THE AUTONOMY PARADOX IN PLATFORM WORK

THE AUTONOMY PARADOX IN PLATFORM WORK:

A SOCIOMATERIAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORK OF INSTAGRAM CONTENT CREATORS

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LAY ABSTRACT

How and why might workers (choose to) constrain their own autonomy in the context of platform work? Animated by this overarching research question, this thesis explores the tensions between autonomy and self-imposed constraints through three essays. The first essay integrates multiple streams of organizational research to portray the constellation of three structural forces (social norms, cultural discourses, and material features of technology) that interact with workers' identity to shape the autonomy paradox. The second essay demonstrates how evaluative metrics provided by digital platforms function as habit-forming identity baits that control workers' behavior and sustain underpaid labor. Finally, the third essay demonstrates how prescribed authenticity (e.g., the ethos of 'just be yourself') prevalent in the discourse of personal branding ironically constrain workers' autonomy by turning the once protective fender of personal brand into a system of radical self-revelation. The second and third essays draw on an inductive qualitative inquiry of Instagram content creators.

ABSTRACT

Organizational research about the autonomy paradox –the discrepancy between workers' increased level of autonomy in carrying out their work and their increased self-imposed constraints– is limited in two ways. First, our understanding of the role of technology in perpetuating the paradox of autonomy is limited to the influence of relatively simple features of technology (e.g., email devices' portability and ubiquity) in amplifying the expectations of near-constant availability. However, human-computer interaction research and practice increasingly show that design features of advanced technology, too, can play an important role in cultivating the culture of constant connectivity. Second, organizational research on the autonomy paradox has primarily focused on organizational shared expectations and has not examined social forces and cultural images that might contribute to the autonomy paradox in the individualized context of independent work. Thus, our understanding of socio-cultural processes that might contribute to the tension between autonomy and discipline in the context of platform work is incomplete. In this dissertation, I explore these issues through a review study and two empirical studies that draw on 50 semi-structured interviews with Instagram content creators, four years of participant observation, and a walkthrough analysis of the platform's features.

The first study integrates the literature on sociomateriality, identity control, and autonomy paradox to explore the interconnected cultural, social, and material mechanisms that contribute to the autonomy paradox. I discuss how we can extend our understanding of autonomy in technology use by attending more explicitly to material features of digital technology and how mechanisms identified in organizational contexts can guide our understanding of platform workers' autonomy. In so doing, this study maps out pathways for examining autonomy and discipline outside traditional organizational contexts.

The second paper examines how through a recurring process that I label *identity baiting*, evaluative metrics provided by digital platforms function as habit-forming identity affirming opportunities for desired identities which motivate work effort and sustain underpaid future oriented labor. By attending to workers' desired identities rooted in cultural ideals of independent work, this study sheds light on entanglement of cultural ideals and technological features in shaping the tensions of autonomy and self-imposed constraints in platform work.

Finally, the third study explores how people navigate the tensions arising from the collocation of externally prescribed authenticity in the discourse of personal branding with the internal desire to be and feel authentic in contemporary work. I find that tensions arise from the consistency required to maintain a personal brand and the inconsistency of the authentic self over time. Further, practices induced by the rhetorical invocations of authenticity sometimes contradicted workers' internal needs for a strategic balance

between authentic and image management. This study shows that tensions of autonomy remain even if the external prescription demands individuality and authenticity rather conformity and collective assimilation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the unhappy and overworked are told that they only have themselves to blame if they're not being 'all they can be' (Obodaru, 2017). Faced with a pressure created by the abundance of choice and freedom, ironically referred to as "the tyranny of freedom" (Schwartz, 2004) or "the tyranny of happiness" (Elliott, 2003), people are now invited and expected to follow their heart and seek the ultimate freedom at work. "Be your own boss" and "do what you love" are the common career advice given to those seeking answers in self-help books and popular articles. The question is how much this venerated image of freedom is actually lived and experienced by those who chose to pursue the dream? Are people really "reluctant to welcome" the freedom as Bauman (2000) predicted in *Liquid Modernity*? Although scholars have focused on how organizational norms and shared expectations to explain the surprising discrepancy between workers' available and enacted autonomy (Barker, 1993; Kunda, 1992; Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998; Mazmanian, 2013; Perlow, 1998; Reid, 2015) or the autonomy paradox (Mazmanian, 2013; Michel, 2011), research increasingly suggests that the autonomy paradox is not exclusive to organizational contexts and those who are not tightly affiliated with an organization experience similar tensions (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Cameron, Thomason, & Conzon, 2021).

Yet, the autonomy paradox remains underexplored outside the brick and mortar walls of organizations and inside the invisible walls of digital platforms. Specifically, as independent work becomes more prevalent and work becomes more intertwined with advanced digital technology, three problems surface in the current literature on the autonomy paradox. First, scholars of work and technology have demonstrated that affordances of email devices (e.g., portability and ubiquity) amplify the norms of constant connectivity by enabling work anytime and from anywhere (Mazmanian et al., 2013), but have paid less attention to design features of advanced technology used on digital platforms such as Uber, Upwork, and Instagram. Thus, we understand little about how design techniques increasingly used by digital platforms contribute to the autonomy paradox in the context of platform work[1].

