You are a brand: social media managers' personal branding and "the future audience"

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Abstract

Purpose – Social media management is an emerging profession that is growing as companies increasingly adopt social media. The purpose of this paper is to analyze social media managers' personal branding.

Design/methodology/approach – In-depth qualitative data is drawn from 20 semi-structured interviews with social media managers and supported by three years of orienting fieldwork in Toronto, Canada.

Findings – Social media managers are responsible for managing and executing organizations' brands and presence on social media and digital platforms. As lead users of social media, social media managers provide critical insight into the emerging practices of personal branding on social media. "The future audience" is introduced to describe how individuals project a curated brand for all future unknown and unanticipated audiences, which emphasizes a professional identity. Due to workplace uncertainty, social media managers embody the mentality of being "always-on-the-job-market", which is a driver for personal branding in their attempt to gain or maintain employment.

Originality/value – While personal branding is largely discussed by industry professionals, there is a need for empirical research on personal branding that examines how various employee groups experience personal branding. This research fills this gap by analyzing how people working in social media brand their identity and how their personal branding is used to market themselves to gain and maintain employment. The development of "the future audience" and "always-on-the-job-market" can be used to understand other professions and experiences of personal branding.

Keywords Social media, Personal branding, Future audience, Self-branding, Social media managers, Social media management

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Everyone is individually branded: one may not realize, acknowledge, embrace or manage their brand, but it certainly exists. In North America and in various industrialized countries, the importance of the personal brand has emerged as a recurring topic in popular discourse and academia during the past ten years, under the titles of personal branding (Gehl, 2011; Wee and Brooks, 2010), human branding (Close *et al.*, 2011; Moulard *et al.*, 2015), personal marketing (Kotler *et al.*, 2005), self-branding (Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013, p. 2012) and self-marketing (Shepherd, 2005). In this research, personal branding is defined as the process of developing, harnessing and classifying personal information and providing a comprehensive narrative for others to easily understand one's identity—often using social media.

Social media managers are at the forefront of personal branding and offer a unique perspective to understand the personal branding strategies that they are personally experiencing and professionally witnessing on social media. Considering that these social media professionals engage with their target community and customers using social media, they exist at the intersection of social media users, social media consumers, social media professionals and social media influencers. Social media managers experience the pressures of social media first-hand, and they are also part of a newly emerging profession based on social media.

The research focuses on the personal branding of social media managers as a professional practice by linking the issues of personal branding with the emergence of a new profession: social media management. Social media managers are responsible for managing and executing organizations' brands and presence on various social media and digital platforms. Social media managers are acutely aware of the necessity of personal branding for career success (Shade and Jacobson, 2015). They develop and execute this social strategy at the digital frontline; they are digital creators and producers who are heavily engaged with social media management and personify the digitally savvy individuals leading social media trends. As lead users of social media, social media managers provide

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critical insight into the emerging practices of personal branding on social media.

While personal branding is largely discussed by industry professionals, there is a need for empirical research on personal branding that examines how various professions experience personal branding. This research seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how people working in social media brand their own identity and how personal branding is used to market themselves to gain and maintain employment. Specifically, how do social media managers build their personal brand? To address this, the research analyzes social media managers' practices of personal branding and the presentation of self on social media.

The research analyzes how social media managers work *in* social media—referring to the work practice of social media management—and also do the work *of* social media—referring to the execution of their personal brand using social media—to leverage a strategic advantage in the job market. Using a qualitative mixed method approach, including three years of orienting fieldwork in Toronto, Canada, and 20 semi-structured interviews with social media managers, "the future audience" is introduced to describe how individuals project their personal brand for all future and unknown audiences on social media. The research describes the prevailing strategy of creating and crafting a curated personal brand, which necessitates continuous labour of presenting a curated identity. Finally, the research identifies the "always-on-the-job-market" mentality due to the latent precarity and repeated "hustle" to survive in an unstable labour market. Section 2 outlines previous scholarly literature on personal branding and social media management.

2. Literature review

2.1 Personal branding

The concept of "personal positioning" has gained popularity since Ries and Trout introduced the idea in 1981. 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 experts in industry are presenting the same arguments with renewed force and a focus on social media as the locus of personal branding (Broad, 2016; Marcoux, 2016).

