

CO-CONSTRUCTING A PARTICIPATORY BRAND: THE AFFORDANCES OF LIVE
STREAMING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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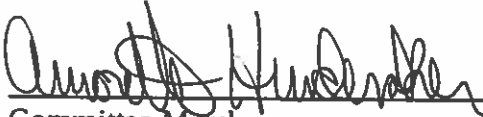


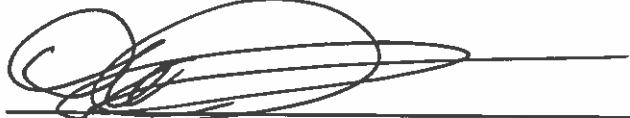
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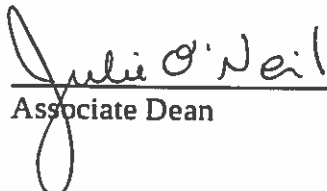
Co-Constructing a Participatory Brand: The Affordances of Live Streaming
for Social Media Entrepreneurship

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Here's to the next chapter.

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Social media platforms in the earliest iterations were introduced as personal, creative spaces for user-generated content and collaboration, a chief hallmark of the Web 2.0 era. Over the last decade, social media has been uncharacteristically commercialized. Online spaces once adorned solely with personal artifacts are now brand-driven enterprises where the promise of self-made careers are an attractive draw for young entrepreneurs. Although researchers studying digital labor have traditionally understood the process of content creation in an asynchronous manner, increasingly popular, synchronous social media platforms are disrupting the norms of the influencer economy. Social live streaming platforms allow content creators and their audiences the opportunity to interact with each other as content is produced in real-time (Scheibe, Fietkiewicz, & Stock, 2016). Live streaming platforms have altered and subverted the comment section feature of other social media platforms in terms of design and instead rely on a message board alongside a live video stream. Platforms such as Twitch, YouNow, Twitter's Periscope, Facebook Live, YouTube Live, and the now-defunct Meerkat have all entered the live streaming market with the hope of becoming the next YouTube. Behind the scenes, content creators are making substantial amounts of income for content that is not curated, produced, edited, or packaged. Scheibe et al. (2016) made the distinction between two types of live platforms: topic-specific live streaming services (e.g., Twitch's platform-wide focus on gaming) and general live streaming services focusing on any topic the content creator may choose.

One social live streaming service experiencing substantial growth and popularity is YouNow. YouNow (n.d.) considers itself a fusion of broadcasting, gaming, performing, and social networking with the goal of "giving direct power to the people and enabling them to discover and create new kinds of interactive content in real-time." Founded in 2011,

YouNow is a live video streaming platform in which users broadcast live video or engage with the live streams of other users in real time. The synchronous nature of content creation on YouNow allows broadcasters and audiences to interact with each other using the platform's chat feature, an active message board that appears alongside live video streams. The platform boasts 100 million user sessions per month, 70% of which come from users under the age of 24 (Kosoff, 2015). Given the myriad ways in which social media platforms shape the identity of young users (boyd, 2014), YouNow is ripe for exploration of self-presentation, especially in an entrepreneurial context. For its most popular content creators, YouNow offers a partner program to earn income. Unlike many income structures in the social media influencer economy that rely heavily on outside sponsors or advertisements, YouNow has built in a form of virtual currency called Bars, represented through the form of "likes" or other similar visual encouragements, that appear in real time during live streams. The revenue from the exchange of these virtual goods is split between YouNow and the broadcaster (40% and 60% respectively; Flynn, 2016). This infrastructure cuts out external advertisers and instead relies on a monetarily supportive audience. Successful YouNow broadcasters have earned as much as \$10,000 in one month, while a more common range of monthly income is between \$500 and \$1,000 (Graham, 2015). Thus, YouNow is not merely a social enterprise; it offers a potentially substantial financial reward. Drawing on YouNow as an exemplar, albeit part of the broader, emerging economy of digital labor and content creation, this study builds theoretical understanding of live streaming as a form of mediated communication, distinct from asynchronous and heavily produced content creation elsewhere online (e.g., YouTube).

Content creation in the social media influencer economy has generally been examined

independent of questions regarding platform design. Researchers adopting an affordances approach (e.g., Leonardi, 2013a; Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017) consider the interaction between the user and the material design or interface to determine how users perceive they may use the technology. An affordances approach to social media research sheds light on how media users might perceive technology design to offer alternative or subversive opportunities for their own desired ends. Given the increasingly strategic, entrepreneurial turn in social media use (e.g., Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2013), social media affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2017), as a theoretical approach, offer insight into the broader inquiry of self-branding on social media, digital labor, and platform-driven cultural production. This study seeks to build understanding of digital labor as it occurs on live streaming platforms through the lens of affordances, suggesting that three sets of affordances of social live streaming—aspiration, connection, and accounting—allow for personal branding on social media to be constituted by both content creators and audiences, a phenomenon I term *participatory branding*. Situated in a social media ecology notorious for precarious working conditions, participatory branding emphasizes the roles of viewers and audiences in the development of branding, an unpaid but compulsory element of creative work online.

Theoretical Perspective

Self-Branding and Digital Labor

A more challenging aspect of communicating online is the process of constantly managing impressions that others may be forming at any moment. This is particularly true for content creators on social media, whose professional livelihood and income depend on positive and active engagement with audiences. Beginning with Goffman's (1959) notion

that everyday life is performance and enacted self-presentation, decades of scholarship have pursued questions regarding self-presentation, whether mediated or face-to-face. As self-presentation took a professional turn in Web 2.0, self-branding emerged as the entrepreneurial embodiment of online self-presentation. Self-branding is a manufactured identity for promotion, a “salable commodity that can tempt a potential employer” (Marwick, 2013, p. 166). Self-branding certainly exists outside of digital spaces, though it is an imperative for the modern digital laborer. Individuals also adjust their self-brand based on the perceptions related to the imagined audiences on different social media platforms (Scolere, Pruchniewska, & Duffy, 2018).

Of course, maintaining a stable and marketable self-brand requires several considerations, including target audiences. Social media platforms collapse audiences together, making it difficult for social media influencers to strategically deploy content that would satisfy all possible groups. Thus, context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010) documents the diffusion of social media posts to anyone in a social network, strong and weak ties alike, without the ability to manage impressions. As a solution to the problem of context collapse, researchers found that Twitter users created content for imagined audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Although these individuals did not know the extent of the audience who might see their post, the users have an intended audience that they consider while drafting such a social media post given the reality of context collapse. This cognitive process supports existing literature on the compulsion to engage in self-branding practices and “micro-celebrity” behavior on social media, even as a user without a substantial following (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

The desire to present a self-brand rooted in authenticity is integral to the success of

social media influencers. Banet-Weiser (2012) describes the manner in which cultural spaces considered normatively authentic (e.g., self-identity and creativity) have become increasingly associated with branded identities. Thus, there has been a shift from authentic experience to a branded authenticity for consumption. One such manifestation of this trend is found in the contrived development of authenticity in social media influencers' content. Calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017) refers to the expectation of crafting content that seems so authentic that it must be amateur (i.e., not heavily produced), whether or not the content creator is a beginner or a seasoned professional in the influencer economy. This concept reflects a tension between the audience's desire for authenticity and the content creator's need to produce content that reflects little production value itself. Marwick (2013) suggests that the recent influx of terms to describe digital laborers (e.g., influencers, content creators, vloggers, YouTubers, etc.) reflects the increase in desire and popularity of creative work online, as well as the added compulsion of individuals to brand themselves and engage in "micro-celebrity" norms. Self-branding can be a slippery slope, as it often requires individuals to become brand-friendly at any cost to the personal identity. In the influencer economy, engagement metrics are only valuable to the extent that brands will place advertisements on your content and in line with your self-brand.

