding on social media is premised on the representations being fake, inauthentic, and narcissistic. Amira acknowledges that
Curation of a personal brand can go too far if it is not an authentic representation of who you are. At the same time, she acknowledged that she strategically curates what she posts online, but this mirrors her offline behaviour as she recognizes that she also considers what she says offline. The use of “curation” in discussions of personal branding recognizes that not all aspects of one’s life is shared, but rather that curation involves the selection of moments, images, videos, or vignettes that showcase how one wishes to be seen by others. In this way, curation involves a combination of aspirational and authentic representations whereby individuals package themselves to employers, friends, and the future audience through social media.

While participants recognized curation as a creation strategy in personal branding, curatorial practice is also about longer-term memory and digital archiving. The practice of curation develops a culture that enables people to go back into the social media archive. This type of self-documenting offers insight into identity and the everyday lives of people, which is digitally archived. As a result, users are curating a museum of the self for the future audience. Self-presentation is a process of curation whereby people take part in both sharing and archiving. Interview participants recognized that the data, as Riley says, “lives forever.” There is both the appeal of permanence as well as the fear of permanence. In 2015, Facebook introduced a built-in app called “On this Day” that shows users’ previous posts and memories on that date in the past, which can be re-posted. Sabrina comments on how she looks back on her past social media posts as it reveals who she was at a previous life stage:

"It might seem ridiculous because it’s a five-year span, but five years into your 20s is figuring out your life—like you’re “in your 20s.” Sometimes I"
look back on Facebook memories—“thanks a lot”—because you really do look back on certain times of your life and [think] why? What was I?

At the same time, the utility of the social media archive elicits fear. Noah comments on how he is cognizant of the permanence and how this proactively impacts what he posts:

Well, wait a second, [do] I want to do this and it’s going to be super public and it’s going to be there forever and do I want this to be there forever?…I think people think about it—even kids just saying stupid sh*t and then it’s like “yeah, you’re a kid, but this might come back to bite you in the ass one day.”

While the museum can be seen as a static and permanent representation of a time, a museum is also a living archive of the past. A user’s self-presentation is in a state of creation and evolution where there may never be a final product. Consequently, the exhibits grow and shrink as the individual progresses in an ever-evolving curation of the self. The affordances of social media generate both a tool for private and ephemeral communication, and a tool to build and preserve an archive of the self. In this way, while social media is often considered to be fleeting and inconsequential, curation can be used to understand the strategic use of personal branding as a new form of personal archiving for the future audience.

Social media content gets painted as ephemeral, highlighted by the development of new social media sites explicitly promoting the ephemeral, such as Snapchat, a

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22 Srinivasan, Becvar, Boast, and Enote (2010) argue that people in museology are increasingly viewing the “exhibition as process.” Schubert (2000) similarly highlights the creation and creative process: “Museums no longer hide the curatorial hand and present only the end product, but make visible the entire underlying decision-making process” (p. 67). Instead of exhibitions presented as static final products, they are increasingly displayed as ongoing projects that are continually developing.
multimedia mobile app where messages and photos are only visible for a limited time before becoming inaccessible to users. Although social media may be dismissed as mere “fun” (Angus, Stuart, & Thelwall, 2010, p. 268), the work of curation on social media is also about longer-term memory, digital archiving, and cultural practices. Accordingly, the work of curation of a personal brand has a distinct purpose. Personal branding is not merely storytelling strategies, but curation serves as a lens to recognize the memory preservation that people—including oneself, one’s current network, and one’s future employers—can review in the future.

In the digital economy where digital skills are increasingly required, using social media to showcase one’s personal brand also serves as a portfolio for future employers to highlight one’s digital literacy. Jill explains, “So you’re letting your personality shine through. You’re showing people how you curate content. You’re showing people what kind of filter you have. You’re showing people how you might reveal details about your personal life—that’s building a personal brand also.” As a result, my participants explained that the personal curation of one’s brand serves as a reflection of one’s professionalism and digital literacy that employers can use to assess potential job candidates.

Curation is a filter that not only provides a lens through which to see the world, it also serves as a self-imposed sift of information. On social media, a “filter” is something that is added to an image in order to enhance the original. Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and other social media have built-in filters that can be added to an image to create a desirable visual effect—such as black-and-white, or extreme saturation—that enhances the images. Snapchat’s innovation is in filtering features, such as video filters, face swap,
voice manipulation, and absurd graphics. Overall, a filter on social media is something that is added to the original. At the same time, a filter also refers to the removal—a filtering out. The filtering for personal branding requires an understanding of what is acceptable and desirable. The calls to “Google oneself” to see what information is publicly available online about oneself can be likened to a curator’s inventory check to determine if some items can be retired or removed entirely, or if other items deserve the centre stage. In 2017, Instagram made this link to curation explicit with an “archive” feature that allows individuals to move a post into the archive that hides it from the public, but does not delete the post. However, an individual has little direct control over what information is online about themselves, which manifests in latent fear and the need to work on one’s personal brand. An individual can create additional sources of information—such as new social media profiles—which is something they perceive as having control over. The lack of control and the fear of undesirable information being showcased online results in the need to continually work to create additional sites of self-presentation.

According to Marwick (2010), “The edited self is the result of transparency, audience, intimacy, and authenticity motivating social media users to carefully construct ‘safe’ online profiles” (p. 437). Beyond “safe” profiles, powered by the affordances of social media, the curated self caters to the professional (work-related) future audience. The presentation of self on social media is not merely filtered or edited, but curated in purposeful and calculated ways. It responds to the reward system of the influencer economy (as I discuss in Chapter 6), as much as it responds to the unstable job economy. The curated self extends from online to offline. Curation is used to construct, build, and
perform individualized identities across networks that bridge both online and offline experiences. Accordingly, curation is the work of personal branding that is often not visible. While the presentation of self is not new, I found that the curation on social media is value laden and ascribed significance in its manifestation.

5.5 Always-on-the-Job-Market

To understand why personal branding has dramatically increased in popularity in recent years, it is important to consider the socio-technical-economic climate. The spread of technologies, such as social media, to showcase one’s personal brand explains only part of the rationale for the current focus on personal branding. Social media is merely a set of communication tools, but the impetus may lie in the shifting economic climate that is marked by job insecurity and precarity. Micki McGee (2005) writes, “The popularity of the invention and re-invention of self and the desire to market oneself comes at a time of economic insecurity, which provides insight as to the rationale or motivation of using personal branding” (p. 13). The current discourse encourages people to become “entrepreneurs” which often means more self-promotion and self-marketing. Further, there is a popularized understanding that young people will move jobs many times in their career, and this trend is exacerbated by the uncertainty of their work situation. I argue that the pervasive sense of uncertainty resulted in my participants feeling and acting that they were always-on-the-job-market—even if currently employed. The discourse of personal branding works to amplify anxieties about competing in a globalized labour market (Harold, 2013). This is further perpetuated by the fact that there are no clear guidelines to success or promotion in many creative industries, such as
community management.

Current estimates from the online employment site Workopolis suggest that Canadians can expect to have 15 different jobs in their careers (Harris, 2014). While personal branding is articulated as being particularly necessary for young people entering into the job market, personal branding has also become a necessity for people across various professions and throughout the job hierarchy. Although all interview participants were employed in some form, they still expressed a sense of hustling and proving their worth, alongside marketing themselves, which was evidenced in their personal branding. Deuze (2007) notes that media workers similarly feel that their job is constantly on the line. While participants reflected a sense of confidence and pride in their work, there was often an undertone of uncertainty with their work situation. This perception transformed into reality as many of the participants I interviewed lost their job over the following year. By analyzing the work histories of seven million Canadians, Workopolis declared, “Job hopping is the new normal” (Harris, 2014) as their study revealed that people are changing jobs frequently with shorter gigs on the rise; however, this job hopping is often due to structural forces—such as downsizing, outsourcing, and organizational consolidation—rather than choice. As a result, an impetus for personal branding lies in the precarious work situation where employees are always-on-the-job-market.

Personal branding is positioned in promotional discourse as the strategy to help someone stand out in a sea of job applicants and get a foot in the door. The narrative of “getting out there” or “getting yourself out there” or “getting your name out there” was repeated many times by participants. Christina says she always advises people to build

23 This also serves to reinforce Workopolis’ business as an online career website hosting job boards.
their personal brand. She explains, “I think it helps you be memorable. If you come into an interview and people haven’t heard of you before and you don’t stand out at all from the interview and there’s no way to remember you, you won’t be memorable.” Social media is a tool used to make the first impression before a job applicant meets the interviewer, and is used as a strategy to get the resume identified as potentially appealing; having a large following on social media is sometimes a requirement for getting hired for a job. Noah describes how using social media allowed him to break down barriers to communicate and meet with interesting people and heads of various companies. He purposefully sought out the heads of large firms and responded to their tweets in order to get on their radar: “Would I have had the chance to interact with him previously, to get him to ask me to come in? Probably not. I would have gone through a traditional channel and sent my resume in and got lost in the f*cking pile somewhere.”

In almost all countries around the world, young people today are the most educated generation (OECD, 2016; Patten & Fry, 2015), yet they continue to face precarity and uncertainty in the labour market. Precarity refers to the “insecurity, discontinuity and randomness that now hangs over all work” (Gorz, 2010, p. 24; as cited by Cohen, 2016). The latent precarity refers to the generalized feeling of precarity in contemporary capitalism that is always present, even if it is not explicitly discussed or identified by workers. Young people are told that their education alone is not enough to secure a paid position and this is reinforced in their experiences in trying to attain an entry-level position (Shade & Jacobson, 2015). At the same time as universities, colleges, and for-profit institutions are capitalizing on the precarity of the labour market by offering hands-on training and specialized courses, there is also a concurrent rejection
and dismissal of higher education as illuminated by successful high-tech men who do not have a higher education, such as Steve Jobs (Apple), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), and Bill Gates (Microsoft). These success stories serve as rare exceptions to the reality that people with high incomes tend to have higher levels of education (Statistics Canada, 2011). There is a growing recognition that one needs an undergraduate degree in order for the resume not to immediately be dismissed, but that the degree alone will not secure the job. This works to necessitate credentialization, but also persuade individuals that education alone is not enough to get or keep a job. As a result, there is a perpetual need to do more, be more, share more, and live more. The simultaneous binary of rejection and celebration of expertise and formal education speaks to the disappointment of a generation that has invested time and money into a system that has largely failed them. Living in a society of excess, which is not driven merely by consumerism or greed, but uncertainty, precarity, and unpredictability, results in people being always-on-the-job-market.

Always-on-the-job-market manifests in people continually showcasing their personal brand via social media, which requires constant effort and labour. Jill explains that she needs to work at her personal brand: “I do need to keep on working on growing it and keeping it fresh and relevant…so that my latest post isn’t from a month ago.” To develop new content to feed her social media channels, she looks for opportunities to be invited to brand-sponsored events, and also seeks out influencers in the city to interview for her blog. These interviews not only allow her to develop content for her blog in a strategy to improve her personal brand, those strategic connections to high-value people also serve to bolster her brand by affiliation. Jill admits that she hopes that the blogging
and the people she meets will one day help her to find a full-time position—as she was still tirelessly freelancing while looking for permanent work.

Personal branding requires that individuals continually work at presenting themself in a way that allows them to be seen in a favourable way by others (Wilson & Blumenthal, 2008; Wee & Brooks, 2010). Despite personal branding being most important when one is seeking employment, the uncertainty of the job market necessitates perpetual labouring on oneself and on one’s personal brand. Personal branding needs persistent work to maintain the front stage by actively managing impressions through self-reflexivity; for example, Hubert Rampersad (2008) developed a model of personal branding that guides an individual toward creating and maintaining a personal brand. This model employs a never-ending cyclical process of personal branding, which requires “constant updating to reflect” on one’s personal branding (Rampersad, 2008, p. 36). This model of personal branding problematically neglects the immense and perpetual work that is required of individuals, expected by employers, and normalized in society.

Figure 3. Rampersad’s (2008) Authentic Personal Branding Model

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Self-reflexivity occurs on the backstage where an individual prepares for future front stage performances. Individuals need to deeply understand themselves, identify areas of self-improvement, and be able to answer the question: Who am I? In this way, the goal of personal branding is to uncover and present the core “value proposition” to the future audience, who are potential employers. The impetus to unceasingly improve oneself manifests in learning new skills in order to be more marketable to employers. Noah describes his experience on the job market:

I’m always constantly trying to expose myself to new people, but when I was younger, I was looking for a job and I needed to get my name out there and make sure people knew who I was. Now, I have a job, and I feel like people do know who I am. I don’t mean to say that in a conceited-sounding way, but I’m not that person with a hundred Twitter followers or something anymore. People sort of know who I am: “I’m me. This is my brand.” The fact is my brand is my personality, so, it’s not something I work at anymore, it just happens.

Noah’s statement that “it just happens” speaks to the naturalizing of the process and expectation of labouring on one’s personal brand as a contemporary worker. While building a personal brand is recognized as critical when applying for jobs, particularly as a young adult, there exists a normalized continuous need to maintain the brand. Even though Noah is well-known in the social media industries, he is still very active on social media online and in the social media scene offline. The process of working on one’s personal brand becomes so ingrained that it is no longer considered work; the practices are embedded into the everyday lived branded experiences. Due to the latent precarity in the job market, I found that participants embodied an always-on-the-job-market
mentality—even if currently employed. As related to personal branding, this manifested in the incessant need to cultivate and improve one’s personal brand.

5.6 Simplicity at Odds with Job Precarity

Beyond merely perpetually working on one’s personal brand, there are prescribed and accepted strategies: personal branding involves developing a simplified and stable narrative of one’s identity (Deckers & Lacy, 2013). A personal brand is the image that comes to mind when an individual’s name is mentioned. Take, for example, these celebrity brands identified by Rampersad (2008):

- When we think Oprah Winfrey, we think of warmth and women’s empowerment.
- Bill Gates brings to mind gadgets, geeks, and philanthropy.
- J. K. Rowling is the professional writer behind the Harry Potter series.
- Einstein was a great and gentle genius.
- Mother Teresa brings to mind helping the poor and saintly behaviors.

(Rampersad, 2008, p. 34)

My participants similarly articulated that personal branding relies on the audience being able to easily recall the essence or single most important aspect of an individual. Dionne makes clear, “If you can’t characterize yourself in some way, then you don’t have a personal brand.” The honing of a personal brand necessitates a simplification of one’s presentation of self with a “focused message” (Baker, 2001, p. 2).

For both organizations and individuals, branding is about simplicity, not complexity of identity. Organizations can simply construct “grand narratives” (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 330) in the creation of their marketing material. Shifted to the
individual, the construction of a “meta-narrative and meta-image of self” (Hearn, 2008, p. 198) in personal branding is more difficult. Behind an individual’s personal brand is a complex and multifaceted person that simplicity cannot capture. The simplicity required in personal branding is problematic in the current job market where an individual will have multiple different jobs over their lifetime. This is particularly troubling for young people as they are likely to engage in various contracts, internships, and other forms of short-term employment in an attempt to earn money and gain experience in the labour market, making it difficult to articulate a simple personal brand.

Given the desire for simplicity in personal branding, Brooke describes how she had difficulty crafting her personal brand because of her varied work experiences in different industries. Her various different jobs were all forms of short-term gigs—such as blogging, photography, and social media—that she did prior to landing a full-time position. She was uncomfortable, discombobulated, and felt awkward with the process of self-branding and ultimately decided to hire a professional to help her craft her personal brand and package her varied experiences simply through using a personal website. She explains:

When I tried to do it myself, I felt like I was just basically vomiting on a website…I didn’t know how to make that all live together, and I had a hard time. I had a hard time figuring out how to communicate all these different things that I do or I’m interested in or have done without it looking like I was all over the place.

The road to full-time employment is not a straight and simple path as many young people engage in various forms of short-term contract employment. As a result, these disparate
working experiences often do not fit neatly in a single simple narrative. This is further compounded in ever-evolving fields, such as social media management.

Following the simplicity of the branded identity, a related tenet of personal branding is consistency. For example, in a popular press book titled, *U R a Brand*, Catherine Kaputa (2006) advocates the development of a stable personal brand, “What you want to do is burn in a single-minded identity at every touch point, producing a consistent brand experience” (p. 96). Consistency and stability are believed to strengthen personal branding, which relies on an understanding of identity as something that is static and knowable. Online, a consistent personal brand is developed across various social networking sites to perform a stable branded identity. While personal branding relies on a stable and consistent identity, this is at odds with fluid identities and multiple jobs that people will have throughout their working lives. Yet, many people are deliberate in trying to develop their stable and simple strategy for their personal brand. Dionne explains that she uses “content buckets,” which refers to the different categories of content that one would post for a brand. Dionne explains her personal content strategy on social media:

I have buckets, like what are your seven *Jeopardy!* questions that you would be great at…So these are things and you just—when you’re posting things—when I post on Facebook, I try to be consistent with—I don’t go out and look for stuff, but because I’m naturally interested in these categories.

Mirroring the strategy she would use professionally for a client on social media, Dionne’s predetermined seven content buckets force her to stay consistent with her personal brand and allow her audience to know what to expect. Her content buckets—
including a local sports team, a popular television show, online dating, and her work as a community manager—reflect both her self-described “quirky” personal and professional identity as a young woman living and working in Toronto. This strategy means she is able to stay “on brand” and present a consistent identity to her present and future audience.

Problematically, one’s personal branding often demands change when one’s job changes. Ava’s personal brand shifted from when she was newly emerging on the job market to her current job as a community manager. She explains, “Let’s say if you asked me four or five years ago what my personal brand was, I would say entertainment. Whereas if you ask me today, I’d say more social media and digital.” Thus, while a personal brand necessitates stability, it is also tied to one’s work, so that when a job ends, people need to re-craft their personal brand accordingly. The stability and simplicity that is required of personal branding is at odds with the multiple gigs, jobs, and careers that most young people will face in their lifetime. As a result, utilizing a meta-brand that is specific, yet not tied to one job, and rather positions a person as a thought-leader, personality, or influencer in a specific industry is seen as preferable (see Chapter 6).

A common way to promote one’s personal brand is through the development of personal websites wherein people develop a highly customizable branded presentation of self. Most of my participants had personal websites that allowed them to aggregate their various other social networking accounts in one location and gave them control over what information they chose to disclose (Papacharissi, 2002). This practice is more accessible as the technological barriers of creating a personal website—complexity of coding and website development—have been lowered (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne,
Sites like Wordpress or Wix afford people with a low-level of technical knowledge the opportunity to create a customizable website to showcase their personal brand. As a result, the economic and technological barriers are lowered, which provides an opportunity—and need—for more people to curate their personal brand in one online location.

A personal website, however, is one of various ways of showcasing one’s personal brand. Personal branding can manifest on one platform (such as Twitter), or in the multi-sited combination of several social networking sites. In exploring the self-branding practices of designers and cultural workers, Brooke Duffy, Urszula Pruchniewska, and Leah Scolere (2017) found platform-specific self-branding practices as their participants identified a particular audience that drew from a personal versus professional dichotomy. This lies in contrast to the consistent personal branding strategy that is often promoted in popular and industry discourse on best practices. While Duffy, Pruchniewska, and Scolere (2017) found that people engaged in platform specific branding, I found curated personal branding practices as participants in my research recognized that they needed a consistent presentation of self, while also recognizing that parts of one’s self could be highlighted on different platforms. For instance, one may be quirkier on Facebook and more professional on Twitter, but the base identity needs to be consistent.

The idealized strategy to create a simplified and stable personal brand results in a curated identity targeted to the future audience—the standardized profile articulates who you are and what your skills are in the marketplace—which can be viewed and bought by potential employers who are looking for specific skills for a discrete project. Employers
can easily seek out an individual with a specific skill set to work on a short-term project, which facilitates the ease of using gig labour. Overall, there is a tension as the personal branding strategies of simplicity and stability are required, yet are also incompatible with the current labour market where one’s personal branding demands change when the job changes.