Second, the autonomy paradox has been mainly explained by individuals' striving for living up to shared cultural expectations and norms about what it means to be a good employee or co-worker (e.g., Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Kunda, 1992; Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998; Perlow, 1998; Reid, 2015; Sewell, 1998), thus, we understand little about the cultural images and social forces that might animate self-

[1] Digitally mediated independent work in which workers rely on information technology (i.e. digital platforms) to sell their services to the market.

imposed constraints outside the boundaries of organizations. Further, social practices, including work organizations, have been shown to engage in more or less intentional and primarily discursive efforts to shape the individuals' systems of meanings, aspirations, and cultural ideals in directions congruent with organizational objectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992). While it is recognized that platforms engage in discursive work to increase their profit and minimize their responsibility (Gillespie, 2010, 2014), we know little about platforms' efforts aimed at shaping and reifying particular cultural images that might contribute to autonomy paradox. For example, the discourse of personal branding has been shown to prevail in the context of independent work (Vallas and Christin, 2017), but research has not examined whether digital platforms that facilitate independent work play a role in promoting this discourse among independent workers.

In this dissertation, I address these gaps through a review essay of the existing literature on identity management, autonomy and cultural control, technology use in organizations, and platform control that informed my research questions for two empirical studies. The empirical studies draw principally on 50 semi-structured interviews. As a secondary data source, I rely on my own participant observation experience with the platform to gain a deeper understanding of the platforms' technological features and the social dynamics present in the industry. Further, I analyzed archival data from Instagram official communication channels. Table 1.1 shows a summary of all the data I collected for my dissertation.

[Insert Table 1.1 about here]

Taking a sociomaterial approach (Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008), I integrate the theories of social and cultural control at work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992; Vallas & Christin, 2017) with the literature on desired identities (Anteby, 2008; Pratt, 2000) to better understand *how and why people might (choose to) constrain their own autonomy at work in the context of digitally mediated independent work.* Specifically, I explore (1) how different streams of research explain self-imposed constraints in the contexts of organizational and digitally mediated independent work, (2) whether and how evaluative metrics provided by digital platforms contribute to the construction and maintenance of platform workers' desired identities and their behavior at work, and (3) how platform workers navigate the tensions between externally prescribed authenticity and their internal desire to reveal (or hide) their authentic self. In addressing these questions, this thesis provides a deeper understanding of the tension between autonomy and self-discipline as enacted within the intersection of material features of digital platforms and individuals' systems of meaning derived from various sources including available discursive resources, social relations, and cultural ideals.

The context of the empirical studies is cultural production on Instagram –a photo and video sharing digital platform with over a billion active users. The platform began in 2010 primarily as a photo-sharing app with a peer-to-peer sharing and co-creation model (Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008), a model that relied solely on the amateur

participation of consumers. Initially, therefore, the platform's interface was identical for all the users including businesses and content creators. However, since 2016, as the platforms grew and the time spent on content consumption and thus the demand for content creation increased, the platform has gradually adopted a tiered structure (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020) that unobtrusively differentiates between content consumers and content creators in various ways. The previous peer-to-peer sharing and co-creation (Zwick et al., 2008) model (a model that relied solely on consumers of the content to create user-generated content), is now replaced by a model that still partially relies on user-generated content but recognizes creators as the providers of content and offers them specific tools, training, guidelines, and monetization methods to do the work of content creation and promotion more effectively.

This thesis advances scholarship in three main ways. First, as discussed, in explaining the role of technology in perpetuating the autonomy paradox, past research has mainly focused on how affordances of email devices (e.g., ubiquity and portability of technology) amplify the collective norms of constant connectivity (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011; Hafermalz, 2021; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Wajcman & Rose, 2011), and paid less attention to design features of technology. Thus, we understand little about how material features of advanced technologies used in the context of platform work could contribute to self-imposed constraints at work. By focusing on platform workers that interact with these advanced technologies to carry out their work, this thesis provides new insights into the process of enabling and constraining autonomy

in the context of independent digitally mediated work and extend autonomy paradox literature to attend more explicitly to technology features of digital platforms that direct platform workers' day to day work activities and self-imposed constraints. Further, by paying attention to sociomateriality of technology–inseparability of material features of technology from its social construction (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008)– this thesis elucidates more clearly the interplay between ideologies of work and technological features of platforms in relation to workers' autonomy, thus responding to calls in the literature for studying "social controls… in concert with technological features" (Colbert et al., 2016: 736).

Second, the autonomy paradox has been primarily explained by collective norms and shared expectations prevalent in collective contexts such as groups and organizations (e.g., Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2004; Kunda, 1992; Martin et al., 1998; Perlow, 1998; Sewell, 1998), thus, our understanding of social forces and cultural images that might contribute to the autonomy paradox in the individualized context of independent work is limited. By focusing on workers' desired identities and norms of authenticity, this thesis provides insights into how prescriptions of authenticity and cultural ideals about work outside the collective boundaries of organizations contribute to the autonomy paradox. I draw on the concept of identity incentive –opportunities for identity confirmation that "induce action or motivate effort" (Anteby, 2008: 203)– to cast light on the meanings creators attach to evaluative, relational, and symbolic affordances (e.g., badges, evaluative and reputational metrics) provided by the Creator version of Instagram, and

examine the significance of these meanings in identity confirmation and self-imposed constraints. By examining the meanings individuals attach to activities enabled and constrained by the platform, and by examining how the use of features of the digital platform corresponds to workers' systems of meanings, I identify the main "sociomaterial assemblages" (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) of meaning and matter that direct the day to day work activities lead to self-imposed constraints.

Third, while the past literature has documented that organizations engage in discursive efforts to shape individuals' cultural ideals in directions congruent with organizations' objectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992), despite knowing that platforms engage in discursive work to gain their business objectives (Gillespie, 2010, 2014), we understand little about how such efforts might target cultural images of work that contribute to autonomy paradox. This thesis addresses this gap by investigating how platforms' discursive efforts in promoting prevalent independent work career discourses (such as authentic personal branding) contribute to the autonomy paradox. In doing so, this thesis responds to the need for more research on symbolic and normative aspects of algorithmic control (Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020).