Digital labor is an emerging field of research that considers how individuals earn income and attempt to sustain viable work online (Duffy, 2017). It is concerned with creative work in new media industries, which often includes the self-branding practices undertaken to sustain relationships between content creators and audiences. Although social media employment may be perceived as glamorous by audience members and the general public, researchers have frequently lamented the dangers of engaging in work that is merely

aspirational (Duffy, 2015; 2017). Aspirational work represents the tendency of digital laborers to aspire to fame, affluence, and flexibility in their careers, while most struggle for their content to become successful, have un(der)paid working conditions, and are constantly in a production cycle to remain prepared for the proverbial “next big thing.” Additionally, digital labor requires impassioned connection with audiences, which comes at an emotional cost to the creator upon engaging in constant relational labor (Baym, 2015). Indeed, the allegedly glamorous job of being a social media influencer is far from the story told in the upper-earning percentiles of digital laborers, whose stories are mirrored in only a select few.

Nonetheless, social media industries have intrinsic appeal as an option for flexible work, particularly for women. Researchers have noted a broad trend in 20 to 30-year old women seeking creative labor online due to its allure as flexible, free, and feminized (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gregg, 2008). Entrepreneurial femininity is not itself a problem; terms such as “girl boss” and “boss babe” have recently entered the public lexicon, reflecting a shift toward women being empowered by their work. Yet, the work available in the culture industries, digital labor, or freelance work (e.g., the “gig economy”; see Kessler, 2018) is highly gendered and forces a singular notion of what it means to be feminine. Successful female digital laborers often rely on traditional prescriptions of femininity, including mommy bloggers, beauty vloggers, and fashion models. Researchers have described three expectations placed upon female digital laborers: soft self-promotion, interactive intimacy, and compulsory visibility (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). Jarrett (2014) attempted to historicize much of the backlash against particularly feminized norms of digital labor by contextualizing it in the tradition of women working in affective, but immaterial, labor conditions. Researchers navigate critiques of invisible work while simultaneously

acknowledging the potential challenges arising from a hypervisible, identity-focused labor model.

An early marker of the growth in digital labor opportunities can be traced to the shift in websites and social platforms from personal, interactive spaces to commercial marketplaces. For example, parenting blogs (e.g., mommy blogging) were once a space for online community and advice. However, Hunter (2016) describes the transformation of mommy blogs from virtual communities to commercial spaces, wherein they became home to branded advertisements and compensated, sponsored posts. The YouTube community also frequently straddles the line between labor and leisure. The advertiser-focused technological features of YouTube have contributed to its business model of turning playful content into material gain for content creators and the company itself (Postigo, 2016). To this end, the affordances of YouTube may have a profitable impact on content creators' ability to maximize potential income. Despite critiques of influencer employment, new avenues continue to emerge for new content to be created and new creators to make it happen, including live streaming. Senft (2008) was perhaps the earliest researcher to document live streaming in the form of "camgirls" (i.e., women who broadcasted their personal lives daily on webcams). Albeit distinct from the live streaming platforms used today, Senft's (2008) research suggested not only a desire for seemingly authentic content, but also voyeuristic fly-on-the-wall footage of everyday life similar to content found on YouNow. The manufacturing of authenticity has typically been examined as it occurs on asynchronous social media platforms (see Abidin, 2017). The present study instead calls into question how curated self-branding practices may still play a role in content creation on a live streaming platform with real-time interactions with audiences.

Although other forms of content creation could be examined in relation to affordances, the design of live streaming platforms, such as YouNow, offers users an meaningfully different interface and user experience as compared to a curated content platform such as YouTube. With an interactive chatroom and monetary gift messages available for purchase through the broadcast, live streaming platforms uproot the contemporary understanding of the relationship between content creators and audiences. Whereas asynchronous content creators have a relationship to uphold with their fans or subscribers, live streaming content creators are relying on users' real-time enjoyment for their income, and thus must navigate communication from audience members in real-time. Therefore, this study asks:

RQ₁: How do content creators on live streaming platforms engage in self-branding practices in real-time?

Affordances and New Media Technologies

Scholarship on digital labor generally has ignored the effects of site design. That is, scholarship surrounding the social media industries may be platform-specific, but it traditionally has not analyzed technology design as a central component affecting self-branding and content creation. The affordances approach to technology offers an opportunity to gain deeper insight regarding digital labor by placing the user's perception of technology design at the forefront. Originating as Gibson's (1979) explanation for the process of animals adapting to objects in their environment, scholars have defined affordances as possibilities for action. Affordances, as applied to communication technology, are understood as sociomaterial constructs (Leonardi, 2013a). That is, affordances sit at the intersection of social interaction and materiality. The affordances approach to communication technology

helps to explain how users engage with technology and other everyday objects (Hutchby, 2001; Norman, 1990). Technological affordances therefore represent the relationship between technology design or interface and user interaction (Leonardi, 2013a).

Although scholars have conceptualized technological affordances in different ways, this study envisions affordances as going beyond mere features of communication technology (see Evans et al., 2017). Instead, affordances represent an ability granted to the technology user based on the way they make use of a feature or tool. In order to refine and clarify the concept of affordances further, Evans et al. (2017) established three criteria for determining whether or not something can count as a technological affordance. First, affordances are not simply material objects nor technological features. Next, affordances are not outcomes. Finally, affordances must have variability. Perhaps the most important and often misconstrued premise in affordances scholarship is confusion of affordances with technological features. To help illustrate this point, for example, “a smartphone’s built-in camera is a feature, while an affordance is recordability” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 39). Affordances provide users with the ability to do something as a result of the design (material) and use (social) of the technology itself. To that end, technological materiality matters as much as the way users interpret and make sense of design decisions. Conceptually, affordances serve as a middle ground between pure social construction and technological determinism (Hutchby, 2001).

Studying communication technology through affordances helps to bridge the disconnect between technology designers and users, and it can be particularly useful in the context of social interaction online. In a study of paralinguistic digital affordances (i.e., single-click tools for expressing certain relational cues; Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016),

features such as Twitter retweets were conceived as having a relational component in addition to the feature. For example, the study found that Facebook likes were given more freely than Twitter favorites, suggesting the users' communication styles or relational goals might influence the way users perceive they could engage with the feature itself.

Much of the research on affordances focuses on a similar strand of inquiry: deducing the affordances of a technology, feature, or platform. For example, one study found that email affords its users asynchronicity, editability, persistence, and replicability, which in turn led to cycles of knowledge sharing, co-construction of events, and constructive conflict (Erhardt, Gibbs, Martin-Rios, & Sherblom, 2016). Reviewing a decade of literature on mobile media and communication, Schrock (2015) found that mobile media afforded portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality. In political communication research, affordances of identifiability and networked information access predicted democratic deliberation (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Thus, the affordances approach sheds light on the ways in which some technologies enable users toward an end, though other technologies may constrain the users.