In the scholarly literature, there is immense overlap in the use of the terms "human brand" and "personal brand", as the terms are often used interchangeably. In a systematic review, Gorbatov *et al.* (2018) contend that, with over 100 published papers on personal branding, the scholarly area is fragmented with multiple diverging definitions and imprecise conceptual boundaries with human branding being a closely related concept to personal branding. The human brand has previously referred to "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications effort" (Thomson, 2006, p. 104); however, Close *et al.* (2011) embrace a more inclusive definition as a persona that is well known or emerging. As a point of differentiation, the human brand is sometimes used to refer to traditional celebrities (such as famous athletes or musicians), whereas personal brand may be used to describe those who are more micro-celebrities (Khamis *et al.*, 2017; Senft, 2008, 2013) or those more amateur on social media (Chen, 2013). As such, in this paper, the term personal branding is adopted throughout.

Personal branding has evolved, which can be attributed to the proliferation of computer-mediated communication and the rise of social media that have afforded people the ability to use the internet to create and foster self-presentations (Albright and Simmens, 2014). Today, personal branding relies on a combination of the presentation of self offline and the presentation of self online. Therefore, personal branding is not the same as the presentation of self that existed offline; however, personal branding is also not completely new and different. Self-presentation is an important driver of brand-related electronic word-of-mouth (Pasternak *et al.*, 2017). The technology itself does not necessitate change; rather, social media has afforded a new arena for identity creation, performance and management.

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. Using social media, the information is amalgamated and presented in an information exchange system whereby identity is created and consumed by online audiences. 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 and Hancock, 2011). An individual can be selective in their self-presentation techniques (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011) and in that selection process can present themselves in positive ways (Bazarova and Choi, 2014; Chou and Edge, 2012).

Until recently, industry professionals have largely monopolized the conversation on personal branding by writing popular books on how to develop a brand, which is largely tied to career success; for example, Broad's (2016) *The New Brand You: Your New Image Makes the Sale for You*; Marcouz's (2016) *Be The Brand: The Ultimate Guide to Building Your Personal Brand*; and Chritton's (2014) *Personal Branding for Dummies*. 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.

In 2005, Shepherd stated, "The self marketing territory is currently 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. Emerging scholarly research on personal branding has analyzed the branding practices of various professions such as chefs (Dion and Arnould, 2016), faculty (Close *et al.*, 2011), freelance professionals (Gandini, 2015), artists (Moulard *et al.*, 2015), fashion models (Parmentier *et al.*, 2013) and fashion bloggers (Duffy and Hund, 2015). Previous research has found that fashion models engage in the branding strategy of standing out while also fitting in (Parmentier *et al.*, 2013); fashion bloggers portray the post-feminist ideal of "having it all" by performing passionate work and showcasing a glamourous life (Duffy and Hund, 2015); chefs embody two possible models of brand management including a distributed or fragmented brand and a unified personification of the brand

(Dion and Arnould, 2016); research productivity is the strongest brand cue for new faculty that influences academic placement (Close *et al.*, 2011); the practice of self-branding for freelance professionals is an investment for the return of social capital (Gandini, 2015); and for artists, their authenticity is the most impactful factor of their brand that influences consumers' perceptions and behavioural intentions (Moulard *et al.*, 2015). Recognizing the professional practices of different professions is important to understanding the emerging work practices.

Prior research has consistently pointed to the role and performance of authenticity in achieving a credible brand (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2018; Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016; Moulard *et al.*, 2014, 2015). 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. Similarly, Murthy (2012) 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. Unlike prior research that tends to focus on personal brands in established organizational fields (Parmentier *et al.*, 2013), this research focusses on an emerging industry: social media management.

2.2 Social media management

Social media management is growing as a field and as an emerging profession, yet, to date, there is little research that examines social media management as an occupation. Shepherd and Shtern interviewed digital strategists to understand how the workers conceptualize their work as "cultural intermediaries" in the digital media economy (Kruse *et al.*, 2016). Montalvo (2011) identifies 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 that the main responsibility of community management is to update social media content. Tørning *et al.* (2015) interviewed social media managers in Denmark to identify the challenges of organizing social media and perceptions on the return on investment of various social media activities. Based on an analysis of Australian job postings and interviews with social strategists, McCosker (2017) identifies that social strategists work in-house for various organizations and that social media work is diffused across industries. Kwon *et al.* (2013) surveyed 400 students at a business school in the USA to gauge what qualifications were expected of a social media coordinator and argue that universities need to prepare students for jobs in social media. More recently, Kanuri *et al.* (2018) interviewed social media professionals to identify the optimal scheduling of posting to social media, and Bossio *et al.* (2020) analyze the contexts of social media work and identify how social media managers are "boundary setters".