5.7 Positivity for Profits

Positivity, like simplicity and stability, is presented by personal branding gurus—and articulated by social media managers—as an essential strategy in personal branding on social media. Christina explains, “I try to portray a pretty positive persona online. I definitely think when people meet me in person, I’m way lower energy than they expected because I’m pretty enthusiastic online. I think you create a version of yourself online.” Computer mediated communication affords individuals the ability to create and present a more positive representation of themselves than is possible with face-to-face communication (Toma & Hancock, 2011). An individual can be selective in their self-presentation techniques (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011), and in that selection process can present themselves in positive ways (Bazarova, 2012; Chou & Edge, 2012; Walther, 2007). Being positive is aligned with being “nice.” Dionne explains her personal branding strategy:

Put other people first and ultimately, you’ll be happy—and that might be a bit extreme for everybody else, but just be nice because people will remember that, and I fully believe that’s why I’m where I am today. I think that people remember me from whatever day they met me because I was the nice girl, and I’m a bit weird or I make fun of myself.
It is important to note that positivity may be gendered, as women in my study largely stressed this sentiment (see Chapter 4). While an ethic of positivity runs across personal branding practices, the internalization of this positivity was more prevalent amongst the women I interviewed. The labouring of positivity is a form of affective labour in that the individual strives to produce a positive emotional experience in others (Hochschild, 1983/2003).

The culture of positivity is of strategic benefit to social media platforms and their advertisers, and employers. Social media sites derive financial profit by being able to capture and harvest users’ time. The more time a person spends on a site, the higher the revenue generated for the site due to exposure of advertising and sale of people’s personal data. Social media platforms profit from maintaining an overall positive sentiment on their sites. A famous longitudinal research project by Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler (2008) evidences that moods can spread in networks or, in other words, emotions can be contagious amongst people offline. Shifted to an online social network, the Facebook emotional contagion study—albeit infamous due to the questionable ethical practice of manipulating users’ news feed without consent—similarly uncovered that emotional states can be transferred to others (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014) and, therefore, these platforms have a vested interest in positivity.

Social media platforms rely on advertising as their chief business model; for example, in the fourth quarter of 2016, Facebook’s advertising revenue was US$8.81 billion (Constine, 2017). In contrast, investors shied away from purchasing Twitter in 2016 because of the platform’s reputation of abusive posting, nasty commenting, misogyny, and bullying, which provides evidence of what can happen when a social
media platform is unable to foster a culture of overall positivity that reflects the platform and the policies (Carson, 2016). Therefore, social media platforms are motivated to keep their platforms an overall positive and happy place. Typically, advertising sells happiness or the promise of happiness, but advertising also necessitates cheerfulness as a backdrop to selling. As evidenced in the “like” button, social media platforms have built-in affordances that foreground positivity. While the introduction of further clickable reactions on social media platforms—such as Facebook’s like, love, haha, wow, sad, and angry emojis—affords individuals more “choice” in expressing their emotions, the change served to provide more fine-grained data on an individual’s personality and preferences that can be used by the algorithm to provide more targeted posts for the benefit of the platform and it’s advertisers (Greenberg, 2016). The positivity on social media platforms is of strategic benefit to for-profit organizations, and also shapes acceptable forms of social media discourse.

The ethic of positivity on social media also benefits employers. Considering that the identity portrayed on public social media is publically accessible, people seek to foster a positive personal brand that is acceptable to all audiences—specifically employers and the future audience. Dionne explains how being positive is important, specifically with regards to one’s job:

There are times, especially [with] the personal brand—I’m pretty upbeat and positive and I think I generally am in real life. But in real life, if I’m having a hard time, usually I can just be alone…People see social media as you’re always being your best self, especially Instagram. But I will

24 In 2015, Twitter moved from the star icon to “favourite” to the heart icon of “like.”
post—sometimes—like “my Grandfather died.” I’m going to post that—or if I’ve had a really hard day—I have to think about how I say it because you just have to, because if a coworker reads it wrong then you’re in trouble—but it’s an extension of myself.

Various respondents spoke about their employers and coworkers having access to their social media, and recognized the need to refrain from posting anything that could be deemed inappropriate. Avoiding swearing is a prototypical example of people’s strategy in self-presentation. Sabrina explains, “I’m careful with everything I say or swear on there or anything like that…Should I say that? Should I not? Should I put that out?” With regards to one’s employer, employees censor themselves to not say anything negative about their employer or mention their employer’s competitors. There are also more nuanced types of filtered behaviour. Ethan explains how he filters what he says online in order to be respected at work, “Just not too brand-y, or controversial or a bit edgy. Maybe less—I’m a bit less edgy, if you get what I’m saying.” Despite being an influencer (see Chapter 6), Ethan felt that his employers and colleagues might consider that his professionalism and integrity could be compromised in his role as influencer, so he had to limit his exposure in that way. He needed to perform and present himself as the right kind of work subject.

Aside from the social media platforms, employers also benefit from the practice of individuals—their employees—being positive on social media. Beyond presenting an agreeable identity online, positivity pervades all aspects of my participants’ lives including work. Part of the positivity in personal branding is about being happy and expressing that happiness with one’s job. The endless “love your job” sentiment infiltrates Instagram quotes, tweets, keynotes, and popular wisdom in the social media
scene. Angela McRobbie (2002) described the “happiness at work” as employees engage in passionate work—specifically in the creative industries. Similarly, Gill and Pratt (2008) explain:

One of the most consistent findings on research on work within the creative industries is that it is experienced by most who are involved with it as profoundly satisfying and intensely pleasurable (at least some of the time). A vocabulary of love is repeatedly evinced in such studies, with work imbued with the features of the Romantic tradition of the artist, suffused with positive emotional qualities...Research speaks of deep attachment, affective bindings, and to the idea of self-expression and self-actualization through work. (p. 15)

Despite many participants having precarious work situations, they expressed pride in their work; for example, they had built a community around the brand where one never existed before. The “deep acting” (Hochschild, 1983) of performing the labour of love for one’s job has a “transformative effect on the doer” (Weeks, 2007, p. 241) as my participants’ subjectivities shaped at work extend outside work. Their personal brand was inextricably linked to being a worker; as Adam Arvidsson, Giannico Malossi, and Serpico Naro (2010) argue, “The value of work as well as one’s own value as a worker are increasingly conceived in terms of identity and lifestyle” (p. 306). Due to the close connections between work and identity in capitalist culture, to dislike one’s work is paralleled with disliking one’s life and one’s choices. People are obligated to be positive about their jobs so they do not risk losing their job. The performance of positivity may be exaggerated or performed as a strategy to maintain employment, and to promote a positive perception for future employment. Accordingly, people often take to social media to express their happiness and commitment to their job. Positive posts on social
media about one’s job also contribute to the erosion of work-life boundaries. The insecurity of the job market manifests in employees going above and beyond what is expected and this is evidenced on social media. Ted explains how he promotes his work through his personal social media:

I’ll share some Facebook [and] Twitter stuff. I’ll retweet a lot of stuff on Twitter through my account just to up the numbers artificially—or if I think something is cool and I want people to see it later or a second time. And then Facebook: I’ll share those videos that I do just because…I’m going to do my performance review, and they’re going to be like “How’d that video do?” And so if they ask, the numbers are better, in some cases, that helps.

Similarly, Amira describes how, with tens of thousands of tweets, she used to be prolific on social media, but her social media practices have changed as a result of her work where she needs to enthusiastically promote her employer’s events. She describes:

I don’t like to tweet so much about my life anymore. I just use it for my work, for my personal thing too. On my personal account, I would tweet, “Oh, who’s attending this?” or whatever. “Come to this event.” I use my personal network to grow my work.

As a result, employers gain free ambassadors, recruiters, and spokespeople for their organizations (as I describe in Chapter 6), as employees labour at professing their love for their work and workplace.

When people are only presenting the best—most positive—versions of themselves, the perpetual drive to improve one’s personal branding can be mentally, physically, and financially exhausting. Dionne explains that she is generally upbeat and positive both online and offline, but sometimes she likes to be alone offline, but this is
not possible on social media because “people see social media as you’re always being your best self,” which she finds rather difficult. She reflects, “So do I always have to be happy? I don’t know. Do you have to stick to what people are expecting of you? But I think it’s the same in real life too. I think people have the same expectations; it’s just now you have two lives to lead.” Participants were deliberate in continually drawing the connection between online and offline experiences. This imperative to be positive on personal branding migrates offline and impacts people’s day-to-day lived experiences.

Furthermore, companies seeking brand collaborations also find the positive persona desirable (see Chapter 6). In Ted’s job as a social media manager, he identifies influencers that are aligned with his employer’s brand when they are launching a new product or service and want positive engagement. He casually explains his strategy to identify influencers: “It depends. We try to focus on influencers who are more or less positive.” Accordingly, the positivity of personal branding can translate into work opportunities in the social media industries.

What is at stake in this “cult of happiness” (Ehrenreich, 2009) is that the focus is shifted to the individual, rather than recognizing the larger social, economic, and political systems at play. Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) explains that positive thinking is an ideology that is tied to capitalism and puts personal failures on the individual. Miya Tokumitsu (2015) argues that the “do what you love” work mantra is elitist and leads to the devaluation of labour, which serves to mask the truth that labour serves the market, rather than the individual. Thus, as the labour of love becomes more prominent the importance of compensation and working conditions is diminished. Furthermore, the strategies of personal branding and focus on positivity on social media have personal implications as
it means that certain topics remain taboo—such as discussions of economic precarity and job security and workplace harassment. The focus on the individual in personal branding has the effect of blinding an individual to larger societal issues. The individualization of occupations results in workers feeling personally responsible for their success and failures (Cohen, 2016). Failures for my participants are attributed to a lack of individual effort, rather than recognition of larger societal problems. For example, Maria explains how she has not had benefits at any of her positions in the social media industries, despite working for two large international organizations. She remains on serial contracts, yet she justifies the system of precarity by declaring her love for the job:

I didn’t get benefits at [my previous job]—so I guess when you compare this type of job to another job, I feel like I’ve—how do I explain it—I almost have my own justification system in my head, that it’s almost because I love what I do so much and I’m confident that I wouldn’t be this happy anywhere else, I’m willing to not get benefits and to not have that permanent position, because I love what I do and because I also feel valued…so I don’t know—I think the contract thing is going to continue in social media, particularly these social media positions.

Latent anxiety about being fired means one not only labours at one’s job, but also performs the labour of loving the job to build one’s personal brand. The positivity on social media as a key to personal branding is strategically aligned with corporate interests.

5.8 Conclusion

People strive to develop positive impressions of the self through personal branding, and
This is particularly relevant now in an age of social media where our lives are increasingly being lived out online and the presentation of self includes a combination of online and offline experiences. Due to the changing political economic trajectory of digital technologies and how people shape their use of technologies, it is important to recognize that while the presentation of self has been theorized for several years, personal branding is not the same as the presentation of self pre-social media.

Beyond the imagined and actual audience, I argue that a third audience is important in understanding the impact of personal branding on social media: the future audience. This has implications as there is an imbalance of power as companies benefit at the expense of the individual; people work to position themselves in ways that are aligned with corporate interests. Rather than a blurring of life and work—or the personal and professional—there is an engulfing of the personal by the professional in the practices of personal branding. In this chapter, I have outlined how the strategies of curated personal branding are acutely aligned with capitalist interests and benefit corporations and employers; however, the reality of economic precarity and job insecurity needs to be acknowledged. The requirement to engage in personal branding becomes another form of unpaid work, which is necessitated by the precarious labour market. The need to articulate a simplified and stable personal brand positions one as a commodity for employers where one can be hired for a specific task based on specific skills: the standardized profile articulates who you are and what your skills are in a marketplace dependent on a dispensable workforce. The need for a stable personal brand is at odds with the gig economy, also referred to as the freelance economy (King, 2014), and the growing trend towards short-term labour, which is particularly prevalent for
young people emerging in the labour market.

I have extended the concept of “always-on” (as I describe in Chapter 2) to move beyond the constant connectivity of mobile technologies, but also the always-on of the self with personal branding. Furthermore, due to workplace uncertainty, people embody the mentality of being always-on-the-job-market. This always-on-the-job-market mentality is a driver for personal branding as people endeavour to gain or maintain employment. With the emerging norm that young people will change jobs many times in their career—often out of necessity or force—coupled with the uncertainty of their work situation, comes an unstated reality that one is always-on-the-job-market. I have outlined how the personal branding strategies promote positivity thereby causing people to labour at positivity and declare their love for their work, which is of benefit to both employers and the social media platforms. With a focus on positivity, failure is something that is largely missing from personal branding, as failure is merely regarded as a stepping-stone to success. Personal branding highlights the broken binaries of labouring and living in a digitally mediated world and in the social media industries, including the double labour of working on personal branding as an integral aspect of being an employee. Attention-seeking, which is commonly associated with the social media user and personal branding, is not the end product, but required for many people hoping to secure or continue to hold positions in the knowledge economy.

In the following chapter, I focus on influencers who represent the intensified capitalization on personal branding.
Labouring Influence: Influencers and Casual Influencers

6.1 Introduction

From Dale Carnegie’s (1936) *How to Win Friends and Influence People* to Robert Cialdini’s (1984) *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, influence has long been an area of great popular interest, spanning academia, business, and general inquiry. The question of what makes someone say “yes” and to take action, buy, donate, or commit has been the subject of examination for almost a century. Much like Cialdini’s (1984) three years of fieldwork with compliance practitioners at sales organizations (selling items such as vacuum cleaners, portrait photography, encyclopedias, and dance lessons) and agencies (those concerned with advertising, public relations, and fundraising), my three years of fieldwork similarly exposed me to a world of influence. However, rather than specifically focusing on influence as the primary topic of interest, I stumbled upon influence—or more accurately influencers—in the social media scene. Instead of understanding influence from a psychological perspective—that would explore how an
individual can be encouraged to engage in a particular belief or action—my research approaches influence from a sociological perspective that considers networks and society. Instead of asking the “how” of influence, my research addresses the “who” of influence to understand, and problematize, how corporate branding is being extended into the lives of average people.

Influencers, or social media influencers, are people who have built credibility, a large audience, and/or the ability to impact and persuade their network on social media. Influencers often capitalize on their personal brand by sharing branded content on behalf of companies in return for some form of compensation. While “influencers” is the preferred term in the social media scene, a more complete descriptor is “social media influencers.” In 2016, over US$1 billion was spent on influencer marketing on Instagram alone, and the spending on social media influencer marketing is expected to continue to rapidly increase (Mediakix, 2017). Social media, personal branding, and influence are inextricably linked; therefore, social media managers are uniquely situated to understand influence as it relates to social media, as revealed in my research, because it is a critical component of their daily lives. In the social media scene, personal branding is a perpetual topic of lectures, conversations, and blog posts, with titles such as: “26 Tips for Creating a Powerful Brand Online,” “Stand Out from the Competition With a Strong Personal Brand,” and “7 Examples of Kick-Ass Personal Branding.” This was further exemplified by the fact that every community manager I interviewed initiated the subject of personal branding and the topic of influencers naturally followed. For many community managers, finding, engaging, and building relationships with influencers is an important part of their job; others are the influencers themselves. Thus, most of my participants operate as
influencers personally and work with influencers professionally. In this chapter, I first outline influencers and introduce the concept of “casual influencers,” and then I analyze the impact and implications of influence as highlighted by my participants.

6.2 What is an Influencer?

Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet’s (1944) famous study, later popularized by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955), identified that ideas flow from the media to opinion leaders to the general public in what they dubbed the “two-step flow of communication.” The theory suggests that average people are influenced by second-hand information and influencers: “In general, influencers are loosely defined as individuals who disproportionately impact the spread of information or some related behavior of interest” (Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011, p. 66). Meeyoung Cha, Hamed Haddadi, Fabrício Benevenuto, and Krishna Gummadi (2010) define influencers, or what they refer to as influentials:

They are loosely described as being informed, respected, and well-connected; they are called the opinion leaders in the two-step flow theory (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), innovators in the diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers 1962), and hubs, connectors, or mavens in other work (Gladwell 2002). (p. 11)

Despite massive advertising budgets and spending, research indicates that audiences rarely act on advertisers’ messages; rather, the message is taken more seriously or acted upon when it is communicated by one’s personal ties (Granovetter, 1973; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). People place more reliance on and trust in their personal ties because
the message is coming from a trusted source and not from commercial advertising.

Traditional communication theory (Rogers, 1962; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) espouses that a small minority of people excel in persuading other people, although other research de-emphasizes the role of influencers (Domingos & Richardson, 2001; Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, & Gummadi, 2010). The findings of these early communications studies are highlighted in influencer marketing as there is renewed interest in the process of information diffusion with social media (Adar & Adamic, 2005; Gruzd & Wellman, 2014). Influencer marketing is a form of word-of-mouth marketing whereby companies use influential people (or influencers), in paid or unpaid engagements, to share branded content on the influencer’s social media and other digital platforms in an attempt to raise awareness and/or sales for the company.

Influencers use social media as a tool to grow their following and spread their message; however, the impact of their influence does not only reside on social media: “Influencers are one form of microcelebrity who accumulate a following on blogs and social media through textual and visual narrations of their personal, everyday lives, upon which advertorials for products and services are premised” (Abidin, 2016b, p. 86). Social media is simply the tool of the trade for influencers, which is the reason some influencers are further identified by their platform of influence (e.g. YouTuber, Instagram influencer) as they have built a following on specific social media platforms. Influencers influence people to take real action—both online and offline. Social media influencers are sometimes referred to as “social influencers,” but the simplified and shortened “influencers” dominates in the social media scene. Much like the terminology surrounding other social media entities (such as social media community manager) the
link to social media is dropped. As Evelyn explains, “Influence is influence, doesn’t matter where it happens.” This linguistic shift signals the blurred boundaries between online and offline; for example, influencers attend branded events offline and then use social media as their mode of influence.

The concept of influencer marketing has a long history (Furguson, 2008; Brown & Hayes, 2008), but as a practice it is growing with a shift towards brands targeting social media influencers (Langner, Hennigs, & Wiedmann, 2013; Li, Lee, & Lien, 2012). In a 1996 Fast Company article, “The Virus of Marketing,” Jeffrey Rayport introduced the term viral marketing. Viral marketing is “electronic word-of-mouth whereby some form of marketing message related to a company, brand, or product is transmitted in an exponentially growing way—often through the use of social media applications,” which relies on a combination of word-of-mouth and social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p. 253). Rayport had not anticipated that his metaphor of “viral marketing” would, in fact, go viral. Companies are eager to understand best practices that can make something go “viral.” The archetypal example is that of Oreo’s 2013 Superbowl tweet, “You can still dunk in the dark” during a power outage at the Superdome (Britton, 2015; Landa, 2016). Community managers refer to this kind of viral success as brands “having their Oreo moment,” as Ava described.25 While most influencer marketing does not go viral, the goal of rapidly getting mass exposure through electronic word-of-mouth is similar.

The social media influencer is successful in captivating the attention of many people online and, as such, has value to brands. Alison Hearn and Stephanie Schoenhoff (2016) state, “The SMI [social media influencer] works to generate a form of ‘celebrity’ _____________________________

25 In fact, six of my participants specifically mentioned Oreo, which speaks to the level of notable success.
capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic ‘personal brand’ via social networks, which can subsequently be used by companies and advertisers for consumer outreach” (p. 194). Authenticity is recognized and identified by what is perceived as not commercial (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Brands identify influencers and offer free products, experiences, or financial payment to entice the influencer to promote the brand to their online network.