Researchers have used affordances as a framework for studying specific outcomes such as knowledge sharing in organizations based on affordances of social media use (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). Given the growing interest in the affordances approach in the organizational context, researchers operationalized six reliable and valid affordances for organizational media: pervasiveness, editability, self-presentation, searchability, visibility, and awareness (Rice, Evans, Pearce, Sivunen, Vitak, & Treem, 2017). These organizational media affordances are neither tied to one particular technology nor one organizational context. Instead, the affordances are conceived as

occurring at the interpersonal, group, and organizational levels with single, multiple, or clusters of particular media. Also salient in the organizational context, shared affordances result from the similar approach and use of technology (i.e., same affordance for same technology) and has been linked to the formation of informal advice networks in interdependent organizational groups (Leonardi, 2013b). The study also suggested that the inability to establish shared affordances precluded the groups' work coordination.

Scholars often contrast affordances with constraints (i.e., the inability to achieve particular goals), each with distinct implications for the social and material aspects of technology. For example, when members of organizations perceived that technologies afforded, rather than constrained, their ability to achieve various goals, Leonardi (2011) found that affordances led to changes in members' routines (social). The perception of constraints led to changes in technology (material). Individually, affordances of various technologies have been linked to different multivalent outcomes. For example, affordances of social media use in organizations led to knowledge sharing, but in the same sample, it also led to a promotion of covert behavior overall, suggesting a tension for employees (Gibbs et al., 2013).

Although practitioners and scholars have applied the affordances approach in a variety of fields and contexts, it has received criticism for lacking conceptual clarity and consistent application. Oliver (2005) claimed that the affordances approach has lost clarity and become detached from its original conceptual development, such that it is now of diminished value to academic inquiry. False affordances and hidden affordances represent another challenge left un(der)developed in present literature on the subject. Gaver (1991) conceived of affordances as being perceptible, hidden, or false. Perceptible affordances are

those that function the way users might expect (e.g., using a cellphone to call someone). Hidden affordances are those that are not perceived as an affordance (e.g., using a cellphone as a paper weight). Finally, false affordances are those that seem as though they would be perceptibly true, but are not (e.g., attempting to use a toy cellphone to call someone).

Although there has been much progress toward refining the affordances approach in communication technology scholarship, there remains ample work to pursue in this area, including platform-specific applications. Given the limited empirical knowledge regarding live streaming, examining a live streaming platform such as YouNow with an affordances approach for both the design and use of the technology benefits scholarship on both live streaming and technological affordances. For example, YouNow users may perceive real-time interactivity as a major affordance of the platform (i.e., the ability to engage with content creators during the process of content creation itself). This potential affordance of live streaming is representative of a major difference between asynchronous (e.g., YouTube) and synchronous social media content, making an aspect of creator-audience communication possible for one platform that is not possible on another. Given the implications that platform-based affordances could have for the larger academic discourse on digital labor on social media, this study considers:

RQ₂: What are the perceived affordances of social live streaming platforms for both content creators and viewers?

Method

YouNow (n.d.) describes its platform as a “friendly community of people who love spending time together.” YouNow represents what researchers have called a virtual community (e.g., Wellman et al., 1996). Virtual communities embody a shared culture,

insider information, and a sense of group identity. Both in its mission statement and in practice, YouNow audiences and creators appear to spend a significant amount of time together (virtually). It is not uncommon for live broadcasts to last several hours on end, nor is it uncommon for audience members in the live message board to correspond with each other as the broadcast continues. Lindlof and Shatzer (1998) argue that synchronous media, such as today's social live streaming platforms, should be studied through naturalistic observation by considering communicative behaviors and interactions in real-time. Therefore, in addition to engaging in semi-structured interviews with live streaming content creators, this study employed ethnographic observation as means of understanding the virtual community established on the YouNow platform.

Data Collection

Upon receiving human subjects approval from the Institutional Review Board, data collection proceeded in two phases: ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews. Ethnographic methods are the most appropriate method for picking up on the cultural nuances of the YouNow community (Goodall, 2000). Ethnography allows for the researcher to monitor the interactional processes relevant to the study in real-time, privileging the lived experiences of participants. During the online fieldwork, I adopted the role of a complete observer (Gold, 1958). A complete observer does not interact with participants during the observational process, and in many cases, participants are unaware they are being observed, as was the case for YouNow broadcasters and audiences in this study. Thus, complete observers exist at the periphery of the community they are researching. While conducting fieldwork with the YouNow community, I did not participate in message board interactions, nor did I exchange support for content creators through the platform's monetary gifts.

Instead, I merely observed the interactions passively during the ethnographic portion of data collection.

Data collection began with online fieldwork over the course of 6 months, observing the natural processes and inner-workings of the YouNow virtual community. During this process, I observed active broadcasts on YouNow as they occurred in real time. Field notes encompassed activity in all components of the YouNow platform, including the message board interactions, direct quotations from the broadcast itself, and the monetary reward system exchanged through the platform's virtual currency structure. Additionally, I collected the brief biographies provided by the creators themselves on their profile pages and their ranking status on the platform overall. In an effort to capture observations of both the content creators and the audiences as they interact with each other in real-time, I took extensive, thorough field notes with thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) for future analysis.

Broadcasts included in the ethnographic observation portion of data collection were frequently ranked as the most highly viewed broadcasts, found under the "Top Broadcasters" (i.e., the top 100 broadcasters by engagement metrics) ranking on the website. These broadcasters typically stream several times per week, often for several hours at a time. Due to the fluid, freelance nature of the entrepreneurial activity on YouNow, content creators may come and go from the platform itself. The platform's ranking system is also highly fluid, constantly in flux and impractical to systematically monitor for a sample. Instead, I observed broadcasters who, at the time of data collection, were ranked highly on the platform and had enough active engagement on their stream to offer insight to the study. In total, the ethnographic portion of data collection resulted in 184 hours of observation.

Due to the public nature of the digital ethnographic observation (i.e., open access

online), individuals were observed without their informed consent. At the time of ethnographic observation, the nature of the online platform allowed members of the public to view content without any account whatsoever; in other words, site content and interactions were observable at any time by any individual with Internet access. Since then, YouNow has begun to require user authentication by signing in with an account from another site (e.g., Google or Facebook). The Terms of Service for YouNow emphasize that individual users should not maintain an expectation of privacy on a public platform. Thus, the virtual community developed on YouNow is, and always has been, accessible to the public.