This thesis has practical implications, too. For digital platforms and digital platform designers, this thesis provides insights into how different features and practices of platforms influence workers' day-to-day activities and time-use. Having this knowledge can help platforms design applications that foster well-being and productivity rather than constant connectivity. The interviews provide rich data on the lived

experience of platform workers, their time use and work habits, and their perception of the constraints imposed on them by social and technological forces. On a macro level, considering that platform work is still highly unregulated, this paper provides insights that can inform policy-making and regulation of platform work. Control mechanisms used on digital platforms are complicated and advanced and different from control mechanisms of traditional work (Kellogg et al., 2020). Thus, it is important to explore and understand the subtle mechanism of control in platform work. This thesis sheds some light on the debate of whether platform workers are autonomous or controlled by exploring the subtler forms of control including cultural control and control by design.

Table 1.1- Summary of Data Collection Methods

	Data type	Data source
Primary data	semi-structured interviews	50 interviews with content creators
Secondary data	Participant observation	Walkthrough analysis of platforms' features
	Archival data	Derived from Instagram's official communication channels (e.g., Creator Blog, @Creators account)

2. THE TRIO OF THE AUTONOMY PARADOX: CULTURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE SELF

ABSTRACT

Why do people constrain their own autonomy at work? I integrate the literature on sociomateriality, cultural control, and identity management to capture the full range of cultural, social, and material mechanisms that contribute to the autonomy paradox– discrepancy between available and enacted autonomy– and discuss how we can extend our understanding of autonomy in technology use by attending more explicitly to material features of digital technology without falling into the much-frowned upon trap of technological determinism to balance our focus between cultural, social, and material aspects of technology. Further, I describe how organizational theories on identity-targeting control practices shed light on our understanding of platform workers' autonomy. In doing so, this essay highlights pathways for exploring the discursive and sociomaterial processes that might contribute to the tension between autonomy and discipline outside traditional organizational contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Described as 'situated freedom' in classic philosophical thought (e.g., Heidegger, 2019; Merleau-Ponty, 1945) and the 'agency-structure relationship' in sociology (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1991), the notion that individuals' exercise of autonomy is situated within the confines of structure has been around for many years. Understanding the tensions of autonomy at work matters now more than ever as independent work, marked by the autonomy it offers, is witnessing a rise (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018) and as "maximizing employee autonomy is becoming less of a workplace benefit and more a necessary element to remaining competitive and relevant as an organization" (Reisinger & Fetterer, 2021).

Contributing to the conversation about situatedness of autonomy, organizational scholarship has repeatedly documented individuals' propensity to conform to social and cultural norms despite being seemingly autonomous (i.e., free from direct modes of control) (Barker, 1993; Kunda, 1992; Martin et al., 1998; Perlow, 1998). Nested within socialization, identity management, and cultural control research, a large constellation of organizational literature examines organizations' efforts to mobilize this propensity. Conceptually related to this discussion is a stream of work and technology research that attends to the situatedness of autonomy in technology use not only within the social structure (e.g., Barley, 1986; Fulk, 1993; Orlikowski, 2000, 1992; Robey and Sahay, 1996), but also within the material structure created by design features of technology

(Leonardi & Barley, 2008, 2010; Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015; Scott & Orlikowski, 2009).

Scholarship on the interplay between autonomy and self-imposed constraints, therefore, has developed in seemingly separate, yet highly interconnected literature including research on identity management (Collinson, 2003)(e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Anteby, 2008; Reid, 2015), cultural control (Barker, 1993; e.g., Kunda, 1992; Perlow, 1999) and technology use in organizations (e.g., Barley, 1986; Leonardi & Barley, 2010). While these streams of research use varying terminology to describe their main constructs of interest, at their core, all are concerned with the tension between agency and structure. The said structure considered is mainly social and cultural norms in cultural control studies (e.g., Barker, 1993; Perlow, 1998), discursive resources, and cultural ideals in identity management studies (e.g., Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Reid, 2015; Roberts, 2005; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009), and sociomaterial contexts in studies of technology and work (e.g., Barley et al., 2011; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Wajcman and Rose, 2011). Social, cultural, discursive, and material structures, however, are not independent and influence agency in tandem.

The goal of this essay is to integrate these streams of research by describing how the tensions of autonomy are understood and explained across literatures, by examining how the described concepts and mechanisms are interconnected, and by highlighting the ways organizational research can capture such interconnectedness. Comparing and contrasting the tensions of autonomy between organizational context and the context of

independent platform work, future directions are proposed about where we might look for traces of structural constraints when the work seems to be independent and unstructured. I start with the conceptualization of the autonomy paradox and its cultural and social roots, discuss how identity management literature connects to the autonomy paradox, and provide an overview of how the issue of self-imposed constrains has been studied in work and technology literature. I close with a discussion of recommendations for future research.

THE AUTONOMY PARADOX

Conceptualization

Autonomy in the context of work refers to one's capacity in exercising their freedom to determine both the content of their work and how they accomplish the work (in terms of timing, location, and quality). Autonomy has been regarded as an important factor in job design (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) that can increase motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), enhance performance (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Kulik, Oldham, & Hackman, 1987), and add to the experienced meaningfulness of work (Fried & Ferris, 1971; Hackman & Lawler, 1971). Traditionally, autonomy has been regarded as something to be earned, a signal of professionalism and a highly desired and rare trait found mainly in professional and high-status jobs (Freidson, 1984; Sarfatti-Larson, 1979). However, autonomy is an apt descriptor of independent work (either professional or non-professional) and no longer seems to be exclusive to professional status. Although

independent workers' autonomy is inevitably bound by their own financial needs, the project demands, and the market dynamics (Evans, Kunda, & Barley, 2004) many independent workers still refer to this new-found freedom as a reason why they choose independent work over organizational employment (Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007; Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2018; Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017).