Companies discover influencers by using social media analytics tools, such as Sysomos,²⁶ to identify people who would be good candidates to promote the brand. If the company does not have the in-house expertise, then influencer detection can be outsourced to agencies that use social media analytics tools. Influencer marketing is part of a larger trend towards word-of-mouth marketing, which follows the strategy that people are more likely to trust advice from their network than being directly marketed to by a brand. An influencer’s network perceives the message to be more authentic and credible than a blatant advertisement because people have placed trust in the influencer. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements where a celebrity appears in an advertisement with the product, service, or brand, influencers casually share their experiences with a brand, and by extension promote the brand using social media in ways that often make it difficult to determine whether there is a relationship between the brand and the influencer.

Brands have previously worked with mainstream celebrities (such as singers, actors, and athletes) who yield wide influence over fans to bring attention to their company. These celebrity endorsements of brands have long been commonplace in

²⁶ Sysomos is a social media analytics platform.
traditional advertising and have existed since the late 19th century (Erdogan, 1999), but participants suggested that celebrity endorsements could be viewed with skepticism. Noah highlights the growing mistrust and lack of appeal of traditional celebrity endorsements and the appeal of influencers:

The term of “influence” is very wishy-washy; it’s very dependent on a lot of factors. Do I care what a celebrity has to say about shoes or something? Probably not, unless I think that they have a really cool style and they do have really awesome shoes. Whereas do I care what somebody I think who may or may not be a celebrity, but I think has really awesome style and I know knows stuff about shoes—do I care what they think? Yeah, probably.

The popularity of social media has resulted in brands reaching out to social media influencers—such as bloggers, Instagrammers, and YouTubers—who have been able to cultivate a network of followers. For influencers, attention is a commodity—in the form of likes, comments, retweets, and other digital interactions. Companies are capitalizing on influencers’ reach in an attempt to gain visibility, brand awareness, and drive profit. Sabrina explains, “Every brand is jumping on board [with influencers] because they have all of these followers and there are only so many people in Toronto who are at that level.” This high-level influencer that Sabrina describes is what Senft (2008) and Marwick (2010) identify as a microcelebrity.27 Microcelebrity brand collaborations have emerged with the popularity of social media. In her oft-cited book, Camgirls, Theresa Senft (2008) first coined the term “micro-celebrity” to refer to “a new style of online

27 Both spellings of “microcelebrity” and “micro-celebrity” appear in the scholarly literature. My preference as utilized in this dissertation is “microcelebrity.”
performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs, and social networking sites” (p. 25). Microcelebrity was later extended by Marwick (2010), “Micro-celebrities construct their online viewers, friends, or followers as an audience or fan base, use social media, e-mail, or chat to respond to them, and feel obligated to continue this interaction to boost their popularity, breaking down the traditional audience/performer spectator/spectacle dichotomy” (p. 231). However, the term “microcelebrity” is rarely used in the social media scene. Accordingly, to respect the nomenclature used in the social media scene, I use the term “influencer.”

The meaning and value of influencers is widely debated in the scene and newly emerging in popular discourse. What is an influencer? Who is an influencer? Who should call themselves influencers? Jill explains her definition of an influencer:

Someone who’s a tastemaker. I want to say a trendsetter, but I think a lot of influencers could be followers. And they have a large influence in terms of numbers and in terms of word-of-mouth abilities. And they’re active on social media because otherwise how are they getting the word out there. Socialites have existed for years, but now the ones that we hear about have an actual social media presence. And there’s someone who their friends like you to find out what they should buy, or what they should do, or where they should go to stay cool.

While Jill explains that influencers are able to attract attention on social media, there is also a growing recognition that influence is not merely about who has the largest audience. Basic social media metrics can identify how many followers one has, but that does little to explain how much influence one has. Social media analytics tools are used to quantify an individual’s capacity to influence using more sophisticated metrics that
incorporate additional measures to assess engagement level (such as likes, comments, and page views). Evelyn observes:

Influence is a combination of reach and resonance, so, if I can get the word out to a lot of people, but none of them actually care what I have to say—I’m not very good. If I can only get it out to a few people, but they really care…you want to get a library [of] people who care about what you have to say.

With less of a reliance of basic social media metrics, brands can identify and capitalize on influencers who have an engaged audience, rather than just a large audience. Accordingly, brands are now identifying and leveraging people who have more niche audiences; in the following section, I introduce these casual influencers.

### 6.3 Casual Influencer

The microcelebrities described by Marwick (2010) and Senft (2008) represent the highest level of influencer: those who have acquired “celebrity-like” status. As Marwick (2010) describes, “The micro-famous are recognized on the streets, in movie theaters, and are surrounded at by fans [at] technology events and conferences like South by Southwest (where I witnessed Kevin Rose on a red carpet, and ‘mommy blogger’ Heather Armstrong, aka Dooce, backed up against a wall by her fans)” (p. 233). In the last few years, these high level microcelebrities with millions of followers have been able to get

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28 Kevin Rose is an internet entrepreneur, investor, and co-founder of Digg with over 1.7 million followers on Twitter. Heather Armstrong is a blogger with over 1.5 million Twitter followers.
paid over US$100,000 per influencer campaign with the highest grossing influencer, the Swedish vlogger PewDiePew earning over $12 million a year (Kreuser, 2016).

Given the growing prominence and presence of influencers, I believe that there needs to be a broader vocabulary to describe the diversity of influencers that exist. In the social media scene, I uncovered an entire ecosystem of influencers wherein microcelebrities represent merely one type of influencer. A select few people have emerged with “celebrity-like” status of microcelebrities, but the mass of the influencer ecosystem is layered with people who have varying degrees of influence and profiles. Many people who occasionally work with brands struggle to self-identify as an influencer. In answering the question, “Are you an influencer?” Alison states, “No. Well, I guess so, but not. Maybe, I don’t know.” Noah similarly reflects:

Do I get invited to a whole bunch of these influencer parties that I see all these other people going to? Not so much. Do I get hit up by companies sometimes to help them promote something? Sometimes. I mean, it really just depends. It’s like, do I have a large following on Twitter? It’s probably larger than an average person’s.

Noah has about 10,000 Twitter followers; by some estimates, the average person on Twitter has 208 followers (Beevolve, 2012). Both Noah and Alison have difficulty identifying themselves as influencers because they are not at the “microcelebrity” level. Accordingly, I introduce the term “casual influencers” to refer to an average person who “works” with a brand to share branded content, but whose influence is more casual. Casual influencers are paid in perks or money to advertise a product, service, or brand in ways that typically do not look like advertising. As with other influencer engagements, brands strategically identify and use casual influencers to gain positive word-of-mouth
marketing and ultimately increase profits by having the individual promote branded content to their network on social media. Vanity titles like “brand ambassador” and “brand partner”—or more recently the even more ambiguous term of “brand activation”—are used in favour of more direct terminology like “advertising” and “sponsorships.”

The term “casual influencer” works to break the binary of being an influencer, or not being an influencer. While there is certainly a range of people within the casual influencer category, a casual influencer broadly has influence within their social circles, including their local community, friends, and family network that may not be as large as that of a microcelebrity. Casual influencers’ compensation is in the form of perks, such as experiences, promo codes, gifts/swag, as well as cash payments. A casual influencer may not be strategic in posting to social media every day, or even have a large following, but they have above-average influence by way of followers who engage with them. Casual influencers tend to be—but are not necessarily—more locally situated. Typical influencer marketing often fails to recognize that geography still matters (Takhteyev, Gruzd, & Wellman, 2012). For example, a new coffee shop in downtown Toronto wanting to target potential customers who live or work in Toronto may not need—or be able to afford—a celebrity (such as Justin Bieber), or microcelebrity (such as YouTuber Jenna Marbles), but may use a casual influencer who is local and cheaper.

Casual influencers’ “work” with brands may be considered a new form of casual employment. Casual work is commonly defined as “employment that is short term, irregular and uncertain, involving separate contracts of employment for each engagement” (Smith & Ewer, 1999, p. iv), and where “workers are employed on an ‘on-
call’ basis” (Fuller & Vosko, 2008, p. 37). Further, with no benefits, sick leave, or predictability, casual work is also typically characterized by low pay, with women disproportionately represented across sectors (Smith & Ewer, 1999). As I describe in Chapter 2, casual employment is part of a growing trend in precarious work—specifically in digital and creative labour. While a select few high-level influencers have been successful in finding high-paid and more secure work, most influencers, and particularly casual influencers, engage in work that have elements of precarity; however, it is also important to note that they do not experience the same level of precarity as many low-income, immigrant, marginalized, casual workers that Fuller and Vosko (2008) describe. Casual influencers are typically not engaged in a formal contract with a brand, but rather a tacit agreement exists whereby a brand provides something of perceived value to the casual influencer (such as a free product or experience), and the casual influencer in turn provides exposure to the brand. Often, in these casual influencer engagements there is no explicit statement that requires the individual to promote the brand, but there is an implicit understanding that an individual is “free” to post about the product or service if they are able to create a positive social media post. At other times, influencers enter into “agreements” that can include information such as content requirements, which largely operate to protect the corporation and prevent legal complications.

Organizations have recently begun to embrace casual influencers. As marketer, Matt Britton (2015), explains, “The everyday influencer is your typical consumer, going about their daily lives. They have average social network size and sphere of influence, but they are passionate ambassadors of the brands they embrace, and feel great about
telling their friends” (p. 197–198). While the enthusiasm to share branded information may be overplayed, some research indicates that the utilization of average people—people who have average influence or even below-average influence over others—is often the most cost effective marketing campaign, which accounts for the growing trend of brands working with casual influencers (Bakshy et al., 2011).

Coincidentally, as I was writing this chapter on influence, two community managers from two distinct companies contacted me for, as the subject line of one email stated, an “Opportunity to work together.” Working together typically means the brand provides free swag (in the first case, free food) or free experiences (in the second case, free tickets to an event) in exchange for brand exposure: promoting and advertising the company on social media to a person’s network. As previously indicated, attention is a commodity, and while I would not call myself an influencer—and certainly not a microcelebrity—I would be classified as a casual influencer in that some brands have contacted me in the past. I have an online presence that would garner above-average attention (for example, I have about 4,500 followers on Twitter). After much consideration, I decided not to accept those offers. Early on I wondered why a brand would be interested in reaching out to me—an academic—to promote a brand, but I soon recognized that it is all a numbers game: budget / influencers = exposure, where the goal is to provide maximum positive exposure at the lowest cost.

In the following section, I outline the impact and implications of influencers with regards to labouring at influence, including precarious influence, compensation, influencer backlash, and disclosure.
6.4 Precarious Influence

Beyond the benefits of being an influencer or casual influencer, there is a dark side to influence for both the public and for influencers that often goes unrecognized.

Influencers need to constantly work at selling something: either a product or themselves. The so-called behind-the-scene glimpse into an influencer’s life showcases an individual’s authenticity and personality; for example, posts about one’s family. An endless barrage of sponsored posts—if disclosed—may become unwelcome by the audience, as the posts and the influencer would be deemed inauthentic and lacking substance. As a result, influencers need to perpetually work at selling their “authentic” selves to their audience. Cultivating and maintaining influence requires constant work, energy, and time to remain visible. Visibility is key to influence as organizations vie for attention, which is also made more difficult as social media sites change the algorithms that impact how people see posts. In order to continue to garner attention, visibility necessitates presence—both offline at events and online via engagement on social media.

Influencers need to perpetually labour at cultivating audiences on new social media platforms. Influencers often build their following on one platform, and then will seek to translate that following to other platforms. The rise and fall of different social media platforms means that influence is impermanent. For example, in late 2016, Vine, the six-second looped video platform, shut down operations, which left some Vine influencers scrambling to build their audiences on other social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube.

When I asked my participants whether they considered themselves to be influencers, many spoke of the immense time commitment of being an influencer and
how responsibilities like family and work result in them being unable or unwilling to fully participate as influencers. Dionne responded, “I don’t know. I think I was at one point. I kind of think I’m a bit washed up because I’m also—I’m not all that social anymore. I moved in with my boyfriend, I got a dog, I like to just stay at home—so not just doing stuff like I used to, I barely go on Twitter.”

The first influencers in the social media scene were some of the early adopters of social media, specifically Twitter; many of these influencers now work as community managers. Rizal reflects on the early social media scene at a time before “influencers.” He explains:

Back when we first started—I don’t know—is it five or six years ago—there wasn’t—we weren’t talking about influencers or anything. We were just talking about a few people who were very active at the time...It was just a small group of people that people would listen to. Now it’s—everyone else has a piece of the pie, so everyone is getting involved. So it’s not as exclusive as it was. So that’s how it is for that.

With the widespread use of social media and the allure of living the high life as an influencer, many aspiring influencers—often young bloggers—enter into the market every week. As young new influencers constantly emerge with the allure of influencer perks, even established influencers feel squeezed and pressured to perform. However, a very limited number of people make it to the stage of being a microcelebrity. Most aspiring influencers receive nothing more than a few free perks, such as branded products, or get paid nominal amounts, despite several hours of working on their personal brand and social media channels. An online influencer platform that connects brands to Instagram influencers, iFluenz, offers $10 for one branded post to individuals
with 5,000 followers (iFluenz, 2017). Given the affordances of social media, the dream (or illusion) is that anyone with a social media account has the ability to attain celebrity status and earn a living. Despite the allure of becoming “internet famous” very few people become microcelebrities and even fewer reach a level of influencer that can sustain them financially, but it is a perpetuated idea that one can support oneself this way. Sabrina reflects on the insecurity of people who commit to being influencers as their job:

Some people are like Camille, that’s her full-time job…writing her blog and doing all this influencer stuff. When does that run out, what is your end goal? You can’t be doing that at 65, or you can? I don’t know. Who am I to judge and kind of say what our roles are going to look like down the line, but I think I crave stability more than they do. But I couldn’t imagine—like what is your pension going to look like? This traditional view of that—maybe we won’t even have that by the time we all get there—I have no idea—because the world has evolved so much.

As highlighted in the introduction of casual influencers, influencers’ work is less permanent than contract employment. In the influencer ecosystem, there is a tremendous amount of “aspirational labour” (Duffy, 2015b) that involves a real investment of time and money. Duffy (2015b) explains, “Aspirational labourers pursue creative activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven” (p. 3). There are various forms of free labour that exist in the creative industries (de Peuter, 2011), and working as an unpaid brand ambassador equates to working for exposure. The concept of “working for exposure” is strategically embraced by companies who tout that the exposure may lead to future work, but, in reality, it is just unpaid work. Noah explains the aspirational labouring of influence:
There are other people, I think there are a ton of people who are trying [to become influencers]—they’re showing off products on their Instagram and stuff, hoping that people are going to sponsor them and people are going to start looking to them for these things, and that’s their goal of getting into social, it’s very different for everybody.

Participants often differentiated between influencer engagements that are paid versus unpaid. Engaging in casual influencer work *personally* involves occasionally receiving free products or other perks. Engaging in *professional* influencer work is financially rewarded and often involves more repeated and systematic branded sponsorships. The reality, however, is that the roles are not dichotomous. Tali explains how she has done some influencer work personally, but not professionally:

I’ve done some personally; what I haven’t done is actual work, and to be honest, I would not—that would not be something that would interest me on a professional level. I guess on a personal level, it’s fun because you get to do your thing, you know what I mean? But on a professional level, I don’t necessarily feel like it’s the most real way of doing things, you know? But, again, that’s really just kind of a personal preference, but I definitely see the attraction of it; I can see why they do it, it makes sense. To me it kind of—I think I would be very like, “Oh great, here we go.” So I kind of stayed away from that kind of stuff.

Much like influence itself, the divide between casual influencer and professional influencer is fluid as individuals can shift between categories.

Professional influencers insist that influencer work is real work—they work to creatively deliver clients’ messages to large audiences, which have impact—and should be paid for, not merely “comped” with free swag. Rizal explains:
I’m noticing there’s more of a trend where brands and PR are actually paying now more than what it was before. Before, no one was paying, it was all for—it was just, “Come to the party and eat and drink for free.” So that’s how it was in the beginning. Now they’re paying; it’s just a matter of how much are you asking for to get paid.

Influencers’ work illustrates an extreme example of digital labour. Unlike advertising and PR employees, influencers post content to their own social media channels and their work is more freelance, but both engage in work as content creators for brands. Recognizing this imbalance, influencers have recently advocated for paid work in their blogs and conference presentations and the “going-rates” for professional influencers has increased (Sammis, Lincoln, & Pomponi, 2015). Both influencers and brands are determining the standards for pay as the industry evolves, much like the standards that exist in other forms of advertising. However, in a typical supply-demand capitalist market, with countless influencers eager to earn money, the rate is in flux. As the influencer ecosystem becomes more professionalized, there is also increased competition to obtain work as an influencer. As a result, individuals hoping to become or maintain their status as an influencer need to perpetually work on their presence.

6.5 Contest Labour

Digital labour takes various forms on social media (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013), but an unsuspected form of labour is social contests. Social contests, or social media contests, are promotions that target social media audiences that typically include giveaways and sweepstakes to engage and build a fan base (Riegger, 2016). Social contests are run by companies themselves, or by an influencer working with a company. To the influencer
and brand, the collaboration is perceived as a win-win. The brand gets to leverage the influencer’s audience for exposure and the influencer is able to attract further attention and credibility by offering their network the opportunity to win something for free.

Contests typically involve some combination of: (1) developing user-generated content about the brand, such as a photo, video, or post about the sponsoring brand, (2) following the branded account or influencer(s) involved in the contest, and (3) sharing the branded content. People participate in contests for the obvious reason of winning something, but also for the less obvious reason of gaining visibility. Jill, a social media freelancer, explains that she works hard to be seen in the social media scene—both online and offline. The desire to cultivate influence goes beyond merely getting free things, but rather serves as a way for her to build herself, her personal brand, and her portfolio to attract clients or, perhaps, land a full-time job. Jill described a plethora of glamorous events that she was “invited to.” She finally concedes, “They just invited me. Well, to be honest with you…I win a lot of contests, but I also get invited to things, but I’m just telling people that I got invited.” Showcasing products on social media and attending events is a way of gaining visibility and social capital, demonstrating one’s influence, and hopefully making the right connections to lead to the next gig. The labouring for influence is well exemplified in these social contests, as Jill explains:

I’ve done the most free labour in terms of entering contests…I’m happy they exist because I’ve won a lot of cool experiences because of them, and I met cool people because of them—but there is a lot of unpaid labour that goes into it. People make collages; people do all kinds of things to make the perfect picture. Also [you can be] sure to make those pictures, people are spending money.
Aspiring influencers are spending money, and time, to enter into these contests in an attempt to gain exposure and grow their network of influence. In a time of precarious work and high unemployment, people are working for free. This reality of spending time, money, and energy in an attempt to foster influence parallels the labour of working for exposure. Working for exposure refers to unpaid or underpaid work that is done in an attempt to build one’s personal brand, get recognized as valuable to an employer, and gain employment; working for exposure is used as a justification and is a common trope amongst corporations seeking to take advantage of young people and unpaid interns who desire to get a “foot in the door” in the creative industries (Shade & Jacobson, 2015; Siebert & Wilson, 2013).

Influencers are also spending time and money to develop contests to bolster their influence. Rizal, a seasoned influencer, has run several brand-sponsored contests, but still finds the need to manufacture his own self-funded contests as a way to boost his influence. He will sometimes buy something of value with his own money to use in a contest. He explains that he will promote the contest on social media:

“I’m giving away movie passes, who wants to win it?” People are going to resonate, people are going to, “Oh my God, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” But for me, it’s kind of a small investment; a small courtesy that doesn’t [cost much]—the value of what will happen is outweighed more than the cost. So, leveraging.