Following the ethnographic observation online, I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with participants who were either producing live streaming content on YouNow ($n = 8$) or were regular viewers of live streams on YouNow at the time of the interview ($n = 8$). Interviews were conducted with participants to the point of theoretical saturation when new findings no longer emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Due to the public nature of both live streaming platforms and influencer self-branding practices, audience members at large are able to connect with content creators on various social networks. Therefore, I solicited the voluntary involvement of interview participants in the study through the alternative avenues for contact that the participants themselves provide online. Participants in semi-structured interviews were informed about the nature of the interviews and asked to consent prior to their participation. Participants took part in a single interview, and the interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured (Douglas, 1985), meaning that they followed an interview protocol with the addition of follow-up questions based on the flow of natural conversation. There were slightly more female participants ($n = 10$) compared to men ($n = 6$), reflecting feminized trends in the creative industries (Duffy, 2017). Interviews were

audio recorded and transcribed for analysis, resulting in 110 pages of single-spaced text. All participants referenced in the study have been assigned pseudonyms to offer further anonymity in the reporting of results. Although social media industries are inherently self-promotional and public-facing, the decision to assign pseudonyms to participants offered content creators the ability to openly discuss “behind the curtain” aspects of their creative work without tying these skills to their publicly known professional identity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an iterative approach, actively positioned between existing research on digital labor and themes emerging from the data (Tracy, 2013). I initially immersed myself in the data, reviewing recordings and field notes several times prior to transcription and analysis. Collected data and present academic literature served as an *a priori* guide for data analysis, distinct from the strictly inductive process of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather, Charmaz (2006) invoked an abductive method that uses constant comparisons between the known and the new, adapting the data analysis as new data emerged. I began analyzing data with primary-cycle thematic coding in order to identify basic, descriptive activities and processes that were found recurring in the data. This iterative process was further refined through the development of secondary-cycle codes, which go beyond the purpose of basic description and instead serve richer explanation and synthesis of complexities in the data. The emergent codes highlight three higher-order sets of affordances: affordances for aspiration, affordances for connection, and affordances for accounting. Within each of these codes were several lower-order codes demonstrating the specific branding practices described by participants or witnessed through fieldwork.

Collected data from YouNow’s online community compelled further understanding

of specialized language used in message boards, live stream broadcasts, and the in-depth interviews with content creators. The combination of fieldwork and in-depth interviews allows for the members of the YouNow virtual community to describe their lived experiences in their own words. During secondary-cycle coding, in vivo codes were used to identify terms associated with the particular vocabulary of YouNow's online community, known only to those familiar with the platform culture. These codes help to shed light on the relationship between audiences and creators as it develops in real time.

The data collection resulted in two distinct but related data sets: field notes and transcribed in-depth interviews. Rather than analyzing the data sets separately, I analyzed the collected data together but in separate iterations in order to adequately address the research questions of the study once data collection had ceased. Online fieldwork was particularly useful for elucidating the perceived affordances (i.e., RQ₂) of the YouNow platform, while the in-depth interviews aided in the understanding of self-branding practices and the function of affordances in content creation (i.e., RQ₁). Thus, data analysis treated digital observations and in-depth interviews equally, though revealing distinct but related insights. The following section presents the results of this analysis.

Results

The analysis of in-depth interviews and online ethnographic observation revealed three distinct but related sets of live streaming affordances: (1) affordances for aspiration; (2) affordances for connection; and (3) affordances for accounting. Taken together, these affordances support a decentralized framework for branded promotion which I term *participatory branding*. As compared to the logics of self-branding wherein individuals present themselves as commercialized packages for sale (Marwick, 2013), participatory

branding emphasizes the role of audience alongside the creator in co-constructing and sustaining an entrepreneurial brand. Thus, live streaming jointly affords branding for content creators on behalf of both creators themselves and their audiences.

Affordances for Aspiration

YouNow broadcasters and viewers lauded the platform's design for its simplistic tools to publicize live streams before, during, and after a broadcast. The affordances for aspiration highlight the media environment of self-promotion and publicity enabled by YouNow's design and user interaction. Content creators in this sample reported common marketing strategies as social media influencers on other platforms to draw attention to their content. Jeremy, whose consistent broadcast times are on display in his profile description, said, "If they look forward to your streams on Tuesdays and Thursdays, or whatever...that turns into money." The platform also supports a notification system to notify subscribed followers when a broadcaster is "going live" to alert offline audience members to watch a live stream.

Both broadcasters and viewers on YouNow described cross-platform promotion as a norm, with direct links to a user's other social media profiles available in the profile description. Several content creators described the strategies they used for growing their audience on YouNow and simultaneously across all other platforms. James, who produced consistent live shows weekly, said, "I'll go on Twitter and Instagram, and my followers will get banners to tell them what the next show is going to be about and when." In addition to promotion in advance of live streams, YouNow also auto-generates publicity messages to share across all platforms when a creator starts a broadcast. During broadcasts, Brad claimed that "people pull YouNow highlights and put them on other social media outlets." Playing

like a montage reel of the most entertaining moments from a live stream, this feature draws in potential audiences without requiring the commitment of sitting through an hours-long broadcast. Several interviewees reported this feature as the best way that followers of broadcasters spread the word about a particular content creator's streams to their fellow fans on other platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr.

Because of the built-in opportunities to promote streamers as a fan or as a broadcaster yourself, content creators in this sample underscored the importance of being networked with audiences on all social media platforms, not just interacting on YouNow. Mark explains, "I try to convert them, make them all go follow my other social media...and my biggest goal was just growing." Rebecca, a viewer, echoed this sentiment in her perception of the labor of live streaming, "Honestly, I think it's a constant process of getting a lot of followers." Importantly, the emphasis on audience growth across all social media platforms is reciprocal. That is, an increase in subscribers on YouNow has potential to translate to increases on other platforms; likewise, an increase in followers elsewhere could open the door for bringing viewers to YouNow streams.

Platform affordances also tend to be driven by online status. On YouNow, this threshold is based on whether or not a broadcaster has reached "partner" status on the platform; that is, YouNow partners are earning direct income from the site for their broadcasts' engagement. For people who reach the threshold for fans to become a YouNow partner, the broadcasters have access to other tools for building their audience on YouNow and translating that audience to other platforms. In discussing the ability to live stream on YouNow and YouTube simultaneously, Mark said, "You can bring that viewership from YouTube onto YouNow." This comment effectively illustrates the ways in which YouNow's

affordances encourage cross-platform promotion and place it as part of a larger entrepreneurial system for influencers.

Zach, a YouNow viewer who also follows content creators on several platforms, described YouNow as a stepping stone to larger online celebrity status. He said, “It does seem like they’re taking advantage of the kind of intimate setting of YouNow being a smaller platform to be able to launch a career in another area.” Compared to YouTube’s economic structure of advertisements and privately-sponsored content, YouNow relies on a direct monetary exchange between fans and broadcasters through tokens called “gifts,” making it easier to earn income from broadcasting once reaching partner status on the platform. Emily explains, “I would say that with YouNow, the viewers are able to give to the person making the video.”

Live streamers and viewers alike expressed familiarity with the aspirational role (e.g., Duffy, 2016; 2017) of YouNow in a larger economic system of social media platforms. Madison, a relatively new content creator on YouNow, said, “Compared to YouTube, YouNow broadcasters can respond to viewers who you’re hoping to honestly become your customers, because you’re basically developing a brand.” Many participants reported having other side jobs to support their aspirational labor on YouNow. For example, James is a paramedic with a flexible schedule. He explains, “I put all the work into [YouNow] because, eventually, this is what I want to do full-time. I’m lucky I have a job that pays good and the hours work around all of that.”