While previous research tends to identify a specific sector or the managerial perspective on an emerging profession and has implications for how effectively social media managers perform their job, there is a gap between understanding the professional identities and personal branding practices of social media managers. Social media managers represent an important occupational group in the digital economy that has received limited scholarly attention. Gill (2002) reflects on her research on web designers and 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" (p. 75). Similarly, 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, 2020). 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 *et al.*, 2015; Jacobson and Shade, 2018)—is critically important in understanding the shifts in work practices. By specifically focussing on social media managers as digital creators, this research responds to Gill's plea to study new media workers and contributes to the developing research agenda on personal branding.

3. Theoretical framework

Personal branding is largely about self-presentation and impression management (Gergen, 1991, 2009; Goffman, 1959; Papacharissi, 2011; Robinson, 2007). Symbolic interactionism is used as a theoretical lens to understand social media managers' presentation of self on social media. While the sociology of professions has its roots in functionalism, the symbolic interactionist approach rejects functionalism and instead sees professional titles and positions as constructed (Nolin, 2008). Given the focus on social media managers' self-perceived identities and the practices of personal branding in relation to others, as it pertains to their work practices, symbolic interactionism is used as an appropriate theoretical lens.

Symbolic interactionism asserts that the concept of self is created in the interactions with others. The social interactionist perspective has its sociological roots in Mead's work that claims, "Our sense of self is really our perception of society's evaluation of us" (Robinson, 2007, p. 95). Symbolic interactionism has also been adopted as a contemporary theory to study the sociology of work: Abbott (1988) theorizes how to understand the evolution of professions; Beck (2000) decries the "end of the work society" with the decrease in full-time secure employment; Hodson and Sullivan (2011) analyze the high-tech workplace; Sennett (1998) explores work and identity based on how employees develop narratives to find meaning in their working lives; Huffman and Torres (2002) describe how work is gendered and socially and arbitrarily constructed; Marwick and boyd (2010) use symbolic interactionism to understand the collapsed audience and the imagined audience on Twitter; and Hochschild (2003) embraces Goffman's performativity theory and Marxist theory of alienation to understand "emotional labor". Goffman is one of the leading proponents of symbolic interactionism, and this research embraces Goffman's presentation of self as a theoretical lens and extends the theorization to understand social media managers' personal branding on social media.

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Identity is related to the creation of who we think we are and the subsequent presentation of the self to others. 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). Social actors engage in a performance where identity is negotiated and developed, which Goffman (1959) calls impression management. 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 preserve positive impressions that encourage the audience to see them in favourable ways.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model serves as a theoretical lens to study online impression management (Hochschild, 2003; Hogan and Quan Haase, 2010; Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). Goffman (1959) suggests that there are two regions of a performance: the front stage and the back stage. 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.

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. While Goffman (1959) specifically states that he is only dealing with face-to-face interaction, his theorization has proven useful to understand computer-mediated communication and online identity (Gergen, 2009; Hogan, 2010; Hogan and Quan Haase, 2010; Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2011; Pooley, 2010; Thumim, 2012) and is extended in this paper to understand social media managers' personal branding.

4. Research approach

The in-depth qualitative research involved primary data collection from three years of fieldwork in Toronto, Canada, and semi-structured interviews. The three years of orienting fieldwork and participant observation, included attendance at technology meet-ups, networking events, industry conferences, girls in tech events, influencer events, company parties and product launches in Toronto. The fieldwork added context that informed the development of the interview guide. Rather than an artificial setting such as a laboratory or interview, participant observation refers to "the study of people in their own time and space, in their own everyday lives" (Burawoy *et al.*, 1991, p. 2). The internal validity and reliability of this research is supported by the fieldwork, which provided strong support for the research findings that emerged from the interviews (Schofield, 2002; Pryvor and Grossbart, 2005).