The contest is used to increase engagement and maintain relevance amongst his followers, so he can “leverage” this for future paid brand-sponsored contests. In this way, not only does maintaining influence require an investment of time, but also an investment of money. Influencers fear that without these incentives the audience may shift their
attention elsewhere if they perceive the influencer is not offering something of value—
either desirable content or valuable commodities.

Thus, both influencers and casual influencers labour at developing, maintaining, and growing influence. Influencers are sometimes paid to host a contest and sometimes they self-fund the contest. Average people engage in free labour to enter a contest, which sometimes involves out-of-pocket expenses, to then gain access to events and/or swag that they promote, which again constitutes a form of free labour. Thus, the lines of labour—paid, unpaid, free, or sponsored—are extremely blurred and complicated. Casual influencers highlight the breakdown of paid and unpaid labour.

6.6 Backlash

Identifying oneself as an influencer is sometimes considered passé, and there is a growing disdain, yet intense allure, of the term “influencer” in the social media scene. While there is a general acceptance of influencer marketing for exposure in the social media scene, certain kinds of work is deemed acceptable and others unacceptable. When an individual becomes too successful as an influencer, they are often viewed as too commercialized and seen to have lost their voice, personality, and authenticity by “flogging” brands. Audiences may also feel deceived if they do not realize that the recommended brand is actually part of a paid campaign. Dionne explains:

I have a very—I hate that word—I was going to say love/hate relationship, but I—I was always this person at my last agency where people just sometimes didn’t like asking for my help, I mean, they usually did, but I hate influence around—like they’re a blogger, they might be influential about this category, but what makes someone an influencer?
But because that is the language that everyone knows, I just sucked it up and went with it for a little bit, because it makes the clients happy, but I think it’s kind of a silly term, because what makes somebody an influencer? Because years ago, this would be the social influence, right? The people that could have a can of something in their hands and would be photographed and written about in page 6 or whatever, but influencers tend to be—I think it’s still bloggers even though I think that’s silly too, because lots of people aren’t blogging anymore, but if you talk to any agency, there are lists of influencers still—you know—the top 50 whatever bloggers in lifestyle, food, fitness—whatever.

Some argue that influencer marketing is a sham and bloggers are merely puppets manipulated by the money (Hunter, 2016), while others contend that influencer work is real work. With the backlash against the commercialization of influencers, influencers justify their sponsored posts by performing authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Authenticity is constantly highlighted in the world of influence: the lack of authenticity, the promise of authenticity, the loss of authenticity, and the appeal of authenticity. As Goffman (1959) states, “When we discover that someone with whom we have dealings is an imposter and out-and-out fraud, we are discovering that he did not have the right to play the part he played, that he was not an accredited incumbent of the relevant status” (p. 59). In the terms of Goffman’s dramaturgical model, when people are duped into believing a fraudulent “performance,” they lose their trust in the actor. For example, Christina reflects on someone harassing her for the type of content on her blog. She repeats what was said to her, “Oh here’s Christina, shilling on the internet again,” and her response, “I was like, ‘I paid for that…That was an authentic experience.’” Her audience had assumed that the post was sponsored, but rather the post included a brand that she was not affiliated with.
Influencers stress their organic, natural, and genuine fit with a brand in order to showcase that they are not “selling out,” with the hidden undertone of “unlike the other influencers that are.” Interestingly, influencers and those working in social media are often the ones that are problematizing influencer marketing because of their intimate knowledge of the subject and experience working as an influencer. Jill explains:

I find that when I go to the events that I become like a superficial version of myself. If you’re at a media preview, for example, and they’re like, “Oh this is so pretty.” You’re like, “Did you hear what that company does, it’s so amazing”—and it’s like, “Is it, or are you just saying that because a PR person told you that and now you’re just copying them?” So I don’t necessarily trust an influencer.

While laws are developing to provide more transparency to the general public about sponsored content, there seems to be limited, yet growing, discussion in mainstream media that problematizes influencers. Many people may be surprised by how widespread and invisible influencer programs, including casual influencer programs, are. By publicly acknowledging a problem with influencer programs, influencers attempt to differentiate themselves publicly and distance themselves from the controversy by asserting their “authenticity.” Sabrina highlights her work with one brand by emphasizing the congruence between her brand and the sponsoring brand:

No. Well, I, because I love [brand], so I will just say what I want to. But that’s an organic kind of fit into my world and into my life. I am so sick of seeing—especially in Toronto, and it’s only because I’m in Toronto, my work is in Toronto, so I don’t see other areas—but there’s some people that I actually want to unfollow that I can’t tolerate the amount of
sponsored content that they have. Like, “What do you actually like? Who are you as a person because I have no idea.”

While the experience may indeed be authentic, the promotion of it is not. More broadly, this backlash speaks to a broader backlash against social media as being superficial and narcissistic (Davenport et al., 2014), which is coupled with a history of mistrust in public relations and “spindoctors” (Richards, 1998).

6.7 Transparency, Disclosure, and the Law

One of the objections with influencers’ sponsored content is that audiences are being duped; influencer posts are often not disclosed as sponsored, and people often do not recognize the post as sponsored. As Jill Rettberg (2008) writes, “When actual blog posts are sponsored, questions of trust and integrity arise” (p. 137). Sponsored posts are deemed less authentic than an “organic post” because of the compensation involved. The growing mistrust of social media influencers has raised issues of disclosure and transparency in an attempt to break through the uncertainty and ambiguity. Sabrina states, “And if you think because that full disclosure is not there, it just makes me a little ugh—so I try to do the best I can with my brand not to have this like icky moral world of influencers.” The terminology describing the relationship between a brand and an influencer is constantly evolving, including ambassadors, collaboration, sponsorship, endorsements, and activation. The shifting nomenclature works to soften the relationship and skirt disclosure laws, which are developing, yet are somewhat unclear.

In the United States, standards are developing and influencer disclosure laws are in place. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) clearly outlines that the material
relationship between an individual and a brand needs to be disclosed in a way that is honest and not misleading. The FTC (2015) states, “An endorsement would be covered by the FTC Act if an advertiser — or someone working for an advertiser — pays you or gives you something of value to mention a product” (p. 4). Accordingly, in the U.S., an individual receiving financial compensation or even free products, popularly referred to as swag, needs to clearly disclose the relationship on their social media posts, such as using #ad or #sponsored.

In Canada, there is more ambiguity with laws and rules governing influencer disclosure and the laws are not as evolved as in the U.S. In 2016, the Advertising Standards Canada (ASC), under the interpretation guideline #5, states a person must disclose a “material connection,” but has the exclusion “except when that material connection is one that consumers would reasonably expect to exist, such as when a celebrity publicly endorses a product or service” (p. 7). This guideline is unclear, and even more problematic is the fact that the ASC is a self-regulatory body, not a government body, and as such cannot issue fines (Nowak, 2016). An influencer’s lack of disclosure could fall under the Competition Bureau’s (2015) rules against misrepresentation and false advertising. Although the Competition Bureau does have the ability to issue fines, to date, there has been no application of this.

The rise of casual influencers further complicates issues of disclosure, transparency, and the law. As a casual influencer, Noah has worked with various brands. He explains the evolving laws surrounding influencer disclosure in the U.S. versus Canada:
I mean, there’s not a ton of stuff that you hear about here in Canada. The FTC does have guidelines in the U.S., and they keep sort of changing them to keep up with the pace of how things are moving. So recently they introduced something about if you show a product in a YouTube video and it’s a sponsored thing, you have to say. You’ll see people who promote stuff they’ll put brackets and say they’re a client or sponsored or something like that. So, they [the FTC] are telling people that they have to become more transparent about these things, but then there are other people like me: I started talking about [brand] because I love [brand], I wasn’t being sponsored. I would still tell you: go eat [brand], it’s f*cking awesome.

At the end of this quote, Noah briefly highlights an emerging problem with casual influencer marketing and disclosure. Brands often identify casual influencers by targeting someone who is already a fan and is already talking about their brand on social media. The brand then seeks to leverage this affinity for the brand by providing compensation in some form so the casual influencer is enticed to further promote the brand to their network. In Noah’s case, he was a fan of a particular restaurant and shared this on social media. Then the restaurant reached out to him and gave him free products, which may constitute a “material relationship”; however, he chooses not to disclose this in his social media posts. The justification is that he is not paid in cash.

Over time, professional influencers who reach microcelebrity status will have the guidance, experience, and understanding to comply with the emerging laws—or, perhaps, they will be forced to comply. Casual influencers, however, will likely not have the experience or knowledge to understand disclosure, nor would enforcement agencies be able to identify casual influencers. Beyond the legal ramifications, there are problematic ethical implications for casual influencers, as the audience would not anticipate a
sponsored post so they may be less likely to recognize it. The problem is not only that people may be misled into making decisions or purchases, but communities are becoming increasingly commodified (as I discuss in Chapter 7). To skirt disclosure laws in the future, brands might move further in the direction of casual influencers and away from established influencers. 

During my fieldwork and writing, influencer disclosure emerged as an increasingly prominent topic of discussion. In 2013, social media posts with the capitalized words “SPONSORED” or “ADVERTISEMENT” were absent from the social media landscape. Over the next few years, influencers experimented with using #partner, #spon, or other forms of non-transparent disclosure at the end of a post that could easily get lost. In a push towards “authenticity” some influencers began declaring the link, such as “This car was given to me to test out by the kind folks at XX” or “Thanks to XX for the fantastic new clothes”; however, disclosure is inconsistent across social media platforms. Problematically, even with influencer disclosures, average people may not pay attention, recognize, or remember the disclosure as they scroll through their social media feed (Shtern & Brache, 2017). As a result, consumers need to have a certain level of media literacy in order to recognize and understand sponsored content and disclosures—especially as both sponsored and non-sponsored posts can be presented in the same way. 

The affordances of the technology, specifically the space limit, inhibit disclosure. Declarations of sponsorship are more common on blogs, in comparison to microblogs (such as tweets), and quite rare on more ephemeral media—like Snapchat. Rizal explains his disclosure strategy, which seems to be an emerging norm in Canada, “Usually when I post a blog post, I will disclose that I’m getting compensated. On tweets, I don’t say that
I’m getting paid or anything.” Just as the platforms are evolving, the ethics and laws surrounding influencer disclosure are evolving, and the impact is still unforeseen.

Christina speaks about the lack of trust and backlash:

You used to be able to get away with throwing people some swag and having them talk about you. Now it’s expensive to do. There are a lot of companies that have come up that are being that facilitator between influencers and people, like, agencies, and people that don’t get it. So, now it’s expensive to have bloggers represent your product—and I think people are catching on. I think influencers are a lot less trustworthy now. Even in my own blogging, it’s like—I think people think that a lot of influencers are just shills. But some of them are.

While the assumption is that influencers will want to hide their relationship with a brand, some emerging influencers are working to position themselves as influencers by strategically promoting brands as if it were sponsored, yet there is no relationship with the brand. In this way, the sponsorship signals one’s social capital and attention, even if it is untrue. Rizal explains:

Part of creating your personal brand is not just working with brands that pay you. For me, the key to social media is leverage. Literally, for me, the key for social media is leveraging every opportunity. For example, right here is Ray-Bans—I bought these glasses. But if I post a picture on Twitter and say, “Loving my new Ray-Bans,” even though I’ve been working with different brands already, big brands, and I just post, “Loving these new Ray-Bans,” people are going to assume: “Oh, he’s working with Ray-Ban, that’s so cool.” Right? That’s what they’re saying. But I’m not working with Ray-Ban, I just bought these glasses, I love them. So that’s a technique of leveraging. You as a viewer will say, “Wow he’s working with Ray-Ban. He was just working with Adidas, other brands.”
If you’re working in PR or advertising, like: “Let’s work with this guy; let’s do more work with him because he’s working with Ray-Ban and Adidas.” And a lot of people are doing that now; so people are using social media in a way that’s kind of fake. It’s the fake-it-to-make-it. So people are doing, perfect example right now is TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival]. People are saying, “Oh, going to get my hair blow-dried at—” and then #TIFF15. They might just be going to get their hair styled just because. It has nothing to do with TIFF—but they’re—it’s a salon that’s in Yorkville, so they’re just getting their hair blow-dried at Yorkville, and there could be just a TIFF sign, located—but if you take it strategically that you’re at a hair salon with a TIFF logo, you look like you’re at a TIFF party. So you instantly become someone credible, technically.

The scenario of promoting a brand in an attempt to appear sponsored deeply complicates the issue of disclosure and transparency. Further, this is part of an ongoing and deepening commodification of social media more generally. When a person’s social media presence grows, it often attracts advertisers and criticism from the community (Hunter, 2016). As a result, there is a peculiar paradox where working with a brand lends credibility and bolsters one’s social clout, but there is a tipping point in not being perceived as too sponsored or inauthentic. Despite evolving disclosure laws, the use of casual influencers and aspiring influencers further complicates disclosure. Beyond people not being able to identify brand sponsorships, there is also a normalization of this type of relationship, so people may become less attentive to disclosure.
6.8 Fatigue and Mistrust

There is a growing mistrust of numbers and concern by marketers and the public that true influence cannot be quantified. The mistrust of numbers on social media is not a new problem, but the growing use of casual influencers has heightened this problem. On Friendster, an early social networking site, “Friendster whores” competed in a game to gain a huge network (Donath & boyd, 2004). However, the in-degree of the node—or number of followers—is not a true signal of social capital or influence (see Chapter 7.5).

There is a growing recognition that identifying influence using simple “vanity metrics” (such as number of followers) is not reliable because individuals can “game” the system by acting in a way to artificially increase their numbers by purposely timing tweets to optimize impact at high-traffic times, engaging influential people online, or even pursuing socially unacceptable behaviours like purchasing batch followers and “likes.” Despite this, vanity metrics are still often applied to identify influence. As Jill explains, “So that’s a measurement of success...it could be the number of likes, shares, you know—the vanity metrics still apply.”

In the early stages of social media, marketers trusted basic metrics like follower count. It was later recognized that these simplistic numbers can be gamed and, therefore, cannot be trusted. The next stage in influence saw an emphasis on audience engagement—how many people like/share/comment/repost the content, in combination with the number of people who saw the post. Finally with a move to direct buying on social media using monetized hyperlinks, influence can arguably be measured more directly. As a result, it is more difficult to fake influence. However, at an event I
attended, one person spoke of social media metrics and said, “Numbers are like prisoners. If you torture them long enough, they will say anything.”

While those working in social media recognize that vanity metrics do little to measure real impact, industry still desires and respects numbers. Social influence analytics tools use more complex algorithms to identify influence, but many critics recognize that influence is, in fact, difficult to measure. In an age where people are obsessed with numbers, quantifying the “return on investment”—or what is merely shortened to ROI—is invariably difficult, if not impossible. Identifying social media reach has become easier, but influence cannot be mapped as easily. Kat states, “How important really is it to get these five Instagram people to post about it? How influential are they?” The move to casual influencers shifts the focus from those top five Instagrammers to a larger net of people because, as Noah explains, “Influence is very contextual and fluid and it really depends.”

Most people seeking influencer status, eventually, and reluctantly, abandon their hopes when they realize the rewards are not commensurate with the work. The myth of the influencer masks the reality of, what Gill (2002) explains as “chronic insecurity, low pay, long hours, and other problems associated with a shift to the individualization of risk” (p. 86). Sabrina explains giving up on the idea of being an influencer:

I think it was like I was trying to find myself a little bit. You really try to find yourself in your 20s—figure out who you are and what you are—and I liked the idea that people wanted to either pay me or give me things or whatever for exposure and because I thought that I had some clout and some pull in the world, but now that really doesn’t matter to me. I don’t really care if someone thinks I’m cool or not—doesn’t really affect me in any way, shape, or form.
Even professional influencers who have “made it” often recognize that the influencer reality is not the dream it is made out to be. Rizal says he has stopped going out to many events. Dionne said she would rather be home on the couch. As with community management work, influencer work may favour younger people, who may have less commitments, and are less jaded.

6.9 Conclusion

What is hidden, obscured, and invisible, and what is made apparent, obvious, and visible from social media identities? In this chapter, I analyze the impact and implications of influence, including precarious influence, contested labour, disclosure, backlash, and fatigue. In an age of social media, influence is all about visibility and invisibility: the invisibility of algorithms and the visibility of influence with social media metrics tools; the invisibility of brand sponsorships and the visibility of disclosure; the invisibility of labour and the visibility of glamorous posts. While the algorithms of the social media platforms are largely invisible to users, social media managers and influencers need to perpetually keep up and learn to understand, work with, and around the algorithms as their work necessitates being able to attract exposure to their posts. Their success or failure lies in being able to make invisible the visible.

The rise of the influencer and casual influencer has implications for understanding other forms of work and the impact of social media in the workforce. The use of influencers has resulted in the emergence of new jobs for a select group of microcelebrities that have achieved economic and social success. However, these supposed glamorous jobs are not all they are portrayed to be. Enabled by social media
analytics tools, brands are able to identify and approach average people to promote branded content to their audiences. As a result, in the influencer ecosystem, having or not having influence is not a binary, but exists as a continuum. Some influencers are paid handsomely, while most work merely for exposure, swag, or free experiences.

In this chapter, I introduce the term “casual influencers” to address the growing segment of average people who work with a brand where the “work” is at its core a form of casual employment. Casual influencers reflect a growing trend towards outsourcing, unpaid, and contract labour, which provides further nuance to the ecosystem of influencers. Casual influencers epitomize the breakdown of paid and unpaid labour and the diminishing line between the personal and professional. This emerging form of work further blends the supposed divide between work and life so that living life is work, and work is living life. As digital labourers, people are positioned to be continually working through posting, sharing, liking, tweeting, and retweeting on social media, which serves to benefit companies.

Many community managers occupy this liminal space of working with influencers and being an influencer. Influence is similarly not black or white—the reality is that influence is located within the grey space. Influence is situated in the in-between spaces of personal branding, power, authenticity, and vulnerability. Despite the use of social media influencers still being in the early stages, the social media scene and social media influence has “grown up” to become increasingly commercialized and professionalized. New influencers, platforms, strategies, and laws, frequently emerge, which will necessitate a continued understanding of the impact and significance of social media influencers.
Community Quantified: “Leveraging” the Personal Network for Professional Benefit

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how community is shaped in an age of social media, influencers, and personal branding to introduce the “community quantified” argument. As I describe in Chapter 2, advertising is ubiquitous, yet there is a growing mistrust in brands and an accompanying ineffectiveness of traditional advertising. In an attempt to further sell goods and services, organizations have endeavoured to humanize their brands through anthropomorphism. The introduction of social media provided a new set of tools for organizations. Social media can be used by community managers to give brands a voice—to speak directly to their employers’ customers or community in one-to-one or one-to-many online conversations. Community managers passionately work at managing the brand across social media platforms, and in this process, the organizations harvest the identity of their employee by taking their voice—figuratively and literally. Organizations continue to seek alternative ways of developing integrated marketing campaigns that are
perceived as organic, authentic, and natural—rather than blatant advertising—and community managers and influencers work to accomplish this.

As brands are becoming more humanized, people are concurrently becoming more like brands (as I describe in Chapter 5). Personal branding is not an intrinsically negative practice; rather, people are adopting personal branding practices against conditions of increased corporatization, job insecurity, and precarious economic times. People work on their personal brands as a strategy to gain control of their own livelihoods and careers. As evidenced by my participants, personal branding is becoming normalized as a personal and professional practice. Through banal domestication, people are encouraged to not think about becoming branded subjects; yet, the tropes of needing to be entrepreneurial, competitive, and to hustle to survive proliferate, which requires constant work and persistence. Once people consider themselves a brand, it is a small step to comprehend companies seeking to leverage individuals’ community and capitalize on their “personal” networks. Selling oneself and using personal branding becomes a way of life in the social media scene; thus, individuals sell themselves and their community—made up of friends, peers, family, and online networks—to organizations in influencer engagements.