The affordances for aspiration on YouNow highlight the platform’s lower position in the larger social media ecosystem. Broadcasters on YouNow engage in highly aspirational forms of work, seeking to promote their personal brands beyond the scope of the platform

itself. However, the broadcasters' and viewers' interaction with technical features of YouNow's design jointly afford aspirational practices for the content creator's brand. Audiences, to that end, play an equally important role in the aspiration of live streamers through cross-platform promotion and recording and sharing highlights from broadcasts. Aspirants themselves work within the platform design to promote a consistent broadcast time, maximize audience engagement, and publicize trending moments from streams in the hopes of leveraging YouNow popularity for external online microcelebrity status.

Affordances for Connection

The content produced on social live streaming platforms such as YouNow draws heavily on the social interaction between broadcasters and viewers. The design of the live broadcasts caters to the comparatively intimate, authentic space for "real" exchanges on YouNow, affording connection for users of the platform. The platform itself is branded in contrast to edited, curated social content online. Several content creators in this sample participate in what Baym (2015) calls relational labor, the work of connecting and interacting with publics in an effort to cultivate and expand an audience.

The attractiveness of live streams compared to curated, edited content (e.g., YouTube videos) was a common assessment in interviews with streamers and viewers. Danielle said, "I prefer live streaming because it's more real. It's raw and unedited. I think it's a lot more genuine." Jen also suggested the "rawness" of YouNow made it "really easy to connect with people." Emily, a broadcaster on YouNow who also has an active YouTube channel, explained why YouNow would draw content creators from YouTube. She said, "They already have that following and they know the audience wants to see more of their content and more of their personal life." Many viewers also expressed the feeling that their voices

were heard in the YouNow chat window compared to comment threads on asynchronous forms of content creation. Zach said, “It feels like you’re interacting with them in real time and you’re having a conversation with them. Whereas in a YouTube video, you can leave comments, but they may not get checked at all.”

The live streaming media environment on YouNow also appeared ripe for conversations about personal topics to flourish. James discussed his incorporation of “Mental Health Saturdays” into his broadcasts each week, during which time viewers “can go and just vent and feel comfortable in a safe environment.” Chelsea, a viewer who appreciates similar types of outlets on YouNow, said the streams she most often watches “talk about stuff going on in their lives, like, ‘I’m depressed and over-worked and stressed out’,” underscoring the broadcasters’ perceived relatability with the audience. Both broadcasters and viewers emphasized the need for connection during live streams. Jeremy explained, “One of our goals when having a live stream is to speak to them as if we are looking them in the eye talking to them.” Likewise, Brad chooses to subscribe to someone on YouNow based on whether he feels “like [he] would hang out with that person.”

Digital fieldwork on YouNow revealed a commonly used feature on the platform called *gusting*. Gusting allows a broadcaster to invite a viewer to broadcast alongside the creator during a live stream. Gusting is often considered a reward for meeting some arbitrary incentive set by the content creator during a broadcast, focusing on a monetary exchange through the platform’s symbolic currency. Discussing the gusting feature on YouNow, Lauren considered how it inverts power relations between content creators and viewers. She explained that gusting gives fans a sense of agency in their relationship with content creators, claiming “it gives them power back in the relationship.” Furthermore,

guesting represents yet another way in which personal branding is decentralized. As viewers-turned-guest broadcasters produce content for broadcasters, they participate in the co-construction of the content creator's brand. This is not to suggest that audiences become creators; rather, audiences play a pivotal role in shaping the content creator's brand. It is also worth mentioning that guesting is not only free labor given to broadcasters from viewers, but in most cases, it is reverse-pay labor (i.e., paying to produce work for someone else) due to the commonly used incentive structure for guesting.

The platform design becomes particularly important when discussing the affordances for connection. Specifically, live streaming chat windows often serve as the content itself during a broadcast, rather than as an accessory thread like you would see on a YouTube channel. In comparing the content differences between YouTube and YouNow, Mark said, "The difference between going live and a regular video is that I have to react to what they're saying in the comments." Indeed, the chat section built into YouNow is, in many ways, the basis of the broadcast itself. Questions and comments flood chat boards during YouNow broadcasts and provide content for broadcasters who often do not have a specific agenda for the content of their live stream. Sophia echoed this sentiment and explained the rationale:

People will right away, without being prompted, just start asking questions because they know that this is their chance to interact with them. Primarily, they're coming on YouNow to interact with people, to build relationships with people. They want this back-and-forth talk. It's not this whole production that they've come up with. It's a very authentic, spontaneous thing. So they fit it into their life very genuinely and then end it.

Although this is generally viewed as an opportunity for positive social interaction, it is also

important to consider the costs of relational labor in real time. When discussing the possibility for a live stream to go awry due to a negative chat conversation, Rebecca cautions, “The person who’s doing the video needs to even be aware of their facial reactions to the comments.” Although YouNow is championed for its authenticity, the stakes for self-monitoring remain high in the event that an audience could turn against a broadcaster over the course of a single live stream.

Considering the “dark side” of live streams, several broadcasters discussed the tools available on YouNow for content moderation (Gillespie, 2018). Importantly, the types of content moderation referenced by this sample of YouNow users were all intended to help *maintain* the positive social interaction and connections being disturbed by negative agents. James explained that trolls frequently enter his chat boards during live broadcasts, disrupting conversation and sending negative messages. He explained, “I try to force-guest them, and they have to accept or deny. Usually, they never accept. And so, after that, I explain why I’m going to block them.” Mark also described force-guesting—a feature that allows broadcasters to request viewers to stream alongside them (i.e., reversing the request structure for guesing)—while discussing bullying he has witnessed between his viewers during broadcasts. He advised, “I would be like, ‘Well, why don’t you come live with me?’ Or I’d just have to block the person because that’s all you can do.” Viewers also shared negative experiences in YouNow chats and had similar affordances for content moderation built in to the platform. Chelsea, a viewer who claimed to have witnessed toxic comments in many YouNow chats, said, “They can be blocked. You can remove them. There’s parameters to help.” Blocking on YouNow functions similarly to other social networking sites, excluding a user from social interaction within a particular stream. Although the interviews revealed

negative aspects of social interaction on YouNow, moderation served an important role in giving YouNow users the autonomy to *preserve* positive communication, helping to afford connection on the site.

Affordances for Accounting

Humphreys (2018) describes media accounting as a process in which people use new media and technology to document and catalog events of everyday life. Although this interpretation of accounting focuses on subjective, qualitative experiences as media accounts, I invoke the term accounting in this case to refer to its quantitative origins. That is, affordances for accounting refer to the use of platforms for quantification and measurement of content creators' engagement with audiences as part of their overall branding effort. In this study, the affordances for accounting on YouNow trace the constant references and emphasis placed upon metrics, rankings, and income opportunities on the platform, from the perspective of both content creators and their audiences.

Participants described the use of numbers to quantify experiences on YouNow as being easily traced back, in almost all cases, to money. The design of YouNow is similar to other live streaming platforms in that there are no advertisements built in to the broadcasts. Whereas YouTube videos might run a 15- or 30-second advertisement prior to watching, Zach explains that "there's not a built-in ad system on YouNow, so you're not going to see these heavy ads before you go into a video." Instead, YouNow relies on the audiences for direct financial contributions between the viewers and the broadcasters. Audiences therefore provide the most direct, immediate form of compensation for content creators, but with that also comes a comparatively larger amount of voice in what content is desired and subsequently produced. As Emily put it, "With YouNow, your income is based on what your

audience wants to see.”