The 20 semi-structured interviews, forming the core data set used for the research, comprised 14 women and 6 men. The research received approval from the Research Ethics Board at a Canadian university. The research sought relevance rather than representativeness, which is typical in qualitative inquiry (Renton and Simmonds, 2017; Teddlie and Yu, 2007). Women are over-represented in the sample, which is indicative and representative of the gender-divide of social media management more broadly. It is widely recognized and apparent that women dominate much of the work in social media. A 2017 report found that between 70% and 80% of social media workers on Payscale (a salary comparison website) were women (Duffy and Schwartz, 2018). Other research in this area has similarly embraced a women-dominated sample to reflect the population, for example, Duffy (2015) focused exclusively on women in a study of social media producers.

A diverse group of social media managers was selected to reflect varied gender, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Table 1). Guided by the theoretical framework, the qualitative interview guide included a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The open-ended questions allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the unique experiences and personal branding practices of social media 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 60 min and were conducted in participants' workplaces, when possible, to provide insight into the working practices of participants and to contextualize the interview data. A qualitative research design is embraced because this form of work is nascent and quantitative methods may not have uncovered the in-depth information required to understand this emerging area.

The interviews were professionally transcribed, which resulted in 546 pages of single-spaced transcribed data from the interviews, and double-checked for quality and accuracy. The qualitative software package, NVivo, was used to organize, analyze and code the data. The data was iteratively coded and involved identifying emerging themes in the data (Charmaz, 2006). The preliminary codes were those that repeatedly emerged in the interviews. Following the preliminary coding, codes were grouped together using thematic analysis in secondary coding in an iterative process. Aligned with other academic inductive qualitative research, the reliability of the coding is supported by repeated coding over time; moreover, the findings are further supported by the fieldwork and participant observation, which is commonly used in other academic mixed methods research (Pryor and Grossbart, 2005; Charmaz, 2006). The findings and discussion are presented below. Direct quotations are used to highlight the findings and provide agency for participants to speak for themselves. All personal data and information has been anonymized.

Participants had an average of five years working in social media. The participants were largely educated with most participants having a bachelor's degree. More than half of participants were between 25 and 30 years old, and participants' income ranged from under $30,000 to over $100,000 with the median income of $60,000–$69,999 (CAD).

Table 1 Participant profile

#	Name	Gender	Company	Background	Years worked	Age	Salary ($)
1	Amira	Female	Startup	Master's degree	6+	25-30	60,000-69,999
2	Christina	Female	Agency[a]	Bachelor's degree	4-5	25-30	60,000-69,999
3	Evelyn	Female	Agency	Certificate or diploma below bachelor's level	5+	25-30	N/A
4	Rizal	Male	Freelance	Certificate or diploma above bachelor's degree	6	36+	<30,000
5	Brooke	Female	Entertainment	Master's degree	8	31-35	60,000-69,999
6	Ava	Female	Financial services	Certificate or diploma above bachelor's degree	5	25-30	100,000+
7	Dale	Male	Not-for-profit	Bachelor's degree	5	31-35	50,000-59,999
8	Diya	Female	Education	Bachelor's degree	3	25-30	50,000-59,999
9	Ethan	Male	Media organization	Certificate or diploma above bachelor's degree	3	36+	40,000-49,999
10	Tali	Female	Freelance	Bachelor's degree	15	36+	70,000-79,999
11	Maria	Female	Tele-communications	Bachelor's degree	2+	25-30	60,000-69,999
12	Dionne	Female	Technology	Bachelor's degree	8	25-30	80,000-89,999
13	Noah	Male	Social media	Master's degree	5.5	31-34	60,000-69,999
14	Alison	Female	Education	Bachelor's degree	5	25-30	70,000-79,999
15	Kat	Female	Retail	Certificate or diploma above bachelor's degree	3+	25-30	50,000-59,999
16	Liam	Male	Retail	Certificate or diploma above bachelor's degree	5+	31-34	N/A
17	Jill	Female	Freelance	Bachelor's degree	2-4	18-24	N/A
18	Riley	Female	Technology	Bachelor's degree	6	31-34	60,000-69,999
19	Ted	Male	Sports	Bachelor's degree	6	25-30	40,000-49,999
20	Sabrina	Female	Entertainment	Certificate or diploma above bachelor's degree	5	25-30	90,000-99,999

Note: [a]Agency refers to full-service marketing and communications companies

5. Findings and discussion

Social media managers use and internalize personal branding as an integral practice in their professional and personal lives. 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 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. In the following sections, "the future audience" is introduced to describe how one's personal brand is strategically curated and positioned as "always-on-the-job-market".