I contend that given the rise of social media, normalization of personal branding (see Chapter 5), use of influencers and casual influencers (see Chapter 6), and the increased sophistication, acceptance, appreciation, and appropriation of social media analytics (as I describe below), community is quantified. Community quantified refers to the situation where people capitalize on their networks for financial and reputational gain. What is at stake is not merely the future of social media work, but rather the nature
and composition of community. As articulated by my participants, this understanding of community as quantified results in an “always-on” that extends to the desire—or necessity—to keep up with both their personal communities and digital trends. The oft-ridiculed FOMO (fear of missing out) is indicative of the fear of missing opportunities: the opportunity to build one’s community and network that is needed for one’s career and life.

7.2 What is Community?

The understanding of community has changed over time and especially with the introduction of social media (Gruzd, Jacobson, Wellman, & Mai, 2016). In 1983, Benedict Anderson introduced the concept of “imagined communities” to refer to a socially constructed community, and recognized the role of collective imagination in creating the sense of community—aided by the printing press. Anderson (1983) specifically identified the nation as an imagined community, but the concept of imagined community has been extended to other communities, including online communities. Online communities are imagined by users—aided by social media and digital technologies—to foster a sense of community (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011).

Community lies at the heart of community management and social media; the word “community” is embedded in the term “community management.” As I discuss in Chapter 1, some community managers are adamant about the difference between a community manager and a social media manager, whereas most others use the terminology interchangeably. For those who use the terminology more casually, community merely means a network of people that interact in some capacity or have
some loose affiliation. For others, community is the ultimate goal of their work: community means a network of people who are connected, passionate, and advocate for a similar company or cause; community is something to be cultivated, cared for, fed, and grown—social media is merely the tool of the trade. For these community managers, success is often achieved when community members communicate and provide help or support to each other. Riley explains:

Initially, you always have a lot of interaction between you and the community and you’re really slogging to push that and have those interactions continue, but when the community starts interacting with each other without any interaction with you, that’s both exciting and it can be really rewarding depending on what it is that they’re doing.

Riley takes the meaning of community seriously, but community is still comprised of current and potential customers of her employer.

Even though throughout my research and fieldwork, branding—in reference to personal branding—was a repeated topic, there was limited engagement in the corporatization of communities as the distinction between a “community” and “brand community” was largely absent. According to Bruns (2012), “Communities, then, exist around a core both of highly committed and engaged users, and of shared values, practices, and knowledges held strongly by these users, collectively developed and defined over time; beyond this core exist several layers of progressively less committed users and less widely held attributes” (p. 819). A brand community is a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). While there is no firm divide between these two types of community, a brand community is a type of
community that chiefly—but not necessarily—operates in commercial spaces. As the introduction and use of technologies have afforded a shifting definition of community, organizations have sought to capitalize on community. In community management, the lack of consideration for commercial interests, results in the use of the term “community”—whether the community manager is managing a community surrounding a politician, a beer company, or a library.

As I describe in Chapter 2, with any technological change, there is a proliferation of research and interest in determining the impact on community. The concept of community is slippery and changes over time (Parks, 2011). In each generation, questions and concerns resurface with a misguided nostalgia for a golden age of community (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). Questions relating to community and identity continue to be important, “If we are ever to understand the glue that binds human beings together on this planet” (Killworth et al., 1990, p. 311). Connections lie at the heart of our sense of community and identity; as Christakis and Fowler (2009) explain, “To know who we are, we must understand how we are connected” (p. xvi). It is important to understand the implications of maintaining and creating relationships in online spaces because people are increasingly using the internet, and social media, to sustain their dispersed social ties and develop new ties by way of networking (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011).

The current question about the state of community is situated in an understanding of the impact of the use of social media in society. The discussion has historically been situated around three different beliefs: community lost, community saved, and community liberated (Wellman, 1979). However, to answer “the community question”
one needs to move beyond a mere utopian or dystopian perspective to understand the evolving nature of community online. I outline these three traditional views of community, and, then drawing on my participants’ and my experiences in the social media scene, I introduce “community quantified” in an age of social media.

The community lost argument puts forward the idea that there has been a dissolution of community in urban areas; strong social ties are believed to be in self-contained solidarities with a concomitant shift to disorganized and weak ties (Wellman, 1979). Proponents of the community lost argument would suggest that personal branding is merely an example of “the age of great exhibitionism” (Keen, 2012, p. 145), as people are increasingly narcissistic and more self-involved, rather than community-oriented.

Robert Putnam (1995, 2000) documented the decline of participation in voluntary groups since 1950 and argues that social capital—referring to the features of social life that allow people to pursue shared objectives—has eroded, which he partially attributes to the individualization of leisure time with technologies, such as the television and the internet. The iconic story about the loss of community comes from the title of his book: *Bowling Alone* (1995) in which he declared that bowling in America was more popular than ever before, yet the registration in organized bowling leagues had decreased. For Putnam, the rise of solo bowling was problematic as it was indicative of the decline of

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29 Fischer (2005) identifies that many of the correlations or slight statistical differences are not significant enough to suggest that social life and connectedness is declining. Further, not all types of formal activities have had decreased participation. While Putnam shows that there has been a decline in volunteering, parent-teacher associations, voter turnout, public meeting attendance, committee work, politics, and government, the argument solely considers participation in formal group associations and does not take account of other types of connections, such as computer-mediated connections. For example, various types of political activities have actually increased (Fischer, 2005) and there has been an increase in number of new organizations, such as feminist groups. Feminist critiques also point to Putnam’s neglect of informal participation that is often preferred, or embraced, by women (Inglehart & Norris, 2003).
community. While Putnam’s work has been widely cited and repeatedly used as an exemplar for the community lost argument, there are many inconsistencies in Putnam’s arguments, coupled with rhetorical distortion of statistics (Fischer, 2005). Even though the phenomenon is called “bowling alone,” Putnam himself admits that people were not bowling alone; rather, people were bowling with others based on individual and varying schedules of free time. “Bowling alone” elicits fears of people being isolated and disconnected from other people. People are still engaging in activities, but participation is focused on the individual with more fluid membership and flexible schedules.\(^{30}\)

As a binary position to the community lost argument, the community saved argument suggests that neighbourhood communities have flourished. Much of the evidence for this argument has come from poor, traditional, and ethnic minority communities (Wellman, 1979) to suggest that communities have still been able to survive and perhaps even thrive. Research points to indicators that there has not been a loss of community (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; boyd, 2011; Hogan, 2010; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Participation in online communities is thriving (Chayko, 2016; Scott & Johnson, 2005) with social media a primary source of connectivity online (Pew Research Centre, 2016). Research has repeatedly shown that internet users have more diverse and a larger number of friends as compared to non-internet users (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006). Social media affords people the ability to make new connections, maintain pre-existing ties, and visualize networks.

\(^{30}\) Even though Putnam was dismayed to discover a drop in formal participation, he also acknowledged, “Perhaps the traditional forms of civic organization whose decay we have been tracing have been replaced by vibrant new organizations” (Putnam, 1995, p. 70). However, the commentary ends short of explaining what “new organizations” could be.
People use social media to interact with both their strong and weak ties (Chang & Zhu, 2012).

Even though the community lost and the community saved arguments provide opposite answers to the community question, the problem with both positions is that community is still viewed under the traditional definition of bounded communal ties, geographical cohesiveness, and tightly knit groups (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Understanding community as a group versus a network fundamentally shifts the way one understands personal relationships, as well as the “effects” of technology. Communities transcend the traditional geographical neighborhoods, to include online communities of interests, passions, or affiliations. Approached from the community lost or community saved perspective, the community question has been largely bound up in geography. By adopting a network perspective, one is freed from the confines of spatial or geographic boundaries and groups. As a result, both the community lost and community saved arguments are looking for community in the wrong place and space.

A third perspective, the community liberated argument, expands the traditional definition of community to accommodate the ways people develop a sense of identity and community in the twenty-first century, including online activities. A community is better conceptualized as a network and at the centre of the network is the individual, rather than a well-defined and tight-knit group (Wellman, 1979). Consequently, community is not as easily located with the essence of community shifted towards being less bounded and more fluid. The meaning of community has changed as the internet has become widely used in more developed countries with the use of the internet and social media providing an additional way for people to communicate with their existing ties,
rather than replacing face-to-face communication (Miyata, Boase, Wellman, & Ikeda, 2005). People have changed how they interact with one another on a day-to-day basis; the focus is on the individual operating in multiple, dispersed networks (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). The individual lies at the heart of the network, and the network is located both online and offline. The boundaries of what constitutes a friendship, community, work, and identity are extended with the use of ICTs.

The community lost, community saved, and community liberated arguments each present a different understanding of the changing shape of technology on community (Wellman, 1979). Beyond questioning whether new technologies are ruining community (as I describe in Chapter 2), there needs to be an understanding of how community has evolved with social media. In the following section, I outline how organizations—and community managers—have used social media analytics tools, and then identify the implications for community.

7.3 Social Media Analytics

The proliferation of social media has resulted in the emergence and massive growth of social media analytics. Social media analytics companies are also called social intelligence, data mining, insights, monitoring, listening, analytics, and measurement companies; these companies analyze social media data for information, which involves social media listening, monitoring, and intelligence. Much like the fluidity of social

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31 The shift from a localized community to a more dispersed network focused on the individual can be traced in a series of technological and social shifts, which Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue has brought about “networked individualism.”
media job titles, social media analytics companies are similarly identified in multiple and evolving ways. Kennedy (2016) explains:

As well as specialist social media insights companies, digital marketing agencies, search and PPC (pay per click) companies (such as BlueClaw and StickyEyes in the UK), market research firms (like Nielsen), web analytics firms (including Google, through Google Analytics and Google Alerts), digital reputation management companies (for example Kred or KwikChex) and software companies (like Cision) increasingly offer social media insights, making it hard to assess the number and range of companies operating in this field. (p. 105–106)

Mirroring job titles in social media (as I describe in Chapter 1), the word “social” or “social media” can be included in the title of the company or service, but often it is merely inferred. Social listening refers to the monitoring of social media and is typically done by organizations seeking to understand what people are saying online about a particular brand or organization. While community managers are often responsible for social listening, other organizations outsource their social listening to specialized companies that focus on analytics. Ted explains that while he tracks some social media metrics, his employer also uses a social media analytics company to produce a more comprehensive weekly and monthly report that is forwarded directly to the VP, even though management does not understand the report and he has to interpret the report for them.

Social media analytics tools are used to identify influencers on social media (as I discuss in Chapter 6) using algorithms that simplify and quantify users’ online network and influence—often as a numeric score. Each social media analytics platform uses a slightly different—typically proprietary—algorithm to identify topical influencers.
Sysomos, the world’s largest independent social intelligence platform based in Toronto, states that its influence tool allows one to “see what leading influencers are discussing, who they are discussing it with and the breadth of their social media influence” (Sysomos Influence, 2016, para. 2). In essence, the tools seek to quantify and make sense of influence, which is calculated by measuring social media users’ networks. This information can then be capitalized on by organizations in influencer marketing or targeted promotions. In addition to a host of social media analytics companies, various other social media analytics tools specialize in measuring influence, including Revfluence, Kred, PeerIndex, StatSocial (formerly Peek Analytics), ScribbleLive (formerly Appinions), Captiv8, and Tracckr, as well as new platforms that are being developed. Much like the speed at which social media evolves, so do the analytics tools. There are also a growing number of influencer marketing companies, such as Experticity, TapInfluence, and Bzzagent,32 that act as an intermediary between a brand and an influencer.

Launched in 2008—and acquired by Lithium in 2014—Klout was the first online social media analytics tool that specifically focused on measuring and quantifying influence (“About Klout,” 2017). Klout pioneered simplified metrics and offered the general public an opportunity to check the influence score of themselves and others, as well as provide marketers and social media managers an opportunity to better understand the influencers related to their company’s niche. Klout’s proprietary algorithm allocates every account a social influence score, which is out of a total score of 100 that is based on 400 measures found on numerous social networking sites (“Klout Score,” 2013).

Other social analytics tools, such as Kred, embrace a more transparent algorithm that explicitly dictates how the score is calculated; while others may provide a ranked list without any score.\(^{33}\) A detailed scoring system is based on influence and outreach and online activities are associated with different point values; as Hearn (2010) describes, an individual’s ideas, actions, and feelings are translated into value for the market.

The public score operates as a badge of honour. The ascribed meaning and value is further valourized by other social media platforms that allow a person’s Klout score to be displayed next to their profile. Until January 2016, Hootsuite—a popular platform for managing social media—would directly present each person’s Klout score on their Twitter profile, which made the score highly visible. Over the past few years, Klout has lost prominence in the marketplace as other software—with improved functionality—has been developed. Noah explains that the simplistic metrics used in Klout is not sufficient for his job as it does not take into account how influence is contextual. He identifies that more complex analytics tools go beyond simplistic metrics, and states:

> If you’re a social media marketer and you’re looking for influencers, you have to start somewhere. But then, I think it’s also up to you to do your research after that. It’s one thing to say, “Yeah, that person has a ton of followers, and, you know, we’ve heard them mention our brand name before, so that’s good.” But you have to understand if the person is a right fit for whatever it is we’re trying to do or our audience. I can be a total d*ckhead who just happened to have a lot of followers and I’m proud of it, doesn’t mean I want to work with them.

Noah’s comments highlight how people are still needed to make sense of the social analytics data, but more complex tools can better identify influencers. In network

\(^{33}\) In an academic paper, Rao, Spasojevic, Li, and Dsouza (2015) outline how Klout scores are calculated.
analysis terms, the social influence metrics rely heavily on an individual’s centrality: “A measure of a node’s status is determined both by its number of direct connections, as well as how well connected its contacts are in turn” (Kane et al., 2014, p. 38); thus status is a reflection of who one is connected to (Bonacich, 1987). Social influence metrics seek to quantify an individual’s social capital. The link to social capital is made explicit by Wahooly—an influencer marketing platform now known as Chasm.io—in their promotional material that boasts, “Invest your social capital” (Holmes, 2012). Social media analytics not only measure what ties are activated, but also how influential the ties’ networks are, and more recently the precise composition of the network.

Accordingly, social media analytics can be used to measure the value of an individual’s community and then quantify the community. As a signal of social capital, a social influence metric is a resource that can be transformed into other types of capital. In the following section, I identify how social capital can be translated into “real” benefits, which shapes the understanding and meaning of community. I use social capital as a framing tool to understand how community is quantified and commodified. I argue that various social and technological innovations have afforded a new signal of social capital, which is based on one’s quantified network on social media.

7.4 Quantification of Community

I propose a move away from arguments of community lost, saved, or liberated, to consider how community has been quantified. People can receive benefits because of their social media network, rather than merely through their network; people are able to exchange their social capital for economic capital (i.e., money). Use of social media
analytics has real consequences for organizations and individuals, but more importantly, community. It is thus important to reflect upon the impact of the quantification and commodification of community, and to ask, what is the impact of viewing one’s community as something that can be leveraged?

Quantifying the value of community by using social media analytics is not the first time that an unobservable quality is quantified. From creating popularity lists in childhood play to the academic h-index—which attempts to measure a scholar’s productivity and citation impact—quantifying value is a common practice. This is also reflected in the rise of the quantified self movement, which uses data collected from numerous apps to measure and track indicators of health and behaviour (Swan, 2013; Neff & Nafus, 2016). Prior to the development of social media analytics platforms, people on social media could only casually infer a person’s social capital by the number of followers (also known as the in-degree of the node); however, a high number of followers makes a person appear more popular, but does little to signify influence (Weng, Lim, Jiang, & He, 2010). People and companies can utilize social media analytics tools to signal their social capital and the social capital of others, and therefore their “value.”

Social media analytics tools have afforded people and companies the ability to analyze, visualize, and quantify their network in ways that are difficult, if not impossible, to do offline. Although democratization of information has broadly given people the tools necessary to analyze their own networks, this shift has implications for how people understand themselves, their community, and society more broadly. As Amira states,
“And you know the cheesy thing about what people used to say that ‘your network is your net worth.’ It is really true. It really is.”

Participants spoke of the erosion of their sense of community on social media.

Riley reflects:

When social first started, there was a lot of “nobody’s on Twitter and I can totally tweet out my favorite celebrity and they will 100% see my tweet and tweet me back and it’s so cool.” You know, and that was really neat for people to make those personal connections and I think it was what people really loved about social. And now, there’s just so much noise and you have to be a part of the noise or you’re not doing it right—kind of thing, right? I think we may sort of see that cycle down a little bit—I’m hoping, because I think it’s probably far more valuable to people if it gets back into those sort of real interactions.

Riley explains that people do not use social media in the ways that people used to when the social media community was smaller. A golden age of communication, pre-internet, is popularly romanticized, which similarly reflects the romanticization of a golden age of social media. While this mirrors the lamenting of the loss of community offline, the purported loss of community online occurred in a much more condensed time period—over a few years rather than a few decades. Riley reflects on the social media community and says, “I miss it.” Sabrina seeks to describe the changes:

The idea of conversations via Twitter just doesn’t exist…it just isn’t a reality, which is good and bad for a lot of different reasons. Bad because Twitter really got it started by having people use it as a way of microblogging and communicating with one another and you didn’t have to be in the same room. Bad—so that’s kind of the sad part about it all—but the good part is anyone who works for a brand, you get a lot of people seeing what you want and them to see
sometimes, sometimes not. And it’s free…It’s such a brand takeover—just like most things though. Brands ruin half of the good things on social—if not more.

Sabrina explains that brands have co-opted social media, a place she perceived as a community space. Beyond the infiltration of brands, the influence of corporate logic exists where each person is a brand and their community is a resource that can be leveraged. As a result, the types of encounters are impacted. If one’s social media community is seen as a commodity, then one needs to hustle to continually prove one’s value and grow one’s community.

7.5 Social Influence as a Signal of Social Capital

Social capital has long been an area of interest for network researchers (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 1995) with definitions of social capital debated. Coleman (1988) describes how “social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (p. 98). Bourdieu (1986) describes social capital as the connections by which a person gains access to resources; people mobilize their connections to gain access to the resources of other social actors in their network (Ellison, Gray, Vitak, Lampe, & Fiore, 2013). Similarly, David DeAndrea et al. (2012) explain social capital as the social resources accrued through a person’s relationships within their network.\(^3\) In understanding networks online, it is useful to adopt Bonnie Erickson’s (2001) broad definition of social capital as the “useful aspects of social networks” (p. 127). Social capital can be

\(^{3}\) The precise meaning of the term “relationship” has changed as face-to-face is not a prerequisite for a relationship to emerge, exist, or flourish.
transformed into other forms of capital. Capital is an “investment of resources with expected returns in the marketplace,” where resources are valued goods in a society (Lin, 2001, p. 3).

Previous research on social capital has uncovered the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), the size of personal networks (Killworth et al., 1990), the sharing of job information (Marin, 2012), and so forth. However, people have traditionally not been equipped with the skills or tools necessary to understand their own networks. In 1976, Peter Killworth and H. Russell Bernard wrote, “One conclusion stands out from our data: people simply do not know, with any degree of accuracy, with whom they communicate” (p. 283). However, this is changing with social media and social media analytics tools. For the first time, typical social media users are able to articulate and understand their own online networks using social media analytics in ways that were previously impossible. Social media analytics tools afford people the ability to understand how (well) they are connected, how (well) others are connected, and people’s social capital online. Lin (2001) states: “What is the implication of cyberspace and cybernetwork growth for the studies of social networks and social capital? The short answer is: incredible” (p. 214). Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004) similarly address how the internet has shaped social capital. An updated question would ask: How does the use of social media analytics tools change an individual’s perceived and actual social capital? What is the impact on community?