Online fieldwork on YouNow revealed the myriad methods by which broadcasters attempt to increase viewer engagement and financial participation. Mark, a content creator, used benchmark goals with his audience in order to incentivize participation during a live stream. He explained, “The last day to get bars for the month is very important. You squeeze the most money you can. I would do a challenge for every increment of 5,000 likes.” To that end, something as seemingly minor as a pay schedule can heavily shape the platform’s social interaction between viewers and streamers. The incentives posed unto audiences vary widely, but it typically involves some form of desirable social interaction between broadcasters and viewers offered as a reward for financial contribution. YouNow viewers explained that the reward for direct monetary gifts is tied directly to the perception of closeness with content creators. Chelsea said, “You can donate a certain amount of money and write a message, and they’ll read it aloud.”

In other cases, requests for monetary donations began as a joke or gimmick but were ultimately fruitful for broadcasters. Danielle explained how broadcasters she watched would publicize their username on Venmo, a free person-to-person financial transaction application. She said, “Broadcasters would even make a lot of money just by saying, ‘Hey, I’m going to stop live streaming if you guys don’t all Venmo me \$1,’ which I think is really easy for anyone to do.” Other broadcasters frequently promote their external profiles on platforms like Patreon, a subscription-based financial transaction service that allows viewers to donate directly to content creators, often in exchange for private content only viewable to donors. Although it may seem as though viewers would object to the constant monetary solicitations, Brad explained that most viewers like himself know that broadcasters rely on their audiences

for income. He said, “I also understand it would not function without that. There’s no other way to make money.” In this case, giving financial gifts to content creators helps to ensure future live streams will take place. Thus, the platform’s affordances for accounting help to sustain the brands of content creators.

Broadcasters in this study claimed that various metrics influenced decisions about what type of content to stream. James said, “The numbers that you are getting can be an accurate tool to see if you are doing the right things or need to change something.” Jeremy described his obsession with his profile’s numbers as a “marathon” and cautioned that short-term metrics were only so useful because social media influencers are “always playing the long game.” Indeed, YouNow as a platform is concerned with both the short-term and long-term metrics of broadcasters and viewers alike. For broadcasters, the platform tracks the number of subscribed fans, financial gifts, and audience size. For viewers, YouNow is solely monitoring engagement based on the size of financial gifts given to broadcasters. Content creators frequently incentivized communication in the chat section by using their own rankings system, typically drawn on a dry erase board in the camera’s view throughout a broadcast. The dry erase board lists the usernames of the top three to five fans at a current moment within a broadcast based on financial contributions. Visually, this privileges financial contributions as a central part of any given live stream. If you wish to be in the camera’s shot, and likely gain the attention of a content creator, this additional incentive has been provided to give money directly to the broadcaster.

This relatively common strategy is altogether more interesting given the platform’s existing database of top broadcasters and top fans, which can be viewed in different time spans (e.g., last 24 hours, last month, etc.). Broadcasters commonly shared their ranking

through discussion during live streams, including it in their profile description, or posting it to external social media outlets for promotion. Another method by which YouNow implements a ranking system is within the individual “tags” on the platform. All live streams occurring on YouNow are organized by hashtags that function as categorical markers, with some tags indicating content (e.g., #sleepingsquad, for live streams of people sleeping) and other tags describing the live streamers themselves (e.g., #guys, #girls, #lgbt). Notably, the majority of popular live streams during the fieldwork period were found in the latter category of less descriptive tags. Live streams in each category receive a real-time ranking that updates publicly in the midst of broadcasts based on audience engagement. When a broadcaster’s ranking within a category changes, YouNow sends a banner across the broadcast announcing the new ranking. Fieldwork revealed that ranking changes during broadcasts were not only a source of conversation between broadcasters and viewers, but the rankings helped to structure a central purpose for the broadcast. Both category and platform-wide rankings are prominently available on the platform’s home page, guiding new users to choose live streams organized by ranking.

In sum, affordances for accounting serve to promote the brand of content creators on YouNow in several key ways. First, metrics document the engagement, both socially and financially, of broadcasters and viewers (e.g., a successful broadcaster or a generous viewer). Next, broadcasters use incentives and challenges to garner more views, gifts, and subscribed fans, and these prompts for increased engagement drive the content of most live streams on YouNow. Finally, the constant emphasis on ranking places pressure on broadcasters and fans to elevate their status on the platform, which is entirely driven by their highly quantified interactions. The platform-driven accounting provides measurable, often financial,

connections to the collaborative brand development of content creators.

These findings reveal three interrelated sets of affordances (i.e., affordances for aspiration, connection, and accounting; RQ₂) experienced by both content creators and their audiences on YouNow. Importantly, these affordances support strategies for branding on social media. The personal branding practices investigated in the first research question were assumed to be, given the literature on self-branding, enacted by the content creators themselves; however, this study suggests that, on social live streaming platforms, both content creators and audiences mutually construct the brand of the broadcaster.

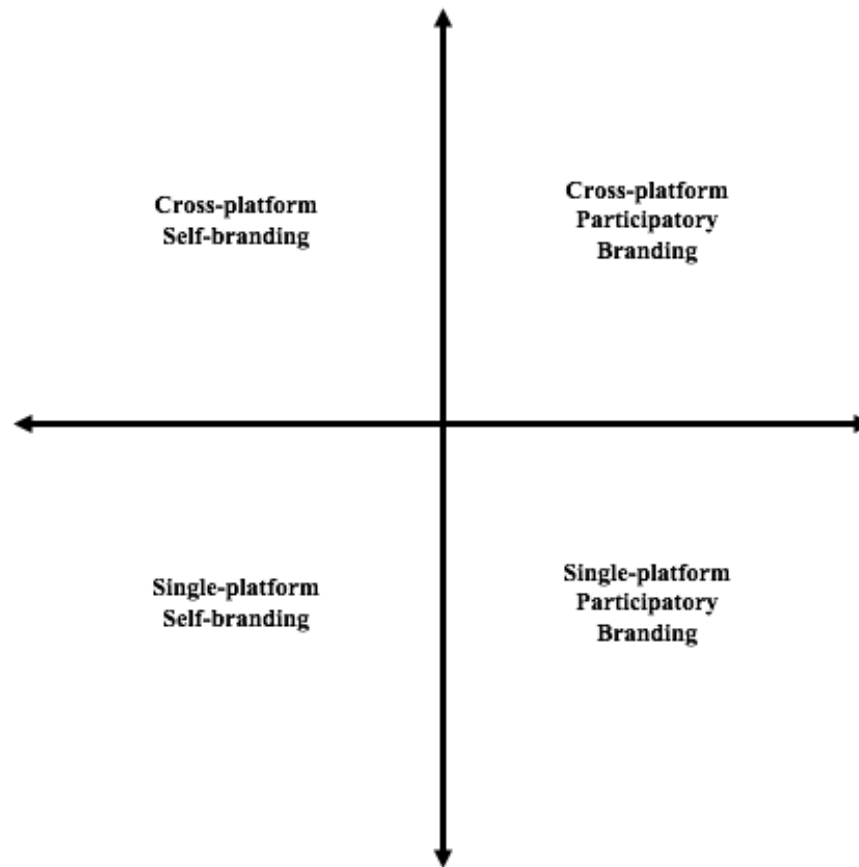
Discussion

The affordances of live streaming for aspiration, connection, and accounting support the notion that personal branding on social live streaming platforms is co-constructed by individual creative workers and their audiences. The results of this study suggest theoretical and practical implications for digital labor. Participatory branding begins to trace the relationship between branding and social media affordances and sets the stage for future theorizing in this area. Using an affordances approach to understand content creation online, I offer a typology of personal branding on social media platforms. This typology presents both theoretical groundwork for researchers and practical guidelines for digital laborers. These implications are situated within the larger social media economy hallmarked by precarious, un(der)paid labor, in which creative workers profit—or fail to—based on their public-facing brand.