When granted the autonomy, however, workers across different occupations (e.g., engineering–Kunda, 1992; Perlow, 1998; manufacturing–Barker, 1993; Kowledge professionals–Mazmanian, 2013) and work arrangements (Contract work–Evans et al., 2004; platform work– Cameron et al, 2021) have been shown to set limits on their own autonomy. The majority of studies consider tensions of autonomy in relation to time use (e.g., Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Perlow, 1999; Reid, 2015) and show that when given more autonomy, people work more intensely and for longer hours, sometimes to the point of neglecting their family and health (Michel, 2011). This counterintuitive discrepancy between available and enacted autonomy or "the autonomy paradox" (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Michel, 2011) that is usually experienced as 'self-chosen' (Michel, 2011) is detrimental to workers' health and personal lives (Lupu & Empson, 2015; Michel, 2011) and leaves them feeling frustrated and trapped by circumstances (Barker, 1993; Barley & Kunda, 2004; Kunda, 1992; Lupu & Empson, 2015; Perlow, 1998). While most accounts of self-imposed constraints on autonomy focus on temporal autonomy, a few studies explore the tensions of autonomy have in behaviors

other than time use such as the degree of emotional expression (Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998) and the extent of visibility (Hafermalz, 2021; Sewell & Taskin, 2015).

Mechanisms: Situatedness of Autonomy Within the Sociocultural Structures

Regardless of the type of autonomy, in explaining the discrepancy between available and enacted autonomy, prior literature has primarily relied on the interdependence between the worker and the collective context, that is, individuals feel it is necessary or appropriate to limit their autonomy in response to group norms, organizational culture, or demands of the market in order to fulfill their obligation to others with whom their work is interdependent (e.g., Barker, 1993; Barley & Kunda, 2004; Kunda, 1992; Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998; Perlow, 1998). Research on self-managing teams, for example, suggests that high levels of granted autonomy inexorably renders the discourses of participative teamwork dominant and results in even higher levels of control over the individual members of the group (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998; Sewell, 1998). In his ethnography of self-managing teams in a small manufacturing company, Barker (1993) demonstrated that despite being granted more autonomy after transitioning from a traditional manufacturing structure to self-managing teams, members constrained their own autonomy even more compared to the previous structure by developing a system of concertive control— a set of value-driven normative rules negotiated and developed by group members that produced an intense disciplinary pressure to conform.

In addition to adherence to social norms, identification with ideal images and cultural discipline contributes to autonomy paradox. Kunda's (1992) ethnography of high-tech engineers demonstrates how a curated ideological culture that seemingly promotes creativity and autonomy functioned to cultivate commitment to norms about how one should behave, think, and feel. He observed that cultural control was achieved through "decentralization of power": "one is surrounded and constantly observed by members (including oneself) who, in order to further their own interests, act as spokespersons and enforcers of the organizational ideology." (p. 155). Likewise, in a study of high-tech engineers, Perlow (1998) found that employees' awareness of the culture of overwork and expectations of availability resulted in the acceptance of long hours and unpredictable demands on their time even when the boundaries were not enforced by bureaucratic control. In her qualitative study of consultants, Reid (2015) found that some employees embrace the cultural norm of ideal worker and work long hours and prioritize work above all else. In all these studies, people are free from direct and formal control but still limit their own freedom because they feel the need to adhere to social norms or cultural ideals.

Similarly, studies that look at tensions of autonomy in behaviors other than time use rely on individuals' propensity to adhere to collective norms to explain self-imposed constraints. In their study of Body Shop employees, for example, Martin et al., (1998) examined tensions of autonomy in workers' preferred degree and type of emotional expression at work and found that that company's culture of 'fostering caring, and nurturance' directed workers to behave in ways that conformed to norms about emotional

expression of the private (self-disclosure) and display of "caring, sharing, and love". In their study of TaskRabbit workers, Cameron et al. (2021) looked at tensions of autonomy between workers' preferred degree of risk taking and expected degree of risk taking and found that some workers constrain their own autonomy by conforming to customers' expectations that they be willing to take the risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus. Similar to studies of temporal autonomy, in these studies workers limited their own autonomy by behaving in ways that was demanded by collective norms and expectations. In their longitudinal case study of teleworkers, Sewell and Taskin (2015) found that workers participate in constraining their own autonomy by making themselves more available and visible to adhere to the reshaped norms developed around telework—for example, visibility, trust, and availability.