In addition to getting things through one’s network, one gets things because of one’s network. Erickson (2001) discusses how people get hired for their social networks and analyzes the role that social capital plays as a job qualification: “Employers value
potential employees with social capital because employers can convert individual social
capital into organizational social capital by hiring the individual and mobilizing his or
her contacts for organizational goals” (p. 127). Previous work has focused on “hiring
through networks, not hiring for networks” (Erickson, 2001, p. 128). While Erickson
(2001) breaks from this focus, his analysis is limited to offline networks and job hiring;
the argument should be extended to apply to online networks with social media.

Although that there has been “a revolutionary rise of social capital” online (Lin,
2001, p. 215), an understanding of social capital is complicated when the locale is shifted
online. How people measure, gain, maintain, and lose social capital continues to evolve.
Research indicates that internet use is correlated with increased social capital, rather than
diminishing or transforming it; accordingly, conventional ways of measuring social
capital will change given the influence of the internet (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004).

Even though social capital is exceedingly difficult to measure (Ellison, Steinfield,
& Lampe, 2010), it is possible to look at the signals of social capital, where a signal
refers to “any observable indicator of an (unobservable) quality” (Podolny, 2005, p. 23).
Therefore, rather than thinking of social media analytics as being equated to social
capital, social media analytics is used to signal social capital.

Social media analytics reflect and impact perceived social capital, which,
consequently leads to further capital. Online-to-offline and offline-to-online relationships
should be viewed as co-existing and complementary, rather than mutually exclusive
(Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). The line between online social influence and
offline social capital is blurred as activities online have impact offline. As Schaefer
(2012) explains in his popular press book, Return On Influence:
We are at the dawn of the creation of a new social media caste system
determined by how and when you tweet, connect, share, and comment.
The haves may score better jobs, higher social status, even better luck on
the dating scene. (p. xvii)

Using social media analytics tools to quantify people’s community warrants skepticism.
Just as an SAT score is a signal of intelligence—used for entrance requirements in a
competitive U.S. undergraduate milieu—measuring community using social media
analytics tools can be a signal of social capital, and both can be manipulated. These
measures can be used as a starting point to assess influence, but they do not suffice as a
stand-alone measurement. Social influence metrics can be used as a signal of social
capital. Social capital research has typically focused on how people can achieve
something of value through their network, rather than analyzing the value of the network.
The changing nature of social capital online means that a person’s online network is a
resource in and of itself in both online and offline environments. In an age of social
media, one’s community becomes an asset and resource that can be leveraged,
 commodified, and sold.

People who learn to fit within the neatly prescribed set of social norms are
promised financial and social benefits as they capitalize on their network. The following
section identifies three ways in which social capital, as identified by social influence
metrics, is translated into further capital. People with high social influence: (1) are given
preferential treatment from brands and their ties, (2) receive preferential attachment, and
(3) are hired for their network. Previous research often failed to recognize that while
influencers garner attention, attention is a segue to other forms of capital (Citton, 2017).
As such, people are incentivized to strategically cultivate and grow their network, which
has implications for an understanding of community. The community quantified argument shows that people benefit because of their social network, rather than just through their social network.

7.5.1 Preferential Attachment

People who have high social influence accrue further social capital by virtue of their location in the network as influential. The “Matthew Effect” refers to the phenomenon whereby high-status actors accumulate more recognition and benefits over time than a low-status actor (Merton, 1968). The term originates from the Gospel of Matthew that states, “For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath” (13:12) (as cited in Rigney, 2010, p. 1). Preferential attachment refers to the increased probability of an individual forming a tie with a more central and high-status person (Maoz, 2012).

Applied to social media, individuals with high social influence scores—herein referred to as influencers—accrue more followers because they are deemed to have credibility and character (Edwards et al., 2013). For example, social media analytics tools, like Tweepi, allow users to sort people by Klout score in order to determine who to follow or unfollow. As a result, there is an intrinsic valourization of the social influence metrics: a self-perpetuating cycle occurs whereby a person with a higher score accrues more followers and interactions, which then correlates to a higher social influence.

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35 Merton (1968) found that a scholarly article written by a high-status author would result in more people reading and citing the paper, than if a low-status author wrote the article.

36 Influencers are identified beyond the number of ties, but the overarching principle applies.
Amira describes how preferential attachment transpires on social media—even when the system is gamed by purchasing followers on social media: “You start an account and bought a lot of followers and it’s like people wanted to automatically start following that account. People want to know why that person is so popular and why he’s an influencer.” Social influence metrics afford people the ability to instrumentally identify and connect with people who have a higher social influence. The effect may be amplified online as an individual can only rely on mediated signals to evaluate others’ networks—even if the followers are faked, as Amira describes. Social media analytics tools are used in an attempt to remove the uncertainty of understanding how people are connected. An individual’s high social influence score translates into preferential attachment from their network and further boosts social capital.

### 7.5.2 Preferential Treatment

In addition to preferential attachment, people with high social capital receive disproportionate preferential treatment—meaning given advantage or preference—by both organizations and their network. Social capital produces preferential treatment beyond what would typically be expected in an exchange (Robinson, Schmid, & Siles, 2002). For example, an organization may receive thousands of notifications and mentions a day, and it may be unlikely or impossible for a community manager to reply to each one, given limited resources. When individuals communicate with a company on social

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37 A dystopian future was shown in the television show, *Black Mirror* (Season 3, Episode 1), where every person is rated (Jones, Schur & Wright, 2016). The higher your rating the more perks one gets, but the lower the rating, the more difficult it is to survive. The episode seeks to depict how superficially we construct and present our lives online.
media—either to compliment or complain—a social media manager must assess who to respond to, which is sometimes accomplished by determining the impact an individual has when they broadcast a positive or negative experience (Poeter, 2012). Alison describes how she used to use Klout to identify who to respond to on social media based on the person’s influence: “I used to have Klout plugin thing so I could see ‘this person has a high Klout score,’ so maybe they have more influence, but I don’t use that anymore.” Similarly, a community manager can use social media analytics tools to understand who is more influential and direct their attention to those people. Despite the idealized myth that companies engage in two-way communication with all of their community members, the reality is that many companies engage in conversation with a particular type of person: one who has high social influence. By responding to people who have influence, organizations can minimize efforts and maximize impact, while being regarded as socially responsive to a larger user base.

In addition to receiving preferential treatment from organizations, influencers are more likely to receive preferential treatment from their ties. Individuals are motivated to positively engage an influencer because the name-dropping of high status people serves to impress the audience (Donath & boyd, 2004). Simply, knowing someone of importance or influence, boosts one’s own importance or influence. A prominent instance of this is when individuals publicly endorse a connection on social media for having skills or expertise in a specific area. Individuals are incentivized to link to online ties that are considered influencers because this further builds their own social capital as the goodwill accrued is a valuable resource (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Furthermore, an influencer may be motivated to reciprocate to the contributor. These types of exchange
transactions create special bonds between people (Stack, 1974). As I describe above, people with high social influence (1) receive preferential attachment, (2) are given preferential treatment, and finally, (3) are hired for their network, which I introduce in the following section.

7.5.3 Preferential Hiring

Personal and professional identities are confounded, which contributes to the view that an individual’s network is a resource in and of itself. Organizations leverage influencers for exposure in various types of relationships. By hiring an influencer as an employee, a company leverages an influencer’s social capital to benefit the company. In Erickson’s (2001) study of employee hiring, social capital was found to be an important requirement for high-level jobs due to the external communications role of high-level positions, but was found to be less important for low-level positions. The situation is shifting to also apply to lower-level positions, as people employed at all levels of the hierarchy use social media to communicate publicly.

Employees can use their personal social media to promote their employer or clients. Kat explains how she uses “#client” to disclose when her personal social media posts are affiliated with her work. In this way, her employer is able to benefit from her social network as she provides a free avenue to promote clients. Rather than a company seeking to engage in influencer collaborations (which increasingly are paid), companies hire an influencer. As these employees promote their work on social media (as I describe in Chapter 4)—often because they are proud of their work and build their personal brand—the end result is free marketing for companies. Kat explains that at her previous
agency job, they would “ask” their employees to promote their clients. She explains that her bosses would say: “We need to boost this. Everyone put this on their Facebook. Everyone put this status up. Everyone do this.” Accordingly, companies are capitalizing on their employees who are influential and have a large social network to make a profit.

Many social media managers recognized that they were hired precisely because of their network. Sabrina explains why she was hired: “I think it was a combination of knowing the right people and then also having a really solid rolodex…so being able to kind of come with names and numbers.” In her role, she manages the social media and is also responsible for organizing media events that bring social media buzz to the company. Sabrina explains that being able to casually message her influencer friends on Facebook and invite them to a work event is much easier and more successful than a blind pitch.

More explicitly, Ethan describes his job hiring process. He was freelancing on podcasts and social media campaigns for ad agencies when he came across “a retweet for an anonymous job post on Twitter looking for someone who ‘loved social’”—the post was anonymous in that it did not identify the employer. He needed the work so he applied, and after a first interview, which included a practical test of his social media acumen, he was invited for a Skype interview with the boss, which he describes:

He was a jet-set millionaire media entrepreneur hotshot kind of guy, so, the whole package. Also kind of a douchebag about a couple of things for a couple of parts. So, I was a bit nervous, obviously, because I had to answer everything. One of the questions was: “What is your Klout score?” I said, “Oh it’s like 67 or 68.” He was, “Oh, that’s quite good. How did you do that?” I’m: “I naturally did it, using Twitter organically for a long time. It just kind of happened.” And I felt like that didn’t cut it for him—the answer, so, it made me nervous.
Amira similarly describes how she has been able to leverage her network to promote her employer’s goals: “I promote a lot of my workshops through my personal network. You have community partnerships, but when the sh*t really gets done is when I reach out to my contacts there. ‘Can you please tweet this? Can you please retweet it?’ That’s only when it gets done.” Employees can, and are “encouraged,” to use their personal communities to promote events and spread their employer’s message. Companies hope to leverage the influence of their employees to be utilized for their corporate interest.

Influencers also work to promote brands in sponsored campaigns (see Chapter 6). Digital marketers and community managers understand that attention is a scarce resource and a critical part of social capital (Coleman, 1988). People only see a fraction of the content shared online due to the rapid flow of information. As a result, attention is a commodity and a valuable resource for organizations. As Lin (2001) describes, “Public recognition in a mass society makes recognition a public good, just as money is” (p. 151–152). Brands capitalize and piggyback on an influencer’s ability to garner attention from their network. In these collaborations, an influencer may not work for the company in the traditional sense, but rather act as an “arms-length” affiliation to promote the company. For example, influencers engage in unofficial brand endorsements when a company sends a free product in an attempt to get the person to blog/tweet/endorse the product and, consequently, influence their network’s opinions.

As I describe earlier in the chapter, embedded in various social media analytics platforms are tools that allow for the easy identification of influencers. Based on a company’s target demographic, these companies are able to identify specific influencers. Klout, for example, established Klout Perks; perks ranged from free business cards to
free airplane flights—depending on an individual’s social influence. The outcome is similar whether a company uses a third-party social media analytics tool to identify influencers, or a company works directly with an influencer; however, the relationship between the company and the influencer is often weaker when there is an intermediary. Companies hire influencers as employees and as sponsored collaborators because companies recognize that influencers have the ability to garner attention and impact their network. Companies have leveraged this through job hiring, formal sponsorships, and collaborations, which provides evidence that people are often hired because of their network.

Social media analytics tools are not only used to reward individuals, but they have also been used to punish individuals for having (perceived) low social capital. As Ethan described earlier, in extreme cases, job candidates are rejected for a job because of a low social influence score (Stevenson, 2012). Accordingly, the tool that a social media manager uses to do their job is the same tool that can be used as a disciplinary tool if numbers are not met. In this way, metrics are a modern day tool to measure productivity, efficiency, and community, but it can come back to haunt the worker as a new form of workplace surveillance.

As evidenced, people with high influence receive preferential attachment, preferential treatment, and successful job hiring. Accordingly, many participants reflected the desire, importance, and increasing imperative to continually work to grow their community, which is evidenced in the culture of busyness and perpetual hustle that people experience.
7.6 Busyness, Hustle, and FOMO

Social media requires time. Dedicated and committed time is needed to develop a network and cultivate influence on social media. In my research, time was a repeated thematic with influence and social media: maximizing time, not enough time, wasting time, all the time, making time, investing time, down time, labouring time, full-time, part-time, and timing. Beyond being always connected to one’s technology, I argue that the always-on also extends to the desire or necessity to keep up and continually build one’s personal brand. In media scholarship, “always-on” refers to the constant connectivity of new and mobile technology. boyd (2012) describes the always-on relationship to technology: “It’s no longer about on or off really. It’s about living in a world where being networked to people and information wherever and whenever you need it is just assumed. I may not be always-on the Internet as we think of it colloquially, but I am always connected to the network” (p. 71–72). In their study of young people and mobile phones, André Caron and Letizia Caronia (2007), similarly refer to the “on generation.” The combination of personal branding and the quantification of community necessitates an always-on of the self—in the dramaturgical sense—for one’s community. Alison shares her compulsion to keep up online:

Making a personal brand for yourself is freaking huge because if you invest time into creating a personal brand for yourself—everybody knows who you are, it’s—and that’s why when I was like, “Oh I have to tweet from my personal account” it’s just because I have to keep that up. I can’t just let that go.

Sabrina similarly describes the incessant need to keep up offline: “I don’t love to go to industry parties, but I go to the ones that I feel I need to go to because they kind of keep
you on the pulse of what’s going on or keep at least your face out there.” The fear of missing out—or FOMO—is often passed off in popular culture as a juvenile desire of social media addicted kids. FOMO refers to “the uneasy and sometimes all-consuming feeling that you’re missing out – that your peers are doing, in the know about, or in possession of more or something better than you” (Przybyski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013, p. 1842). FOMO has become so prevalent that the word entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013 (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). Keeping yourself “out there” is then important because of the value of one’s community; for example, the uncertainty of when one is going to need to rely on one’s network for employment. In this way, FOMO is also about missing opportunities to network, in order to build one’s online community, and make the right connections that will lead to the next—or first—step in one’s career.

Busyness is an epidemic; busyness is a social construct (Gershuny, 2005; Shulte, 2014). The contemporary pleasantries of “How are you?” invites a proclamation of busyness: “I’m busy.” For social media managers, the declaration of busyness is also about declaring one’s worth to the community; the multiple side freelance jobs and the added pressure of personal branding results in more work for an individual. To be busy is to be needed and to reassert one’s value as an employee and connection. A culture of busyness is valourized in the digital economy. Maria states, “I hustled and hustled.” Similarly, Noah states:

Yeah, I mean, yes, it definitely helps when you’re hustling, and I mean there’s an aspect to it that’s just social—I enjoy being a social person, and sometimes I still go to these things that sort of seem social media-y, and I think it’s also just expanded, too; there’s a good start-up scene in the city.
Start-up people are very into the social media scene, as well, so it’s like: on Thursdays, start-up open house, you know? And true that I’m going to go around and I’m going to see a ton of people who I know and they’re all interested in going and checking this out, you know? I definitely think that there’s still a scene going on, and it’s just that I’ve grown older and my values of what’s really important to me have changed. Before, I used to be: “I need to go out, I need to be seen as much as possible” and now I don’t care about that as much anymore.

Noah speaks to the “compulsory sociality” (Gregg, 2010) whereby the value of socializing is not in its pleasure, but is a necessary means to attain work in the future (Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2002; Ursell, 2000). The struggle to keep up both online and offline results in time labouring on one’s personal brand and building one’s community.

Entrepreneurial labour does not only exist at start-ups; each individual is a small business owner of the self (Marwick, 2013; Neff, 2012). Everyone is being positioned as an entrepreneur due to the troubling and competitive labour market. Personal branding, then, is not merely about showcasing oneself, but also building one’s value by engaging in speaking opportunities, self-learning new skills, and being viewed as an influencer (see Chapter 6); these are strategies used as a conduit to personal and professional success. Riley explains that working on one’s personal brand has a real payoff:

So you start with a smaller company and a smaller role, and then you build your personal brand and jump to a bigger company. I see people—professionally I guess—building professional profiles for their own personal brand and building personal brands as a way of sort of leveraging that into getting better roles for themselves elsewhere, because they think
that it’s enough hell-slog to try and get a department built around something that is difficult to communicate.

Starting from the bottom or “paying ones dues” (Shade & Jacobson, 2015) is reflected in the attempt to build oneself and one’s community. Rizal explains that hustling sometimes has a negative connotation, or a “stinginess,” but he identifies hustling in a more positive way. Riley explains the hustling of personal branding as a strategy for career growth:

I would say I would [work] towards that potentially to a certain extent. I know some of the people in my role, and certainly some of the others that I’ve connected with, do have their own website, have their own blog, do speaking engagements—that kind of thing. That may be something that would be interesting to pursue and I know that that’s what a lot of people are doing to get ahead in their professional development and be seen as more of a higher-level position rather than a frontline role…I think it’s a way of demonstrating skill level, or at least that seems to be the strategy to exist in a public space in a way that allows an employer to look at you and say, “Oh this person is at a higher level, right?” As opposed to being like, “Oh you know, this is a glorified receptionist that—you know—handles our social media.”

For most participants, developing a successful personal brand is specifically a strategy towards upward mobility; Hearn (2008) asserts, “The function of the branded self is purely rhetorical; its goal is to produce cultural value, and, potentially, material profit” (p. 198). Goffman (1959) similarly states, “Commonly we find that upward mobility involves the presentation of proper performances and that efforts to move upwards and

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38 Riley’s declaration of a “glorified receptionist” points to the cultural devaluation and feminization of social media work.
efforts to keep from moving downward are expressed in terms of sacrifices made for the maintenance of the front” (p. 36). With regards to personal branding, my participants echoed this; as Evelyn remarks, “It’s sort of your living portfolio.” Similarly, Liam remarks, “I wanted to be more marketable and have varied experience going into future jobs.”

For many participants, having social media influence was an opportunity to get hired for their first job and positioned in their careers; however, the allure often faded. Sabrina, a casual influencer, explains, “I don’t think I’ve posted on my blog for almost a year. I don’t have time, and I don’t want to compete with the Jennies and the Deannas and Skylers and Camilles and Marlas of the world anymore because I don’t have time to dedicate to it, so I would rather just not have it at all.” Sabrina further explains the immense and laborious time commitment of working at growing her influence and building her network. Other social media managers spoke of getting tired of the social media scene, the parties, and the brand sponsorships. They reflected that their priorities changed over time, but more importantly, the work to grow their network was simply not rewarded. As I describe in Chapter 5, they individualized and personalized their failures, rather than recognized the larger societal issues at play. The selfies, life-logging, and community building on social media represent a body in motion—movement. The perpetual need to hustle to build oneself and community is a consequence of the quantification of community.

7.7 Linking

Considering the value and quantification of community, my participants spoke about the
necessity to perpetually work at increasing their following, community, and network.

Linking one’s social media accounts emerged as a strategic practice throughout discussions of community, influence, and personal branding. For social media managers, linking is key to their work—both professionally and personally. Social media managers work with web links to promote content for their employer; they serve as a link between the community and their employer; they identify influencers who can use branded hyperlinks; and they work to build their own personal community by linking their social media platforms together. In this way, linking moves from the micro to macro, which influences an understanding of community.

Linking is also a strategy to manufacture community across platforms. At the most simplistic level, linking an individual’s various social media profiles together serves as a strategy to provide a holistic view of a person. The link symbolically, and in reality, ties together an individual’s various social media accounts. People cross-link and promote their various social media profiles in an attempt to further gain followers and build a community on each platform. This is particularly important when various platforms become obsolete (see Chapter 6). Built into the technical infrastructure, public-facing social media analytics platforms, like Klout, encourage people to consolidate and link various online social media accounts—including Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, Foursquare, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, Blogger, Wordpress, Last.fm, Flickr, and Bing—in order to improve their influence score. The more platforms that are linked to a profile, the more the algorithm can capture the full range of one’s data—and supposed influence. Needless to say, this also gives companies increased access to one’s valuable data; for example, linking your Facebook profile gives Klout access to one’s public
profile, email address, timeline posts, birthday, work history, education history, current city, photos and likes, which can be further monetized by the company by using or selling one’s data.