Self-branding has been traditionally studied as a highly individualized process wherein individuals are the creative directors of their entrepreneurial self-presentation (Marwick, 2013; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gandini, 2016). However, the site of inquiry (i.e., a

social live streaming platform) compels a more critical understanding of the role of audiences in personal branding and content creation. This study therefore examined *participatory* branding and sheds light on the role of viewers and audiences in the branding process. Importantly, not all personal branding is participatory; participatory branding is positioned in a larger platform ecosystem in which technological affordances (e.g., Nagy & Neff, 2015) dictate both affective performance (Scolere et al., 2018) and division of creative labor between influencers and audiences. Whereas Scolere and colleagues (2018) consider the imagined audience in platform-specific self-branding, live streaming effectively minimizes the distance created through imagination. Participatory branding assumes the audience is not only present for content creation, but they take an active role in co-constructing content alongside the creator.

In order to map the terrain of personal branding on social media, I propose a typology (Figure 1) of platforms on two dimensions: locus of promotion (i.e., single-platform or cross-platform promotion) and audience activity (i.e., participatory branding or self-branding).



Locus of promotion traces the affordances for cross-platform promotion, or lack thereof, on social media platforms. Looking beyond the *ability* to share content to an external public, this dimension emphasizes the strategic design of platforms that *encourage* disseminating content or promoting a brand on multiple platforms simultaneously. Locus of promotion intersects with a second dimension, audience activity. This dimension highlights the relative activity or passivity of audiences during the process of content creation. Creative labor on social media may range widely from an individual content creator to a highly participatory brand found on sites such as YouNow in the present study. Importantly, these dimensions are continuous, not dichotomous. Platforms may afford more or less cross-platform promotion, or platforms may afford a greater or lesser presence of the audience in

content creation. Overall, this typology is intended to locate social media platforms in relation to each other based on their affordances, or constraints, for cross-platform promotion and participatory branding.

This study examined YouNow, a social live streaming platform on which creators and audiences jointly produce content through recorded social interaction. YouNow is a representative example of *cross-platform participatory branding*. It is participatory because of the co-construction of content between the live streamers and their viewers, and the platform emphasizes sharing moments from live streams across all social media platforms. Every profile on YouNow, for broadcasters and viewers, links users to the individual's other social media accounts. In fact, YouNow does not host "native" accounts; you must sign in to YouNow by using your login information from another social media platform. All of these design choices position YouNow in constant comparison to the rest of the social media ecology at all times. YouNow relies on cross-platform promotion to bring viewers to the site, and likewise, YouNow's broadcasters rely on cross-platform promotion to launch their social media entrepreneurship.

Cross-platform self-branding accounts for a substantial portion of current research on social media branding and creative labor (e.g., Abidin, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy, 2017). Platforms like Instagram and YouTube have design features that encourage the dispersion of content across other social media platforms, but the content itself is primarily produced by a single creator who maintains his or her self-brand. Similar to YouNow, both YouTube and Instagram aim to increase engagement with local content by drawing in viewers from external platforms, while simultaneously using their content as a method of maximizing their brand presence across all platforms. Of course, self-branding is a

compulsory, but unpaid, element of creative work (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Maintaining a personal brand across all platforms compels an investment in Baym's (2015) notion of relational labor, the work of connecting with audiences and performing intimacy.

Scholars have largely assumed cross-platform promotion is an inherent element of self-branding, but there may be cases worth considering where this is not an imperative. *Single-platform self-branding* classifies platforms in which content creators brand themselves as individuals but within a platform design that does not necessarily promote or rely heavily on cross-platform promotion. Facebook pages or Etsy shops exemplify this phenomenon, as entrepreneurs using these sites for business purposes may be limited to the extent that they wish to gain a following externally. There may be other benefits to using Facebook for branding, including the large user base and relative ease of "liking" pages to increase overall engagement. Likewise, Etsy entrepreneurs may conduct more business from their brand presence on the website, but it may not afford network growth as well as other social media platforms. Early research on "camgirls" (Senft, 2008), mommy blogging (Gregg, 2008), and networking in the rise of web 2.0 (Marwick, 2013) examined personal branding housed in a singular location online. As the number of social media platforms soared over the last decade, this typology addresses single-platform self-branding in tandem with other variants as cross-platform promotion and audience activity have complicated the branding process.

Finally, *single-platform participatory branding* highlights those platforms that tend to constrain cross-platform promotion but afford substantial interaction with audiences in co-constructing content. Functionally, users can retweet on Twitter, repin on Pinterest, reblog on Tumblr, or crosspost on Reddit, all supporting a form of participatory branding through interaction. The sense of diminished distance between content creators and audiences, as well

as the collaboration of audiences in creating content themselves, supports the notion that some platforms afford more participation in the branding process than others (see Scolere & Humphreys, 2016). Additionally, the aforementioned platforms have a comparatively restricted reach. For example, the design of Twitter or Reddit does not allow cross-posting to a visually-driven platform like Instagram due to the nature of the content on each site. Thus, though these platforms are highly participatory, the locus of promotion remains generally confined to the single platform.

This typology of personal branding on social media accomplishes three distinct goals. First, it helps to set the stage for future theorizing. Although the results of this study focused exclusively on participatory branding that emphasized cross-platform promotion, this type of personal branding sits adjacent to other previously studied forms of self-branding on social media. Thus, the typology is a mechanism to organize participatory branding as part of the larger phenomenon of personal branding on social media. Next, the typology helps to locate platforms in relation to each other. Drawing on a technological affordances approach (e.g., Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Evans et al., 2017), this typology organizes social media platforms based on their practices as researchers currently understand them. The typology of personal branding on social media invokes imagined affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015) from the perspective of both content creators and viewers, each with their own perceived uses and goals on the platform, and it theoretically roots previous research on affordance-driven branding (e.g., Scolere et al., 2018). This also welcomes future research to move beyond purely descriptive studies of personal branding on different social media platforms and instead explore theory construction. Finally, this typology pushes the boundaries for what can be considered “content creation.” Indeed, social media entrepreneurship is made up of

traditional video content creators, but also Instagram targeted advertisements, multi-platform lifestyle bloggers, Etsy shops, Twitch streamers, and more. The definition of content creator has been relatively narrow in past research, and this typology compels a reconsideration of who, and what, gets branded on social media.