The majority of organizational scholarship, therefore, focuses on situatedness of autonomy within an external structure, be it the collective context or the material environment. A few notable exceptions, however, have, either implicitly or explicitly, highlighted the situatedness of autonomy within the individuals' minds, bodies, desires, and fears. In her study of remote workers, Hafermalz (2020) finds that workers engage in constant connectivity and participate in constraining their own autonomy by assuming the responsibility of making themselves visible, not because of shared values and norms, but because of their fear of exile—the fear of being left out and ignored by their team members. Similarly, Sewell and Taskin (2015) briefly mention the role of workers' own desire to be seen and heard in constraining their own autonomy (p. 1522). Perlow (1998)

noted that while definitions of success are socially constructed, individuals' "instrumental orientations" for personal success might work in tandem with reward systems to enable the practice of self-imposed constraints. On a similar note, Evans et al.'s (2004) study of technical contractors noted that mechanisms of the autonomy paradox, while shaped by the market structure and occupation norms, are influenced by individuals' desire for making more money. Mazmanian et al. (2013) concluded that the mechanisms of self-imposed constraints "originated from the workers themselves and their aspirations" rather than external influences (pp. 1351). More recently, Symon & Pritchard (2015) concluded that constant connectivity is a practice used by workers to perform particular identities including identities of being in-demand and authoritative which are "sought after" by workers (pp. 253). These interpretations relate to Anteby's (2008) study of manufacturing laborers who constrained their own autonomy because they desired to enact an identity that was also desired by and beneficial to the organization. The internal structure of the self, however, is not always organized by self-interest. Self-imposed constraints are sometimes not a "choice based on rewards, punishments, or obligation" but are structured into habitual behaviors that are shaped and reified by unobtrusive control embodied within what appears to be neutral practices of business conduct (2015; Michel, 2011: 329; see also Lupu & Empson).

IDENTITY, CONTROL, AND AUTONOMY

In this section, I define identity and identity work, discuss the personal and social aspects of identity work, and provide an overview of dramaturgical and discursive modes of identity work. I then discuss how social practices and organizations, including digital platforms, might engage in intentional efforts aimed at exhorting, reifying, and mobilizing workers desired identities to achieve their objectives. Specifically, I discuss two mechanisms that have been previously identified in the literature: (1) directing workers' behavior by selectively allocating opportunities for identity confirmation and enactment, and (2) engaging in discursive efforts aimed at shaping workers' desired identities.

Identity and Identity Work

Identity is defined here as reflexively developed narratives about the self (Giddens, 1991) that are derived from an array of socially available discursive resources (Kuhn, 2006) and situated social interactions (Beech, 2008; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). People engage in identity work—ongoing activities that are undertaken by the individuals to construct, repair, maintain, revise, and display their selfhood (Alvesson et al., 2008; Owens et al., 2010; Ybema et al., 2009 in Brown, 2017). Identity work, therefore, is not an internal isolated process but is rather a situated practice directed both inwardly to secure a degree of existential continuity and self-esteem (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), and outwardly to manage the self-image in the eyes of significant others (Goffman, 1959a). In other words, individuals engage in identity work in order to

establish the self as 'good' in the eyes of both the self and others (Watson, 2009). From this Vantage Point, identity work contains an 'evaluative' process (Wieland, 2010) of comparing the self against the internal values held by the individual and the external expectations imposed by the environment (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). The extent to which the external expectations influence the internal values and, subsequently, the degree of convergence between the internal values and the external expectations, vary across individuals and contexts.

Discursive and Dramaturgical Modes of Identity Work

In addition to the categorization of identity work based on who the identity work is directed at (the self or others), much scholarly attention has been given to different ways identity work is performed, resulting in different interconnected modes of identity work, including discursive and dramaturgical identity work (See Brown, 2017 and Caza, Vough, and Puranik, 2018 for a review). I integrate the literature on desired identities with Goffman's (1959b) dramaturgical theory of identity to cIonceptualize the desired self-image in the eyes of others as 'frontstage desired identity', and the preferred sense of self in the eyes of the self as 'backstage desired identity'. Based on this conceptualization, I define backstage identity work as the efforts undertaken by the individual to address the gap between one's sense of self and the person they want to be (cf. Knights and Willmott, 1999), and frontstage identity work as efforts performed to fill the gap between one's sense of self and the person they want/need to display to others.

Discursive identity work refers to "situated practices of language use" (Brown, 2017: 301), that is performed both at backstage, through internal soliloquy (Athens, 1994), and at the frontstage, through conversation and dialogue (Beech, 2008). People use narratives, dialogues, accounts, and stories (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Van Maanen, 1998; Weick, 1995) to construct, express, and claim their desired identity (McAdams, 1993; Van Maanen, 1998). Dramaturgical identity work refers to a range of situated actions and interactions that individuals engage in to control how they are perceived by external audiences by displaying an image of the self that is socially acceptable, expected, or desirable (Goffman, 1959b). Different forms of dramaturgical identity work have been documented in the context of work. For example, workers have been found to use impression management tactics (e.g., self-promotion and ingratiation) to be liked and achieve career success (Judge & Bretz, 1994; Wayne & Ferris, 1990), or to hide their deviance from expected identities to pass as an ideal worker (Reid, 2015). Dramaturgical identity work might also appear in the form of habitual routines (Brown & Lewis, 2011; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006) or observation and imitation (Ibarra, 1999).

The narrational and dramaturgical modes of identity work are connected and can be viewed as complementary mechanisms (Ezzy, 1998; Hacking, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). For example, in their study of first-line supervisors, Down and Reveley (2009) found that narrational and dramaturgical identity work are codependent and are employed in an interwoven iterative process in which social interactions are deployed as resources for confirmation and validation of narrational identities. Similarly, in her study

of employees in a Swedish company, Wieland, (2010) found that individuals draw on shared cultural values about 'being a good person' as resources for constructing their self-narrative. Conceptualization of identity work in terms of the work performed at backstage and frontstage helps attend to both communities of research that approach identity work from an either discursive-narrational (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998; Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000) or dramaturgical-relational perspective (e.g., Baumeister, 2010; Cooley, 1992; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), and adds to the scholarship that has wed the two theoretical camps together (Down & Reveley, 2009; Reid, 2015; Roberts, 2005; Wieland, 2010).