Linking multiple social network sites can also occur through hyperlinks or social media aggregation. Personal websites afford users the ability to post links to their other online accounts. Free personal web hosting services, such as about.me, provide an easy-to-use one-page website that links to other social media using the social media icons. Social network aggregators, such as Rebelmouse, are sites that automatically update one’s posts from multiple social media platforms to a single online location. Most social media platforms encourage individuals to input information to link to their other social profiles. Therefore, it is common for people to have links between their various social media and personal websites (Deckers & Lacy, 2013). The linking is aligned with personal branding, which is predicated on public and identifiable online activities. Also serving as a impetus for the “future audience” (as I discuss in Chapter 5), the linking of online sites amalgamates information with the purpose of promoting the individual’s digital portfolio or brand.

There are pertinent privacy implications for individuals as social media analytics tools enable users to view a quantified signal of social capital for anyone with a public social media account. Every person with a public Twitter account is automatically assigned a public social influence score and there are countless other tools that are commercially available. Social influence metrics can create anxieties or shame as the measure can be used as a comparison and to remind individuals who they could or should be (Deuze, 2012). People develop an understanding of their social position based on a
“reference group” or the position of others (Cattell, 2001, p. 1503). If available, the reference group on social influence platforms would be perceived as the average score. On Klout, the average score is supposedly 40 (“FAQ,” 2013); however the average does little to explain the distribution or one’s location in the network. Accordingly, an individual needs to link their social media profiles to manufacture the perception and reality of influence and community.

In an attempt to further link various digital profiles together, interview participants identified the importance of having one social media handle that is used across platforms in order to easily link one’s digital footprint together and also grow one’s community cross-platform. A social handle is a username that serves as a unique identifier. Handles can include a person’s name or a branded username that does not include a person’s real name; the key is that the handle identifies an individual. The handle links the social profiles together and serves as an identity marker to build one’s personal brand.

Amira explained how she initially decided on her online handle: “[I] spoke to some of my friends and they were like, ‘That’s a good marketable Twitter handle’ and so I did that and [I] also bought the domain that night. So everything online that’s @AmirasUsername is me.” The identity marker of the handle is not an anonymous pseudonym, but often an attempt to clearly signify an individual across platforms. Noah similarly explains:

When I was earlier in my career, I was like, “I need to have my personal brand?” I think it’s sort of something that happened. I go out places and people would yell across the bar—they’d be like: “Yo, @NoahsUsername.” They don’t know my real name; they know my
Twitter name. So, it technically has become a brand that people recognize. Was it fully intentional? No. Partially. Maybe a little bit. It’s cool when people recognize, “Oh, @NoahsUsername,” so I’ve taken that name across all of my social channels, or wherever I can, and if I can’t, I usually don’t use that network.

As evidenced by Amira and Noah’s statements, the social media handle is crucially important for one’s professional and personal identity. My experiences echoed this in the social media scene as I was frequently introduced by my Twitter handle @jacobsonjenna. It is a widely recognized best practice to use one’s real name as a social media handle, as opposed to a more generic or indirect pseudonym. This move further solidifies the link between the individual and the handle, by removing the ambiguity of a pseudonym.

By linking an individual’s various social profiles together via a simple social media handle, the multiple stages, to use Goffman’s terms, are combined and collapsed. Problematically, the linked profile does not allow for audience segregation as the various stages are consolidated into a single stage. Audience segregation is a crucial part of the impression management that allows a person to present different identities to different groups; it also prevents the “awkwardness” (Leary, 1996, p. 109) of presenting different images of oneself to different audiences. In offline interactions, the process of audience segregation is simpler because people choose their offline setting, which provides information about the type of performance that is required. An individual can present one version of themself hanging out with friends, and then present a more professional image at work. In offline spaces, it is possible to separate one’s social life, from work life, from family life, and so forth. People employ various identities based on their audience; however, a person promoting with a linked personal brand online is forced into one
publicly accessible and acceptable identity.

As Marwick and boyd (2010) describe, social media may create “a lowest-common denominator effect, as individuals only post things they believe their broadest group of acquaintances will find non-offensive” (p. 122). The lowest common denominator effect results in flattening out complexities or inconsistencies in one’s personal brand and presenting a stylized identity. However, as a result of linking one’s social media profiles together, the newest lowest common denominator is extended cross-platform. Rather than presenting information that is merely “non-offensive,” the linking of social media platforms means that the material posted will need to foster positive impressions of the self to all of one’s diverse networks, communities, and the future audience (see Chapter 5.3).

As I describe above, there are perceived, and real, benefits of having a large community. People use linking as a strategy to cultivate and quantitatively grow their community; however, the linked identity forces the individual to perform for all imagined and future audiences (see Chapter 5), rather than multiple targeted audiences. As a result, various parts of a person’s identity need to be filtered in favour of an identity that would be most acceptable to all communities in order to retain the network.

7.8 Conclusion

In an age of social media, influencers, and personal branding, what is the impact of social media on community? Community has been measured, quantified, and sold. In this chapter, I outline three approaches to understanding community: community lost, community saved, and community liberated. Using social capital as a lens to view and
understand social media analytics—specifically social influence measures—I introduce community quantified to understand the impact of social media analytics and personal branding on community. Beyond achieving something of value through one’s social network, I identify how people benefit because of their network or community. The community quantified argument demonstrates a more managerial approach to the cultivation of community online. This chapter speaks to the immense amount of work that one needs to do to get and keep work in the social media industries. The hustle not only represents the neoliberal logic of perpetual work and self-improvement, but also the internalized fear of being jobless, penniless, and hopeless.

Importantly, what are the social consequences of counting, measuring, and quantifying one’s community? By measuring, are we deciding what counts and what does not count? What is visible and what is invisible? Employing social media analytics tools to measure community has shifted the age-old adage, “It’s not what you know, but who you know” to “It’s not what you know, but who knows you and who you engage.” In this chapter, I have contended that personal branding should not be regarded as an intrinsically negative practice; rather, the necessity of personal branding has problematic implications for individual’s understanding of community. People have to embrace personal branding due to the increased corporatization, job insecurity, and precarious economic times. People use personal branding and employ strategies to grow their network in attempt to regain control of their lives. As a consequence, rather than recognize the larger systemic problems of contemporary capitalism, people individualize their struggles. What is at stake is that one’s personal communities come to be perceived as a resource that can be mined.
Conclusion: The Future of Living and Working in the Social Media Industries

8.1 Introduction

The integration of social media strategies in branding and corporate strategizing has become commonplace as companies recognize the power of using social media for 21st century communications. Beyond a snapshot in time, my dissertation serves as a foray into the social media industries. I have proposed using the term “social media industries” to critically situate and analyze the distinct work performed by those who work with social media. I have also extended the theorization of the cultural industries to include the social media industries because they are involved in the production of knowledge; the circulation of products (social media) impacts people’s understanding of the world (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; McKercher & Mosco, 2008). The social media industries are comprised of multiple professions that will continue to evolve as new tools and technologies emerge that necessitate the segmentation and development of new job
categories. As reflected in this dissertation, the statement “I work in social” incorporates newly emerged jobs loosely identified by their link to social media.

With the adoption of social media in corporate life, social media management has developed as a career path. However, while social media management is growing as a field and as an emerging profession, to date, there is limited research that examines social media or community management as an occupation in information and communication studies. Using observations in the Toronto social media scene and interviews with community managers, in this dissertation, I peeled back the shiny layers of social media to break the illusion and uncover the reality of social media production. I have explored community management as an emerging form of new media production and work, and proposed that the use of “cool” job titles serves an insidious role of appeasing workers, whose identity is inextricably linked with being a worker, rather than an increase in pay or job security. I have further argued that there is an emerging feminization of social media management, which has negative implications for the valuation of the profession. The feminization of the work has negative repercussions for both men and women working in the industry, including lower wages, devalued status, increased precarity, and a lack of labour mobility. I have identified the always-on-the-job-market mentality as even those with full-time jobs find it necessary to labour at curating a calculated personal brand for a future professional audience. Young adults have learned the acceptable strategies of personal branding and subscribe to the belief that they need to engage—or will fall behind others—and that they will one day be rewarded financially or socially; influencers, and the rise of casual influencers, serve as extreme cases of this.
The voices highlighted in this research exist at the intersection of social media users, social media consumers, social media professionals, and social media influencers. Considering that these social media professionals engage with their target community or customers using social media, they offered a unique perspective to understand social media interactions and how people are using social media as part of their lived professional experiences. While the research is focused on those who “work in social,” the research findings can be extended to provide a lens through which to understand work in the social media industries and personal branding in a shifting social media landscape. As Sabrina describes, “It’s not how one company organizes and designs their social media strategy, but how as an industry and society we are leveraging social media and the implications of this.”

This form of social media work I discuss in this dissertation may represent an embodiment of the future of work in other creative industries. Some of these trends and practices may not yet be apparent in other industries; as Gill (2002) argues, experiences of new media workers have come to represent the future of work. The social media scene and community managers are at the forefront of technology; the trends and working practices may extend to other industries. Indeed, investigating the nature of new media work through social media management can facilitate an understanding of the future shaping of work, including the difficulties of finding, securing, and maintaining work.

An attempt to advocate for solutions to improve the current situation is extremely complicated because of the larger socio-economic context. The problems articulated in this dissertation are intermingled in a complex contemporary capitalist system that has fostered increased corporatization, job insecurity, and precarious economic times. New
forms of work in the social media industries will continue to emerge as companies seek to capitalize on new technologies and communities for profit, and people will continue to tirelessly labour to gain meaningful and equitable employment in social media.

With the rise of influencers and casual influencers, at the foundational level, there needs to be improved policies of disclosure and implementation of these policies. New laws could be introduced that require companies to provide explicit directions to influencers on how to disclose the sponsorship. Influencers and casual influencers also need to learn the ethics and laws of disclosure. There is already a strong push towards “authenticity” on social media, and as such influencers could be encouraged to disclose their material connection with a company, brand, or product in ways that would be considered appropriate by their audience. The disclosure of sponsorship is a first step in raising the public’s awareness of the practice of influencer marketing; however, influencer disclosure is by no means sufficient alone. Media literacy is critically needed to teach people the skills to understand, recognize, and critically evaluate social media posts as advertising—even when it is not disclosed. In an increasingly complex social media system, people need to be informed in order to make educated decisions. With new social media platforms and digital technologies in an increasingly brand-saturated society, challenges will continue to emerge.

8.2 Blurred Boundaries: The Personal is Professional

My research uncovered and illuminated the inherent binaries and contradictions within the social media scene and the social media industries: the double labour of an individual working on personal branding as an integral aspect of being an employee; the conflation
of the online and the offline; the exaggeration of positivity and authenticity in personal branding; and the visibility of the influencer and the invisibility of various forms of precarious work inherent in social media work.

The research explored the impact of living and working in a social media age. We have entered into a commercialized and promotional culture where the boundaries between what constitutes advertising and non-commercial promotion, work and leisure, and the personal and professional are rapidly evolving and blurring. On social media, typical users are developing content that has the aesthetic of ad content, while advertising is seeping into—what was previously considered—non-commercial places. This is highlighted with the emergence of influencers and casual influencers, making it difficult to identify and problematize influencer engagements. The impact of this convergence is evidenced in the erasure of professional and personal boundaries, and what is at stake is a deepening commodification of social media and private lives.

Previous research has pointed to the merging of the public and private, and work and family (Agger, 2016; Caron & Caronia, 2007). Research has identified the “presence bleed” where work encroaches on employees’ personal lives (Gregg, 2011). Brigid Schulte (2014) explored the current busyness culture and cites psychologist Erik Erikson who identified that the three necessary areas for the “Good Life” are work, love, and play. Based on my research, all three of these areas are combined in complex ways: for example, an employee expresses their love for their job on their personal social media account. Jill explains, “I think our professional and personal lives will continue to blend. People bring their personal brand to work; people talk about work on social media.” In
this dissertation, I have evidenced what this boundary collapse, of the personal and professional, means in practice.

Digital and mobile technologies have afforded individuals the ability to work anywhere by loosening the physical barriers between work time and home time: one can bring work home and bring home to work. My participants recognized that the personal and professional are not separate spheres, but rather that they are intermixed in specific ways. The flexibility that is often touted in more entrepreneurial or freelance work often results in employees being overworked. Sabrina remarks, “All those things always correlate, but it’s because I never leave work at work and personal at personal because my life is constantly cycling between both and I guess maybe that is because I have this flexible work schedule and I don’t just go in from 9 to 5 and get to leave work.” The “flexibility” that comes with many jobs in the creative industries, such as working from home or working variable hours, further subsumes the personal in favour of the professional.

There is also widespread belief that life moves faster due to our digital technologies (Wajcman, 2014). The blurring between the personal and professional can be seen in relation to time—spending time doing work when at home, and spending time at work doing personal tasks. In industry and popular discourse, people speak of work-life balance (Perrons, 2003), but my participants rather discussed trying to keep up with the demands of their work and personal branding. Work-life balance is an oxymoron as life invades work and work invades life; however, just because a blurring is occurring does not mean that this is happening equally. Rather, work invades life to the extent that life itself becomes work. Open-office workspaces look like coffee shops, and coffee
shops look more like workspaces with freelancers working away at laptops. It may become more difficult for workers to problematize this deep convergence as many contemporary workplaces offer perks, such as paid “playtime” where employees have free time in the workday to encourage creative thinking with the goal of increased employee productivity and happiness (Eichberger, 2017; Ross, 2004). When work no longer only looks like “work,” there is an obscuring of what the leisure or personal time looks like. In this way, what has emerged is a liminal space where the personal and professional collide as does the commercial and non-commercial.

While I concur that a strong presence bleed increasingly occurs in work practices, the argument can be extended to thinking about personal and professional identities. This has implications not just for what we do in practice and how we spend our time, but who we are as individuals—our brand. Brooke explains, “I think more and more that they’re [personal and professional] blending. I tried to keep them separate, but some things overlap…There’s no distinguishing. Everything’s kind of blurred into one, or interwoven with the other. I think that it’s going to become harder.” This blurring, blending, and engulfing of the personal by the professional has problematic consequences for workers who are struggling to develop boundaries or preserve a personal space in their lives that is free from work or commercialization.

This research has examined social media work and evaluated the use of social media as a tool of personal branding. Community managers provide a lens through which to view and understand the emerging trend of personal branding because of the imperative for them to engage in personal branding, and because their work consists of engaging and observing people on social media. The spread of personal branding is a
vicious cycle: the existence and popularity of personal branding spawns further personal branding. In this way, personal branding is an emerging norm, which has continued to grow in prominence and will also evolve over time.

Personal branding is not an intrinsically negative practice, but is operating in times of contemporary corporatization, job insecurity, and economic uncertainty. My participants evidenced the need to hustle to survive: be entrepreneurial, competitive, persistent, and constantly working. The positive “love your job” sentiment and promotion of one’s employer, I believe, will continue to proliferate across the cultural industries and beyond into other professions. Selling yourself—and your employer—becomes a necessary way of life, until you literally sell yourself and your community of followers to others; the objectification of the individual and the personification of organizations may proliferate in the future.

Personal branding is more than just the external wrapper of identity presentation; personal branding has deeper implications for individuals’ practices. As discussed previously, in its current manifestation, personal branding can benefit individuals, but largely benefits corporations and social media platforms. While it is true that personal branding is about identity packaging or presentation, personal branding also goes deeper than a superficial layer. Packaging would suggest that only the outside presentation is impacted; however, the commonly accepted personal branding strategies seek to align an individual’s practices with their personal brand. As a result, the development and practice of personal branding changes an individual’s behaviours, actions, and perceptions of self and community that is of disproportionate benefit to corporations.
My research has analyzed the relationship between social capital and personal branding. Beyond the creation of the self, online interactions can generate tremendous capital. In addition to getting things through one’s network, one gets things because of one’s network, which impacts an understanding of community, as communities become a resource to be capitalized on for personal gain. I have introduced “the future audience” which identifies how people curate their social media to target future audiences—both unknown and unanticipated.

Importantly, behind the forced smiles and positivity of personal branding is an individual hustling to make it in a turbulent labour market. Despite these conditions, as my participants revealed, they are pushing themselves to do more, work more, and network more. In contrast to the lazy and entitled millennial stereotype (Stein, 2013), the opposite may be true: young people are entering into a relentlessly competitive labour market and are doing whatever is necessary to achieve success in their careers and lives. As Rizal explains, “I’m already happy, but obviously, with my personal branding, the consulting and everything, it’s just been crazy. It’s been awesome.” The hustle represents the contemporary internalized fear of being unemployed and unable to survive. Rather than dismiss these personal branding activities on social media as narcissistic or merely attention seeking, there needs to be a recognition of the socio-economic factors that have made personal branding necessary.

The prevailing ethic of a positive, stable, and simple personal brand transforms the relationship between individuals, society, and the market. It reconfigures the social contract so that an individual is not a subject, but an object; an individual who is eager for opportunities for exposure, perpetually available for sale or hire, while maintaining
positivity at all costs. Young people are learning and internalizing what is expected of them to be positioned in the marketplace for a job. As Tracey Bowen (2016) states, “Learning to become a professional means identifying and adopting particular gestures, behaviors, values and attitudes that enable one to be seen as part of a particular social group” (p. 400). Significantly, in an age of social media, young people learn to become a professional in specific ways: part of the branding process involves positioning oneself to be marketable and gain or maintain a job.

It is important to recognize that there is nothing natural about the increasing precarity of the workforce, the always-on-the-job-market mentality, and the devaluation of some forms of work in the social media industries. Similarly, there is nothing natural about the pervasive promotional culture where we are perpetually promoting our workplace, brands, and selves to our networks. We built these technologies, workplaces, and social structures. Throughout my fieldwork and during the writing of this dissertation, I have noted the tremendous changes in social norms and social contracts. What we have come to expect, accept, and ignore rapidly changes and has real implications for our lives and livelihoods.

8.3 The Future of Social Media Work: Automated Sociality and Gig Work

Situated within the social media industries, the job titles, the tasks, the ethics of content creation, the technological tools, and the work practices of social media management are evolving. New higher education programs offering training in the social media industries are available. Educational programs in social media data analytics and social media
management have already been introduced and I anticipate that new programs will emerge as young people seek further credentialization to gain an advantage in a difficult labour market and higher education institutions seek to capitalize on this. Employers will increasingly expect and demand that young people come to the job with a high level of digital skills. Sabrina reflects on the future of work in the social media industries:

You know, me thinking 35 years out when I should be retiring—the traditional retirement age—am I going to be able to? I have no idea. Is that even going to be a thing? Is retirement really going to be something that we are able to do at that time in life? I have no idea. Things are consistently moving, but knowing that social media has changed and that landscape has changed so much from the time that I got a Twitter account to now—in seven years—I don’t know what’s coming in seven years. But I do know that the role of someone who could communicate effectively on behalf of a brand is still going to be there, which is why I feel like I’m in an okay place.

Undoubtedly, as Sabrina reflects, there will be a continued need for people to manage social media in some capacity, but the form and shape of this is unclear. As I demonstrate in Chapter 4, there is a feminization of social media management and a devaluation of this form of work. As the work is devalued by organizations, there is the risk of further outsourcing the work to contract workers or even computers. By some estimates, a significant proportion of the current workforce—47% of the total employment in the U.S.—is at risk of automation by computers (Frey & Osbourne, 2013). As the history of technological innovation illustrates, people are repeatedly distrustful and fearful—or euphorically optimistic—about the “effects” of technology. In the context of the workplace, recognizing the affordances of the technologies and how people use technologies is necessary to understand the impact and use of technologies. The concerns
over unemployment due to technological displacement continue the long history of concerns over the impact of technology in society.