5.1 Future audience

Beyond the current audience—both the actual and imagined audience—social media managers 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). Building on Litt's (2012) conceptualization of the imagined audience, this research argues that a third audience is important in understanding personal branding on social media: *the future audience*. The future audience describes how individuals project their personal brand for all future and unknown audiences on social media, which emphasizes the professional identity for future employers.

Social media managers repeatedly 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 their personal branding strategy and what they deem acceptable to post. 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 explains 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 general sentiment amongst social media managers that they feel compelled to take ownership of their own brand through selective self-exposure for any and all future and unknown audiences. Beyond a general future audience, the emphasis is on the future professional audience of future employers.

Contrary to the offline "stage" as described by Goffman (1959), on the online stage, the actor (or individual) is both the performer and the audience. The styled design of personal branding online comprises the "setting" of the performance (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). 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, social media managers transcend their performance and attend to the performance as the actor, their imagined audience (Litt, 2012), and the future audience simultaneously, which directly relates to their work practices.

Despite the term *personal* branding, the identity that participants foregrounded is one that is first-and-foremost *professional*. When giving advice for the next generation, Jill suggests, "Keep your social media professional so that when you get to the hiring stage, people will be impressed with what

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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. Social media managers described that to be effective, one needs 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 [1]. Personal branding strategies attempt to ensure that the individual is in control of information presented to the audience. Thus, their performance needs to be carefully maintained and worked on over time because the audience's impressions can easily change. When developing a personal brand online, social media managers spoke of positioning themselves more prominently using social media 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, these 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. Participants used incidents such as these as reminders of what can occur from, even one, inappropriate moment on social media. Participants reflected that 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".

As a result of the context collapse (Marwick and Boyd, 2011), social media managers engage the "lowest common denominator approach" (Hogan, 2010) to personal branding on social media by ensuring their posts are self-filtered to be acceptable to all audiences—which is extended to include the future audience. As Noah suggests, people can move their less desirable posts to more private social media platforms; however, it is difficult to segment audiences, even on private social media platforms. 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 social media 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 molding herself into the right kind of subject. She describes that 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 loathes 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!'" Three new colleagues that she had yet to meet followed her on social media, which she considered to cross the line in terms of etiquette. Social media managers' social media accounts become professional accounts, which requires pre-emptively 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 simplistic intervention is electing not to use a public profile on social media, but this publicity is also a necessity in personal branding; however, there is a trend towards increased visibility across social media platforms for all current and future audiences.

5.2 Human brand as a curated brand

Curation emerged as a recurrent thematic to describe social media managers' self-presentation practices on social media and the practices of personal branding for the future audience. Social media managers articulated that "curation" was the chief strategy in crafting a personal brand. Although social media is often dismissed as mere "fun" (Angus *et al.*, 2010), 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 for the future audience. Personal branding is not merely a storytelling strategy; rather, curation serves as a lens to recognize the memory preservation that social media managers—including

oneself, one's current network and one's future employers—can review in the future.

For social media managers, curation was naturalized and merely meant selecting what type of content would be used on social media and what type of content was excluded in crafting their personal brand. Amira explains how online influence is curated and developed over time and reinforces the link between influence and curation. 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".

Curation traditionally referred 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 and 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 archiving 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, Bernardini (2008) explores the curation of knowledge in oral cultures of the Hopi villages; in medicine, 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, Hogan (2010) understands the algorithms designed by the site maintainers (the computer) to be the curator; in health, Crichton and Koch (2007) explore the curation of self-identity with dementia patients; in information studies, Williams *et al.* (2009) analyze how people curate their personal digital archives in relation to personal information management, and similarly, Whittaker (2011) uses the term "personal information curation" to describe the information lifecycle of information curation, and Jacobson (2012) uses information curation to describe an alternative information practice, which includes creativity, social networking and identity creation. More recently, 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.