Identity Incentive, Discursive Resources, and Control

While 'significant others' are the target of frontstage identity work, frontstage and backstage identity work are connected because how others view the self is not separate from how one views the self. Individuals draw on both internal criteria (the authentic self) and external criteria (validation by significant others) to evaluate their self-narratives (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Internal sense of self is thus influenced by the validation (or rejection) one receives from others who view (and evaluate) the presented self-image (Ibarra, 1999; Roberts, 2005; Swann, 1987). Self-doubt and existential insecurity (Collinson, 2003) render the 'significant others' particularly important in the process of identity work in the modern world of work: "the authentic self becomes viscous, made up in mirrored imagery of the sense of the appropriate self seen in the

significant others", while the normalizing power attributed to organizations make employees "hang on to old habits and identities", the modern modes of power enable the workers "to see what significant others desire" (Clegg and Baumeler, 2010: 26).

To sustain an identity individuals need external validation and opportunities for repeated enactment of identity (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). While we know that organizations can control workers by selectively allocating these identity confirming opportunities (Anteby, 2008:203), our understanding of sociomaterial practices that might be perceived as identity incentive is limited. This is especially important as independent workers are likely to be particularly susceptible to control in the form of identity incentive for sustaining both the front-stage and the back-stage identity work due to their existential precarity and their dependence on reputation for securing work.

Although individuals are free to choose who they want to be, available dominant discourses impose a network of discursive constraint on their choice by making available a pool of "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1987) including provisional (Ibarra, 1999) alternate (Obodaru, 2012), and aspirational (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009) identities. Identity, therefore, is both a "target and medium" of control, that is, institutions, including work organizations, engage in more or less intentional and primarily discursive efforts to shape the individuals' systems of meanings, aspirations, and identities in directions congruent with organizational objectives (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 623).

Organizations, therefore, act strategically to (re)produce available discursive resources (Ibid).

FROM TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM TO SOCIOMATERIALITY

Technological Determinism

Studies of technology use in organizations have taken three different vantagepoints based on how they view the agency of human actors in technology use and how much primacy they give to the social construction of technology. The first stream of research on technology and organization, stretching from the 1950s to the 1970s, gave primacy to the role of technology in determining human behavior and organizational structures and emphasized how technology dictates human behavior by limiting alternatives and creating 'technological imperatives' (e.g., Perrow, 1967; Woodward, 1958). Drawing on contingency theory, this stream equated technology with 'production systems' rather than specific artifacts and viewed technology as a cause for shaping the organizational structure and individual behavior. The contingency theorists' agenda in reducing technology to an abstract general concept was to arrive at a set of principles about technology and organization that is generalizable across different technologies and organizations (Orlikowski & Barley, 2001). Such 'deterministic' accounts of technology that treated technology as a Blackbox have been criticized for "abstracting away from the specifics of a design" (Orlikowski and Barley, 2001: 148), failing to acknowledge the

volition of human subjects in technology use, and overlooking the role of social forces in shaping the use of technology (e.g., Barley, 1986; Orlikowski, 1992).

Social Construction of Technology

Efforts to counter the deterministic views of technology gave rise to the second stream of research that emphasized the social construction of technology use (e.g., Fulk, 1993; Karahanna, Straub, & Chervany, 1999; Karahanna et al., 1999; Rice & Aydin, 1991), the role of organizational and occupational culture in how technology is interpreted (Markus, 1994; Prasad, 1993). Despite usefully demonstrating how social and cultural structures shapes how people perceive, interpret, and use technology, such a 'social constructivist' view of technology has been criticized for overlooking the importance of specific material features of the technology that provide constraints and affordances within which social meanings are constructed and human agency is enacted (Leonardi & Barley, 2008, 2010; Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015; Scott & Orlikowski, 2009). Multiple studies in this period, perhaps in an effort to reverse the deterministic views that underestimated the agency of workers, highlighted the influential role of human agency in enactment of scripts of technology by showcasing how humans can "choose not to use the technology or use it in ways that undermine its 'normal' operation." (Orlikowski & Robey, 1991: 153). For example, these studies referred to instances of divergent practices of technology use (Boczkowski, 2004; Poole & DeSanctis, 1992), and pointed to the possibility of going against the intention of the

designer by improvisation in use (Boudreau & Robey, 2005). This line of research was based on the premise that "because technologies are socially constructed, they can be reconstructed as well.... the technology itself can be changed by those using it." (Mohrman and Lawler, 1984: 136). Emphasizing the structure as emergent process shaped by different actors rather than embodied within the features of technology, these accounts offered useful insights about instances of divergent enactment of the same technology, but did not speak to possible power imbalances between different actors (e.g., designers and users) in shaping the structure of technology (Leonardi & Barley, 2010).

Sociomateriality

Rooted in Gidden's (1991) structuration theory, the third stream of research recognizes the 'constitutive entanglement' of human agency and the social and material structures (Pickering, 2010; Suchman, 2007). Initially referred to as 'interpretive materialism' (Barley, 1998) in organizational research, and evolved into "sociomateriality" (Orlikowski, 2007, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008), this approach inseparability of human agency, social context, and material structure and emphasizes studying the "sociomaterial assemblages" of meaning and matter rather tilting toward one at the expense of the other (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Sociomateriality evolved in light of scholarship that argued the shift towards social constructivism of technology "has gone too far" (Leonardi and Barley, 2010) and that social construction of technology is now widely accepted and thus demonstrating that technology use is socially constructed is no

longer needed (Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Instead, to advance theory, they suggested that our efforts should focus on the *integration* between the discourse and the matter rather than *alternation* between the two (Leonardi and Barley, 2010).