What happens when sociality becomes automated and outsourced to computers? The human element of the work of social media management is already being devalued; what then are the consequences when it becomes possible to automate these processes? What happens when the face of this work is taken away? Artificial intelligence (AI) is already being used in the social media industries. Facebook has introduced AI to flag inappropriate content, which is a task currently performed by low-wage commercial content moderators (Roberts, 2016). In the 2017 Q1 Facebook Earnings meeting, CEO Mark Zuckerberg explained that it is going to take a number of years to reach the level of quality they need for AI to perform the required tasks, but confirmed that AI will do more work on the platform in the coming years (Facebook, Inc., 2017).

While it is more difficult for a machine to interact directly with a human, as is often needed in social media management, sophisticated advances are being made. A socialbot is automated software that is programmed to perform basic activities, such as tweeting, friending, liking, and carrying on conversations via a particular social media site, and is specifically designed to pass as a human by presenting a “Self” (Gehl & Bakardjieva, 2017, p. 2). Socialbots are used to make a person’s interaction with a company more conversational. The algorithms and code driving socialbots improve over time as people interact with them, and, as such, socialbots will continue to get smarter and better (Gehl & Bakardjieva, 2017), which could replace some of the work of social media managers, such as customer service.
Some jobs, such as cashiers and more recently automobile drivers, can and have already been automated by machines (Huws, 2003). The jobs in the social media industries will similarly continue to advance and be impacted—in some way—by computerization. New iterations of work may very well replace current work practices or make them obsolete. Rather than a complete takeover by technology, increased technological sophistication may create an increasingly polarized job market with a group of people conducting higher-income cognitive work and another large group of people performing low-income manual work, while eliminating the middle-income jobs (Frey & Osbourne, 2013). This could manifest in the development of select high-level positions that require expert knowledge, such as data analytics or creative strategies, whereas the social side of social media management could be left behind and further devalued.

Accordingly, future work in social media management may be marked by increasingly short-term contracts and gig labour. The gig economy, often referred to as the “sharing economy” or more recently what the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives dubbed the “on-demand service economy” (Block & Hennessy, 2017), refers to temporary “independent workers” who engage in short-term jobs. An extension of our current understanding of gig labour is needed to move from simple “click work,” to consider work that requires skilled labour and emotional labour—including social media management. Social media managers do not need to be physically located at their employers’ workplaces, as much of the work is done online and can, technically, be done anytime, anywhere. Online work platforms afford a digital marketplace where individuals have the ability to advertise their skill set and take on short-term contracts. In
2013, there were 48 million people registered on online work platforms in the world and the market is expected to grow at 33% annually (Kuek et al., 2015). By 2030, most Canadians will engage in some form of virtual work, involving short-term contract-based jobs using online technologies (Policy Horizons Canada, 2016). The future progression of work includes: Career → Full-time job → Part-time job → Contract → Project (mean $200) → Task (median $5) → Microtask (median $0.05) → Hybrid tasking (human + AI) → Fully automated (Policy Horizons Canada, 2016, p. 2). This online labour is hosted by online digital marketplaces, such as Fiverr, Mechanical Turk, and TaskRabbit, that facilitate the advertising, hiring, and payment of temporary gig workers. As people, particularly young people, struggle to survive and thrive in the creative industries, they may increasingly take on additional forms of work in a “side hustle” as reflected in the “always-on-the-job-market” mentality described in this dissertation.

With regards to the emerging work and practices of community management, there should be a move towards standardized pay and recognition of the value of social media management. Given the feminization of social media management that is already underway, improving the working conditions will be a challenge. The introduction of professional organizations or unions that could advocate for better working conditions (such as regulated hours of work) and garner respect for the profession would be welcome. Many companies foray into using social through the use of young, unpaid, social media interns as they seek to outsource their social media efforts to unpaid or underpaid young people; as such, there also needs to be a crackdown on social media

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39 The side hustle is illustrated in Uber’s advertisements that state, “Get your side hustle on” and promote Uber as a way to easily earn extra income (Greene, 2016).
internships. A cyclical problem occurs when companies are able to receive free labour and thus ascribe a low value to these work positions. There are already employment standard regulations in various provinces across Canada (such as Ontario’s Employment Standards Act) that stipulate when an internship is legally permissible, but further advocacy and reform is needed. When these internships are part of a higher education program (such as a university or college for-credit program), there needs to be sufficient resources and faculty oversight to ensure that the program is fair and provides a strong learning experience for the intern, while also reinforcing the value of social media work to companies so they hire a full-time community manager in a fair labour contract.

Although some jobs may become obsolete over time, new forms of work will continue to emerge in the social media industries. Throughout my research, I witnessed people move from social media management to a new job of influencer management or partnership management. Influencers are playing an increasingly important role in the emerging social media ecosystem. A few years ago, being an influencer was not considered a job, but today the job of influencer manager or influencer strategist has emerged. Influencer strategists research, pursue, and maintain relationships with influencers and develop an understanding of the types of stories or content that the influencer needs to convey to their audience. On the client side, influencer strategists counsel clients regarding the effective influencer campaigns that work to achieve the clients’ goals across social media and traditional channels.

While some research has looked at influencers themselves (Abidin, 2016a; Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011), I have analyzed the social media industries, and what and who lies behind the social media industries, with a focus on the
human work practices. Sabrina reflects on the uncertainty of the future of influencers: “If I were the Jennies of the world, the Deannas and the Camilles of the world [influencers], I’d be concerned where my paycheck is going to come from in five years because if you look at how it’s changed since 2010, what does 2020 look like? I don’t know.” It is important to also recognize that women dominate both social media (Perrin, 2015) and unpaid labour like unpaid internships (Perlin, 2011); parallels can be drawn between the valuations of both. Social media management is feminized in that women make up most of the workforce, but also in the gendered understanding of the skills and work. As evidenced in Chapter 4, social media management may be the newest iteration of the devaluation of women’s work—and by extension influencer work may follow this trend. While women have been drawn to the creative industries, women are also socialized into these types of positions and have been more accepting of unfair work situations (Perlin, 2011; Ross 2013).

Moving forward, the emphasis on influencer marketing should not merely be on disclosure or preventing people from being duped into buying products or services that they would not otherwise have bought. The focus on disclosure is a first step, but this focus may distract us from recognizing the problematic celebration of commodities, consumption, and capitalism. Over time, disclosure laws will make the responsibility to disclose clearer—although uncertainties may still remain with casual influencers. What will be critical is an understanding of the social and cultural concerns surrounding influencers: the social consequences of how people’s work and identities are configured and reconfigured using social media.
8.4 Future Research in the Social Media Industries

There is a growing body of research exploring the impact and implications of social media in society. Approached from various theoretical and methodological perspectives, social media continues to be an important area of study due to its growing presence and influence in everyday life. There are challenges to researching the use of, and the work in, social media as new platforms are constantly being developed, existing platforms are continuously updated, and the ways people use the technologies are evolving (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). It is difficult to draw durable boundaries because the space is rapidly changing. Rather than defining social media, this research is concerned with what social media means to a particular group of people: community managers. Social media cannot be understood in a monolithic way (Baym, 2010). An attempt to understand “internet use” is too large of a topic as affordances are specific to individual technologies (Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011). It is important to remember that “there is no everyone on the internet” (Streeter, 2011, p. 11) and not all people have similar access or experiences online.

Existing theories and methods are useful in the study of social media. However, as research in the social media industries is emergent, new theories and methods may need to be developed if the current tools do not adequately address the research questions. Because of the dynamic nature of social media, it is difficult to stake definitive claims on the social meaning of this form of computer-mediated communication on work and community. In understanding community, I mapped the community lost, community saved, and community liberated argument, and introduced the community quantified argument. As the social media landscape changes, new research questions exploring the
impact and influence of the use of social media and work in the social media industries will inevitably arise.

As the digital voice for organizations, social media managers have many more stories to tell. While recognizing the inherent difficulty of analyzing an ever-evolving field, this research has provided an in-depth examination of one form of emerging work in the social media industries: community management. A qualitative research design was embraced because this form of work was nascent and quantitative methods may not have uncovered the nuances of their work practices. As this work becomes more established over time, there will be value in quantitative research (such as a large-scale survey) to understand: the scope of work in the social media industries, the pay, and the pervasive challenges faced by workers. In addition, as this research was situated in Toronto, and as social media scenes invariably exist in most major cities, a global comparison would be interesting in order to recognize whether and how the practices and norms are similar or different in other cities. While I believe that many of the findings identified in this research will be found in other locations, local nuances may emerge that could provide further insight into these changing global dynamics.

This research has focused on highlighting the voices of those who work behind the screens in social media. Future qualitative research could also be conducted with corporations about their use and valuation of social media management, influencers, and data analytics. As this research has identified the feminization of social media management, future research could examine whether influencer work is similarly feminized. While there is some awareness that employers are turning to social media for job screening, social media data is also being used for risk management by governments.
for travel visas, by landlords for tenant applications, by banks to assess credit scores, by insurance companies to assess medical risks, and by organizations to detect mental health conditions. The continued desire for companies to capitalize on social media data to gain information for profit will mean that jobs focusing on deriving analytical insight from people’s social media data will be in demand. Companies are already harnessing social media data, and the power of social media analytics and predictive analytics is increasing. As Evelyn explains:

People really don’t understand how much [data] I can get. A lot! Almost anything that’s not locked down…if you don’t lock your social down, I can get it…But people don’t really understand. I can have a social campaign that links up to what you’re watching on television. I can do that, I do do that, and people don’t know that I do that and that I can do that.

Looking to the future, Noah worries about how social media data will be used, not only for targeted advertising or social campaigns, but “something similar to ads that we haven’t seen yet.” Beyond what is currently possible, the future uses of social media data are unknown. As a society, we need to ensure that the necessary policies are in place to ensure that people’s data and privacy are maintained as we move forward towards a social media data-intensive society.
References


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Appendices

Appendix A. Ethics Protocol Approval

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

OFFICE OF THE VICE-PRESIDENT, RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 30709
September 30, 2014

Dr. Leslie Shade FAC OF INFORMATION STUDIES
Ms. Jenna Jacobson FAC OF INFORMATION STUDIES

Dear Dr. Shade and Ms. Jenna Jacobson,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "I work in social: Community management and personal branding in social media"

ETHICS APPROVAL

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We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board (REB) has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB's delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D. REB Chair
Dean Sharpe REB Manager

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS
McMaster Building, 11 Queen's Park Crescent West, 3rd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 1S8 Canada
Tel. +1 416 946-3275 • Fax. +1 416 946-5763 • ethicsreview@utoronto.ca • http://www.research.utoronto.ca/e目に目看のAdministrators/ethics/
PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 30709

September 18, 2015

Dr. Leslie Shade
FAC OF INFORMATION STUDIES

Ms. Jenna Jacobson
FAC OF INFORMATION STUDIES

Dear Dr. Shade and Ms. Jenna Jacobson,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "I work in social": Community management and personal branding in social media"

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: September 30, 2014
Expire Date: September 29, 2016
Continuing Review Level: 1
Renewal: 1 of 4

We are writing to advise you that you have been granted annual renewal of ethics approval to the above-referenced research protocol through the Research Ethics Board (REB) delegated process. Please note that all protocols involving ongoing data collection or interaction with human participants are subject to re-evaluation after 5 years. Ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your protocol. Note that annual renewals for protocols cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry as per our guidelines.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible. If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew Brower, Ph.D.
REB Co-Chair

Jeffrey Steele, Ph.D.
REB Co-Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS
McMurrich Building, 12 Queen's Park Crescent West, 2nd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 3E8 Canada
Tel: +1 416 946-3230 • Fax: +1 416 946-3763 • ethicsreview@utoronto.ca • http://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers/administerethics/
September 30, 2016

Dr. Leslie Shade  
FAC OF INFORMATION STUDIES

Ms. Jenna Jacobson  
FAC OF INFORMATION STUDIES

Dear Dr. Shade and Ms. Jenna Jacobson,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "I work in social: Community management and personal branding in social media"

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We are writing to advise you that you have been granted annual renewal of ethics approval to the above-referenced research protocol through the Research Ethics Board (REB) delegated process. Please note that all protocols involving ongoing data collection or interaction with human participants are subject to re-evaluation after 5 years. Ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Research Oversight and Compliance - Human Research Ethics Program as soon as possible. If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Please ensure that you submit an Ethics Renewal Form or a Study Completion/Closure Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your protocol. Note that ethics renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry as per our guidelines.

Please note, all approved research studies are eligible for a routine Post-Approval Review (PAR) site visit. If chosen, you will receive a notification letter from our office. For information on PAR, please see [link] .

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew Brower, Ph.D.  
REB Chair
Appendix B. Contextual Interview Guide

SOCIAL MEDIA WORK

Finding work

1. How did you find your current job?
2. Why do you think you were hired for your current position? Was your online reputation a factor?
3. What has been your experience in finding paid work in social media?
4. Have you done unpaid work, such as speaking gigs, consulting, blogging, writing, unpaid internships related to community management?

Job as a community manager

5. Describe what you do in your job as a community manager.
6. What type of position is it – for example, is your job salaried/per hour/contract/freelance?
7. Do you do any other work? (e.g. social media consulting)
8. What percentage of your work is online?
9. Is there anyone else who works with social media at your work?
10. Has the job changed since you first started working in social? How?
11. What is the most rewarding part of working on social media? (Tell me a story about this.)
12. Can people online see that you are the voice behind the brand?
13. Have you ever had to work where you were posting anonymously?

Precarity

14. What is the most stressful/frustrating part of working on social media? (Tell me a story about this.)
15. Do you have autonomy/control over your work?
16. Are you overworked in your job?
17. Are you expected to be “on” all the time for work?
18. Is community management under-valued?
19. Is community management under-paid?
20. Can you tell me about a time you have felt mentally drained with the job?

Perceptions of work

21. Is there anything notable about the gender divide of your work?
22. What do your friends/family think of your job?

Strategies as a community manager

23. How do you use users’ social media data?
24. What is your strategy to show management that your work is valuable?
25. How do you learn about new social media skills or do you get any training at your job?
26. Are there policies or ethical guidelines on what you can and cannot do on social media?
27. Have you ever encountered any ethical issues with the data at your job?
28. Does your organization have policies about employees’ social media use?

Interaction with community

29. What does community mean on social media?
30. How do you build community? (e.g. do you have a brand voice?)
31. Why do people connect with your company using social media?
32. What have you learned about how people use social media?
33. Tell me about what success looks like in managing a community online?
34. Tell me about a time when something bad happened online in your job?

PERSONAL BRANDING

Influence

35. Are you aware or involved in the social media scene in your city? Tell me about this.
36. What is an influencer? What makes someone an influencer?
37. Do you engage with influencers for work or personally? Why? Can you give me an example.
38. Do you consider yourself to be an influencer? (e.g. brand ambassador). Tell me about this.
39. Do you ever work with brands as a brand ambassador or go to events? Tell me about this.
40. What is the connection between online influence and offline influence?
41. What do you think of Klout or other social influence platforms?

Presentation of self

42. Do you censor/delete comments/photos from your profile?
43. Is your professional identity part of your personal identity?
44. Do you use your personal account to promote your company/client? (e.g. Do you target your friends to like a company/client you work for?)

Personal branding

45. Do you believe you have a personal brand?
46. Do you feel like you need to work/labour at your online presence because of the industry you are in?
47. How do you feel about having to do personal branding? (e.g. Personal branding is sometimes exhausting. Do you feel uneasy/conflicted?)
Living on social media

48. How do you personally use social media? Do you share your day-to-day personal life?
49. How has being on social media impacted your life – positively/negatively/neutral? Tell me a story.

Publicity & privacy

50. Are you concerned about how your personal social media data can be used?
51. Do you try to separate your professional and personal life or are they intertwined?
52. Is there anything you wouldn’t post on your personal account because of your job?

Next steps

53. What do you think will be the future of social media employment?
54. What do you think are the trends or the future of social media?
55. Describe your dream job. [Entrepreneur, 9–5 worker, multiple contract positions, at home/office/mobile]

Conclusion

56. Is there anything else you would like to add?
57. Can you think of anyone who you think would be interested in speaking to me?
### Appendix C. Coding

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<td>online hate</td>
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<td>ridicule</td>
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<td></td>
<td>brand bashing</td>
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<td>Influencer ecosystem</td>
<td>free swag</td>
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<td>backlash</td>
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<td>disclosure</td>
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<td>sponsored sellout</td>
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<td>personality</td>
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<td>organic experiences</td>
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<td>paid/unpaid</td>
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<td>Scene</td>
<td>events</td>
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<td>networking</td>
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<td>being seen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growing up (individual)</td>
<td>change over time</td>
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<td>Golden age of social media (collective)</td>
<td>corporate events</td>
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<td>getting paid</td>
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<td>Commercialization of community</td>
<td>leveraging</td>
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<td>value in network</td>
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<td>attention as commodity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>new influencers</td>
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<td>buying followers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ambiguous definitions</td>
<td>anonymous</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lack of definitions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no job title</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“work in social”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>gain credibility</td>
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<td>influencer defined</td>
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297
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Secondary coding</strong></th>
<th><strong>Preliminary coding</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Gendering social media (feminized) | listening  
care  
support  
conversation  
girls/women  
creative labour  
fight to be paid |
| Social media youth (infantilized) | young people  
next generation  
front lines |
| Analytics (masculine) | accountable  
ROI  
numbers  
data guys  
strategy  
desire & mistrust numbers  
influence metrics |
| Community quantified | community  
online community  
offline community  
blurring of spaces  
connecting networks |
| Hustling | hustling  
keeping up  
leveraging |
| Always-on | fear of missing out  
being tired  
front-line work  
busy |
| Time as a resource | over time  
invest time  
spending/investing time  
lack of time  
attention as commodity |
| Free labour | contests  
pride  
doing more  
work for exposure |
| Emotional labour | overworked  
gig  
emotional work  
labour of love |
| Ethical standards | ethics  
changing norms  
uncertain laws |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Secondary coding</strong></th>
<th><strong>Preliminary coding</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private &amp; public</td>
<td>private&lt;br&gt;privacy&lt;br&gt;public&lt;br&gt;presentation of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal &amp; professional</td>
<td>professional as personal portfolio building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal learning</td>
<td>learn from others&lt;br&gt;lived experiences&lt;br&gt;lack of formal education&lt;br&gt;stay up-to-date&lt;br&gt;meaning of expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurialism</td>
<td>DIY mentality&lt;br&gt;entrepreneur&lt;br&gt;“flexibility”&lt;br&gt;moving companies&lt;br&gt;you are a brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love your job</td>
<td>freelance&lt;br&gt;passionate work&lt;br&gt;love&lt;br&gt;high emotions&lt;br&gt;burnout&lt;br&gt;being valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing visibility</td>
<td>storytelling&lt;br&gt;exposure&lt;br&gt;voice&lt;br&gt;recalling horror stories&lt;br&gt;segment audience&lt;br&gt;needed when changing jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>being positive&lt;br&gt;filtered self&lt;br&gt;curation&lt;br&gt;displaying happiness with job/life&lt;br&gt;fake it ’til you make it&lt;br&gt;humblebrag</td>
</tr>
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<td>Branding practices</td>
<td>branding&lt;br&gt;working to build a brand&lt;br&gt;positioning oneself&lt;br&gt;labouring the self&lt;br&gt;strategic advantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic simplicity</td>
<td>simplicity&lt;br&gt;authentic vs being fake&lt;br&gt;transparency&lt;br&gt;honesty&lt;br&gt;stability&lt;br&gt;work-life continuum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>