The use of social media extends beyond the seeking, using and sharing of information but is also implicated in social media managers' identity creation. Social media managers 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. Social media 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. Social media managers package themselves and sell themselves to employers, friends and the public through social media for both current and future audiences. They 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.

Amira's comment about searching for a person online reflects the perceived disconnect between online and offline identities, which also valorizes the offline identity as that which is "real" and the online identity as that which is "unreal" or able to be faked. In recent years, there has been a backlash against personal branding on social media, which is premised on the representations being fake, inauthentic and narcissistic. Amira acknowledges that the 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. Mirroring Goffman's (1959) online and offline stages, the use of "curation" in the articulation of personal branding strategies meant that participants recognized that not all aspects of their lives are shared. This is particularly important when considering the future audience, which is focused on future employers. Curation involves the selection of moments, images, videos or vignettes that showcase how they wish to be seen by others – now and in the future. In this way, curation involves a combination of aspirational and authentic representations whereby social media managers package themselves to their audiences.

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, social media managers 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. Participants recognized that the data, as Riley says, "lives forever". There is both the appeal of permanence and the fear of permanence. 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".

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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 (Srinivasan *et al.*, 2010). An individual'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.

Curation is a filter that not only provides a lens through which to see the world but also serves as a self-imposed sift of information. On social media, a "filter" is something that is added to an image to enhance the original. Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and other social media platforms have built-in filters that can be added to images to create a desirable visual effect that enhances the images. 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. 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 result in social media managers feeling 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. For social media managers, the presentation of self on social media is not merely filtered or edited but curated in purposeful and calculated ways. 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, the curation on social media for the future audience is value laden and ascribed significance in its manifestation.

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, participants explained that the personal curation of one's brand serves as a reflection of one's professionalism and digital literacy that future employers may use to assess potential job candidates.

5.3 Always-on-the-job-market

For social media managers, the future audience manifests in the pervasive sense of uncertainty, which resulted in them feeling and acting that they were *always-on-the-job-market*. 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 for the future audience. 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 often no clear guidelines to success or promotion in social media management. Social media managers articulated that they needed to be entrepreneurial, which often means self-promotion and self-marketing. 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 social media managers' work situation.

For social media managers, always-on-the-job-market manifests in continually showcasing their personal brand using 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.

Effective personal branding for social media managers means continually working at presenting themselves in a way that allows them to be seen in a favourable way by others (Wee and Brooks, 2010; Wilson and Blumenthal, 2008). 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, yet these ideals of personal branding problematically neglect the immense and perpetual work that is required of social media managers, expected by employers and normalized in society.

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. 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 participants interviewed lost their job over the following year. Changing jobs, frequently with shorter gigs, is on the rise (Harris, 2014); however, this job hopping is often due to structural forces—such as downsizing, outsourcing and organizational consolidation—rather than individual choice.

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As a result, an impetus for personal branding lies in the precarious work situation where social media managers 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 by the participants. Christina says she always advises people to build 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 even 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 social media job. Noah describes how using social media allowed him to break down barriers to communicate and meet with interesting people, including the heads of various companies. He purposefully sought out the leaders of large firms and responded to their tweets 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***ing pile somewhere".

The impetus to unceasingly improve oneself manifests in learning new skills 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 naturalization 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 in social media management, there exists a normalized continuous need to maintain the brand for the future audience. Even though Noah is well known as a social media manager, 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 for participants that it was no longer considered work; the practices are embedded into the everyday lived experiences of branding for social media managers.

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, social media managers' personal identity becomes subsumed by their professional personality, which constrains acceptable forms of subjectivity. Social media managers explain there is a perpetual need to do more, be more, share more and live more on social media to improve their personal brand. Living in a society of excess, which is not driven merely by consumerism or greed but by uncertainty, precarity and unpredictability, results in social media managers being always-on-the-job-market.

6. Conclusion

Social media managers' personal branding practices highlight the broken binaries of labouring and living in a digitally mediated world, including the double labour of working on personal branding as an integral aspect of being an employee. The research analyzes the personal branding practices of social media managers and explores how social media is used as a tool of personal branding. Beyond the imagined and actual audience, the research finds that a third audience is important in understanding the impact of personal branding on social media: personal branding practices target *the future audience*, which includes unknown and unanticipated audiences. Social media managers curate their personal brand for future audiences, which is amplified given the sense of them being always-on-the-job-market.