A central notion in this approach is adapting a practice lens (e.g., Pickering, 1995; Suchman, 2007) to uncover the enactment patterns of recurrent situated actions (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Examining every day practice of work (Suchman, 2007) surfaces tensions and instabilities that are inherent in the dialectical process resistance and accommodation (Pickering, 1995) in which actors (designers, users, technology, the organization, and the context) "interact recursively, may be in opposition, and …may undermine each other's effects" (Orlikowski, 1992: 412). The autonomy paradox is one of such contradictions surfaced repeatedly in studies that explore "dance of agency" (Pickering, 1995: 21) at the nexus of autonomy, control, and technology.

Sociomaterial accounts of autonomy and control

Such calls gave rise to a third stream of research that recognizes that the social and the material are constitutively entangled and emphasizes the need for paying attention to how the social processes and material properties of technology affect and are affected by each other. Multiple studies have documented the concurrent enabling and constraining effects of communication technology use at work (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011; Mazmanian, 2013; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Symon &

Pritchard, 2015; Wajcman & Rose, 2011). Murray and Rostis (2007) found that the use of mobile devices simultaneously enhanced workers' autonomy by allowing them to work remotely and constrained their autonomy by enhancing monitoring systems. Similarly, Prasopoulou et al. (2006) found that the use of mobile devices endowed some autonomy by increasing spatial flexibility but impeded workers' autonomy by intruding their temporal boundaries. Jarvenpaa and Lang (2005) and Middleton and Cukier (2006) report comparable results. In their study of the use of portable email devices (i.e. Blackberries) by knowledge professionals, Mazmanian et al., (2013) found that knowledge professionals face an ongoing tension between enhanced autonomy (made possible by the technology) and increased expectations of connectivity (made possible by technology and made the norm by their social context). This study demonstrated that the autonomy of workers is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the assemblage of collective norms and material features of mobile devices (e.g., portability and ubiquity). The features enabled workers' autonomy by allowing them to work whenever and wherever they wanted, but at the same time constrained their autonomy by perpetuating the norms of constant connectivity, leading professionals to make themselves available for work everywhere and all the time. In their study of Rail Engineering workers, Symon and Pritchard (2015) found that the 'employee-smartphone assemblage' of connection is used to perform ideational identities of being contactable and responsive, being involved and committed, and being in-demand and authoritative.

In addition to temporal effects of constant connectivity enabled by the assemblage of communication technology and sociocultural norms, recent conceptual work has emphasized examining workers' participation in restricting their own autonomy by making themselves more visible (Hafermalz, 2021; Leonardi & Treem, 2020; Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Leonardi and Treem's (2020) conceptual article explores the sociomaterial configuration of visibility, the paradoxical nature of visibility enabled by technology which can function both as control and as a means for self-promotion, and the mechanisms through which behavior visibility might be enabled by communication technology. They specifically identify three mechanisms; self-presentation (workers making their behavior visible through communication technology such as social media), aggregate quantification (fragments of behavior are measured and aggregated to discover behavior patterns), and algorithmic ordering (algorithms selectively make some behaviors more visible).

Despite taking a sociomaterial stance, a common tendency in studies of communication technology conducted in the context of work organization is paying more primacy to the social dynamics of technology use and thus slightly tilting away from materiality. Barley et al. (2011), for example, concluded that "redesigning e-mail's material features" is unlikely to reduce the overload and stress associated with mobile email devices because email functions as a symbol of stress for workers regardless of the amount of time they spend working. Similarly, Wajcman and Rose, (2011), despite acknowledging that interaction with technology depends a great deal on material

properties of technology, suggested that altering design features of technology is unlikely to solve the problem of constant connectivity because communication patterns are affected by norms, culture, and employees' perception of their work role. Studies of platform control and autonomy, discussed in detail in the next section, have paid more attention to features of technology, but they primarily examined direct constraint on workers' autonomy and have not examined how material features might contribute to self-imposed constraints.

Sociomaterial accounts of autonomy and control in platform work

While sociomaterial studies that explicitly examine the autonomy paradox in platform work are still rare in organizational research, a rich and growing body of literature on platform control (Cameron & Rahman, 2021; Cameron, Thomason, & Conzon, 2021; Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020; e.g., Rahman, 2019) provides insights into the role of platforms in enabling and constraining independent workers' autonomy. Platform work might offer workers increased temporal and geographical flexibility (Lehdonvirta, 2018) but platform workers' autonomy is bounded by platforms through different mechanisms. The autonomous or "free agent" (Pink, 2001) image of independent work has been recently shattered by studies that reveal how digital platforms control and manage independent workers using artificial intelligence and algorithms (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019; Curchod et al., 2020). Platforms increasingly rely on indirect and subtle forms of control including customer ranking and

reputational metrics (e.g., Orlikowski and Scott, 2014; Curchod et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021) and technology design techniques that exploit human brain cognitive biases for behavior direction (Calo and Rosenblat, 2017; Scheiber, 2017; Rosenblat, 2018).