This study also offers practical implications for both content creators and audiences on social media. For content creators, it highlights the potential benefits of using live streaming to build a following for translating to larger online status. Given the smaller, more intimate setting on a platform like YouNow, amateur content creators can make deep connections with viewers in real-time. Interestingly, though gender was not a focus on inquiry in this study, the primary categorization of #guys and #girls on YouNow also support Duffy's (2017) notion that social media professionals brand themselves through a reliance on normative assumptions of gender performance. The process of self-categorization (e.g., #guys, #girls, #lgbt, etc.) on YouNow may have implications for affective self-presentation during live streams on the platform. The typology also serves the interests of social media content creators as they consider the necessary labor required on different platforms, especially given the amount of free labor invested in personal branding that goes, at least directly, uncompensated. For audiences and viewers, this study reveals the unsettlingly large reliance on reverse-pay labor on platforms like YouNow. Although viewers are able to build closer relationships with content creators through participatory branding, it comes with the financial expectation of support for content creators. This unwritten contract of sorts creates a slippery slope for the economic relationship between content creators and audiences, particularly considering the lack of pressure being applied to platforms and external corporations for more adequate pay in the social media industries.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study is not without limitations. The scope of inquiry was limited to the YouNow platform throughout the data collection process. Although data were triangulated from YouNow, researchers do not have the ability to make claims about other live streaming sites with different affordances, platform cultures, and income models. Despite its limitations, this study presents a vigorous foundation for future research on participatory branding on social media. Future research can continue to refine the typology of personal branding in order to empirically place platforms within each quadrant, rather than provide mere exemplars. Additionally, future research should question the role of the audience in all content creation, not just viewers on social live streaming platforms. The notion of participatory branding should be examined across social media, with creator-audience communication at the forefront.

This study represents a step toward understanding the social uses and affordances of live streaming platforms as part of the larger economy of social media content creation. Using an affordances approach, the social aspects of live streaming were held in equal regard to the material design for the study of personal branding on social media. Participatory branding offers a counterpoint to existing research on self-branding, suggesting that some platforms may promote a decentralized approach to personal branding that privileges the role of the audience. Situating participatory branding alongside other forms of personal branding in the presented typology, this study helps map branding practices across platforms. Overall, these findings support both the theoretical development of personal branding on social media, and it also reveals the practical, sociomaterial role of design in cross-platform promotion, audience interaction, and building a personal brand for practitioners in the social

media economy.

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VITA

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EDUCATION

M.S., Texas Christian University, 2019 (Communication Studies)

Thesis: “Co-Constructing a Participatory Brand: The Affordances of Live Streaming for Social Media Entrepreneurship”

Committee: Andrew Ledbetter (chair), Amorette Hinderaker, Daxton “Chip” Stewart

B.S., *magna cum laude*, Texas Christian University, 2017 (Communication Studies)

Honors thesis: “When Product Loss Minimizes Product Harm: The Reframed Narrative of Blue Bell Creameries’ Listeriosis Crisis”

Committee: Amorette Hinderaker (chair), Andrew Ledbetter, Amiso George

APPOINTMENTS

Editorial Assistant, *Communication Monographs* (January 2019–August 2019)

Editor: Paul Schrodt

Laboratory Instructor, Texas Christian University (August 2017–December 2018)

COMM 10123 – Communicating Effectively (6 sections; 20 students/section)

PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

Meisner, C., & Hinderaker, A. (in press). Reframed crisis narratives: Localized agenda setting, product loyalty, and pre-existing organizational narratives in the 2015 Blue Bell Creameries listeriosis crisis. *Western Journal of Communication*.

Manuscripts in Progress

Meisner, C., & Ledbetter, A. M. (in progress). Co-constructing a participatory brand: The joint affordances of live streaming for social media entrepreneurship. Intended submission to *New Media & Society*.

Meisner, C. (in progress). Logging in and coming out: Branding the queer master narrative for online celebrity. Intended submission to *Communication, Culture & Critique*.

Hinderaker, A., & **Meisner, C.** (in progress). Queer identity in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Intended submission to *Journal of Communication Inquiry*.

Manuscripts in Preparation

Meisner, C. (in preparation). Exploring “brand friendliness” on Instagram (working title).

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Meisner, C. (2018). Logging in and coming out: Self-branding, identity, and the queer master narrative. Paper presented at the Association of Internet Researchers, Montreal, QC.

Meisner, C. (2018). Self-branding on live streaming technologies: An affordances approach to digital labor. Work-in-progress paper presented at Going Live: Exploring Live Digital Technologies and Live Streaming Practices (preconference), Association of Internet Researchers, Montreal, QC.

Hinderaker, A., & **Meisner, C.** (2018). “Like part of me is just inherently wrong”: The narrative of conflicting identities of LGBTQ+ members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Paper presented in the Religious Communication Division at the 104th Annual Convention of the National Communication Association, Salt Lake City, UT.

Betts, T. E. S., & **Meisner, C.** (2018). Getting what you paid for: Unobtrusive control and socialization in college sororities. Paper presented in the Group Communication Division at the 104th Annual Convention of the National Communication Association, Salt Lake City, UT.

Meisner, C., & Hinderaker, A. (2017). When product loss minimizes product harm: The reframed narrative of Blue Bell Creameries’ 2015 listeriosis crisis. Paper presented in the Mass Communication Division at the 103rd Annual Convention of the National Communication Association, Dallas, TX.

GRANTS & AWARDS

Recipient, Cornell Fellowship, Cornell University, 2019–2024

“What’s Next?” Communication Grant (\$2,000; with PI Andrew Ledbetter), Bob Schieffer College of Communication, Texas Christian University, 2018

LGBTQ Caucus Travel Assistance, National Communication Association, 2018

College of Communication Travel Grant (\$500), Texas Christian University, 2018

Graduate Studies International Travel Grant (\$800), Texas Christian University, 2018

Graduate Studies Domestic Travel Grant (\$400), Texas Christian University, 2017

Graduate Assistantship, Texas Christian University, 2017-2019

Top Senior Scholar in Communication Studies, Texas Christian University, 2017

National Champion in undergraduate research presentation, Pi Kappa Delta, 2017

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES & SERVICE

Departmental Service

Volunteer Judge, TCU Speech & Debate Intercollegiate Invitational (2017; 2018)

Volunteer Judge, Wisdom Award for Public Speaking Excellence (2017; 2018)

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Association of Internet Researchers, current member (2018–)

National Communication Association, current member (2017–)

ABSTRACT

CO-CONSTRUCTING A PARTICIPATORY BRAND: THE JOINT AFFORDANCES OF LIVE STREAMING FOR SOCIAL MEDIA ENTREPRENEURSHIP

by Colten Meisner, M.S., 2019
Department of Communication Studies
Texas Christian University

Thesis Advisor: Andrew Ledbetter, Professor of Communication Studies

Creative workers in the social media industries face the relentless imperative to present themselves as media entrepreneurs, marketing their “brand” to external audiences, followers, and potential customers. This study challenges the notion of “self-branding” (Marwick, 2013; Duffy, 2017) and suggests that, on social live streaming platforms, content creators engage in a joint branding effort with their audiences which I term *participatory branding*.

Participatory branding redistributes the labor of personal branding on social media and emphasizes the work of audiences in helping to shape the brand of a social media entrepreneur. Drawing on an affordances approach, I then propose a typology of personal branding on social media that maps the terrain of other platforms as it relates to design, cross-platform promotion, and audience activity in content creation.