Social media managers strive to develop curated positive impressions of the self through personal branding, and this is particularly relevant now in an age of social media where individual experiences are increasingly being lived out online and the presentation of self includes a combination of online and offline experiences. Owing to workplace uncertainty, social media managers embody the mentality of being always-on-the-job-market. This always-on-the-job-market mentality is a driver for personal branding as social media managers endeavour to gain or maintain employment. Other professions in the knowledge economy that face job insecurity, and other emerging professions, may experience similar branding practices. These personal branding practices may decrease or be perceived as less of a necessity if job insecurity decreased—such as if the profession were to become more formalized (perhaps by the establishment of official associations) or if the public recognition and employer perception of the value of the profession improved.

As a practical implication of the research, employers are tasked with supporting employees' autonomy and recognizing the mental health risks of social media work. Employers should refrain from adding new hires on social media or publicly sharing their social media handles. Rather, employers should allow the employee to decide who they connect with, for example, employees at the same job level may elect to connect with one another as a way to build bonds and solidarity. Alternatively, employers can ask employees if they want to share any social media handle, which provides employees the opportunity to elect to share more "public" profiles (such as a public Twitter handle). While the onus lies with employers to set policies and practices, social media managers will need to develop personal and professional boundaries to ensure their well-being and long-term success in a fast-paced industry. Furthermore, in an attempt to reduce the mental health risks, employers can increase the size of their social media teams so that the responsibility of the work is distributed. Employers should endeavour to provide more long-term and stable employment contracts for employees to reduce the precarious nature of this type of work. The stability would lessen the burden of the perpetual curation.

With the emerging norm that employees 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. This is

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particularly relevant for emerging professions such as social media management, but this means social media managers need to tirelessly labour at improving their personal brand. While attention seeking is often presumed to be the goal of personal branding, attention seeking is not the end goal for social media managers. The always-on-the-job-market mentality embodied by employees points to how personal branding is required for employees to secure or continue to hold positions in the knowledge economy, specifically, social media management.

This research adds to the emerging, yet growing, body of literature that analyzes how various professions experience human branding by focusing on social media managers. The research extends the work on symbolic interactionism by applying the theoretical lens to understand the personal branding practices of social media managers. With a focus on social media management, the practice of personal branding is especially prevalent now in an unstable economy with spreading precarious work. As lead users of social media, social media managers provide critical insight into the emerging practices of personal branding on social media that may spread to other professions. The development of the future audience can hopefully be a useful tool to understand other professions and experiences of personal branding.

Limitations and future research

This research embraces a qualitative research design considering the understudied area of personal branding amongst social media managers. This research showcases the perspective of a unique group of digital media producers who are heavily engaged with social media. The research identifies how social media managers use digital technologies both personally and professionally to build their personal brand. A focus on social media 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. Social media managers work in social media and, by extension, serve as extreme examples of living on social media.

The exploratory nature of this research does not afford generalizability to the general population but rather aims to elicit deep insight and an extreme manifestation of lead social media users. Furthermore, given the extensive data collection, this research would be difficult to replicate. A follow-up study with the same participants could allow for a longitudinal perspective on the changes taking place in the emerging profession of social media management. The research is limited in the use of interviews that was restricted to participants in one geographic location in a major technological hub. Alternative methods would be able to uncover other findings, and future research could consider using a quantitative research design; large-scale surveys could be used to analyze the prevalence of the findings and extend the research. Considering that social media is widely used by businesses around the world, future research could assess whether the findings are applicable in other countries to identify the common issues, as well as local nuances, of social media work.

As work in social media becomes more commonplace and new professions emerge in the social media industry, it would be interesting to analyze the professionalization of the industry. Currently, women tend to dominate social media management, but the valuation of this type of work may change over time as the industry matures. For social media managers, personal branding is commonly accepted as a necessary part of promotional identity; however, the implementation is still new to many other emerging professions. Personal branding as a trend has spread to other professions and industries that tout the importance of personal branding for career and life success – especially in highly competitive labour markets. Future research could examine the personal branding strategies of other social media-driven professions.

Note

1. 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.

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Further reading

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