Online reputational ratings and rankings are an important feature of platforms that help or impede platform workers' access to better opportunities and regular gigs (Cameron & Rahman, 2021; Curchod, Patriotta, Cohen, & Neysen, 2020; Irani, 2015; Rahman, 2021; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2018). In his study of Upwork freelancers, Rahman (2021) found that the opaque evaluation algorithm was experienced as a form of control by workers that he labels invisible cage. In their study of platform workers, (Cameron & Rahman, 2021) found that workers resist platform-enabled customer control but that their resistance latitude decreases as the labor process progresses. In their study of platform-mediated gig workers, (Rahman & Valentine, 2021) found that using platform-mediated tools to exert coercive control over workers resulted in unfinished project outcomes, while refraining from using those tools and engaging in an interactive process of communicating expectation and rebuilding trust, resulted in completed project. On most digital platforms, user/client-generated data about each worker is reported as performance metrics visible to both the users/clients and the providers themselves. To maintain high ratings on the platforms, therefore, workers are required to engage in emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) in their interactions with the clients/users which is considered to be a qualitative form of work intensification (Gandini, 2019). Since these reputational measures are not transferrable from one

platform to another, even in the rare occasions that platform monopoly is not an issue and platform workers have another option to turn into, they are still trapped and dependent on the platform that owns their reputations (Schörpf et al., 2017). This is the actualization of the notion of management by customers that was first identified in interactive service work (Fuller and Smith, 1991). Platforms in this regard, play a permissive role by delegating some important aspects of control to the users/clients (Vallas and Schor, 2020), without distributing the power: "control is radically distributed, while power remains centralized" (Kornberger et al., 2017: 79).

The studies reviewed in this section provide important information about the role of platforms in constraining workers' autonomy, but they do not explain how and why workers might constraint their own autonomy. Although the issue of autonomy paradox in platform work has not yet been addressed by management research, scholars of information and communication technology noted the paradoxical function of platforms in enabling and constraining workers autonomy (Jarrahi et al., 2020; Covaleski et al., 1998). Further, these studies are inclined towards the technology side of autonomy and have largely overlooked the social and discursive component. Organizational researchers, however, are slowly starting to incorporate the sociomaterial perspective in studying platform workers' agency. In their qualitative study of eBay business sellers, Curchod et al., (2020) employed a sociomaterial approach to demonstrate that eBay workers were exposed to power asymmetries through online customer reviews and algorithms' mediation of relations between actors. They showed that in response, sellers used their

practical knowledge of the algorithm to work around the constraints they face and increase their agency. Bucher et al. (2020) followed a sociomaterial perspective to demonstrate that Upwork and Fiverr freelancers adopt anticipatory compliance practices to ensure their work can be continued on the platform. These studies address the agency of workers in trying to rectify the constraints imposed by platforms or customers but do not explore self-imposed limits on autonomy. Table 1.2 summarizes the mechanisms of the autonomy paradox identified here.

[Insert Table 1.2 about here]

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Situatedness of Autonomy Within the Sociocultural Structure of Independent Work

The extant literature on autonomy paradox provides valuable insights about why people might choose to limit their autonomy in the context of organizational work, but the autonomy paradox remains underexplored in the context of platform work. Among the few studies that showcase self-imposed constraints on autonomy outside the boundaries of organizations is Barley and Kunda's (2004) study of software contractors who, despite not being affiliated with an organization, constrained their own autonomy in an attempt to build a good reputation in the market to secure future work and financial prosperity. They showed that the centrality of reputation in the market and the seasonal nature of the work, combined with economic evaluation of time (i.e. viewing time as money) resulting from hourly pay, led the contractors to restrict their own autonomy and work even longer hours

compared to their counterparts working in organizations. They concluded that self-imposed constraints on autonomy cannot be blamed solely on organizations. More recent work has investigated the changing face of the ideal worker image in the context of independent work marked by customers' expectation of risk taking during the COVID 19 pandemic (Cameron, Thomason, & Conzon, 2021). The significance of these studies goes beyond the specific explanations they provided for autonomy paradox as it points out to the possibility that cultural images and social forces that contribute to autonomy paradox are not exclusive to organizations and workgroups, rather they might be found within the occupational cultures, cultural ideals expected by customers, and individual aspirations (making more money in case of contractors).

Research on precarious identities has identified a range of dominant discourses in the context of independent work, including the enterprising self (Vallas & Christin, 2017), the self as a passion project (Duffy, 2017), and the ideal self (Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020). In their study of precarious workers, Vallas and Christin (2017) used Foucault's theory of governmentality to demonstrate that the "personal branding discourse" and the notion of the ''enterprising self'' are both prevalent and widely accepted in the context of independent work. In their concluding remarks, they suggest that personal branding discourse is likely to grow even more pervasive as web-based platforms such as Twitter and Instagram "have become almost ubiquitous platforms on which the enterprising self routinely performs" (p. 45) and emphasize the importance of paying attention to platforms' material features in understanding the meanings individuals

attach to activities enabled, required, or constrained by the platforms: "As web-based platforms such as Twitter and Instagram proliferate across national boundaries, enabling or requiring participants to engage in audience-promotion and identity work of various sorts—but always constrained by the 'platform's features'—what meanings will workers and job seekers attach to such activities?" (p. 45).

Discourses of personal branding "foster a view of the self as a revenue-generating enterprise, and define this marketized condition as a source of agency, autonomy, and empowerment" and help legitimize precarious work arrangements (Vallas and Christin, 2017: 29). The enterprise of the self, however, is not just bound to be a source of revenue generation but is expected to be a source of both 'profit' and 'self-actualization' by generating revenue from "doing what one loves" (Duffy, 2017). In her study of fashion bloggers, Duffy (2017) sheds light on how the ethos of "doing what you love" becomes a base for viewing the entrepreneurial self as a 'passion project' and the work as a 'self-actualization' outlet and demonstrates how the rhetoric of 'turning one's passion into a career' produces and legitimizes aspirational labor —"a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love" (Duffy, 2017:4). In addition to conflicting discourses of romanticism and self-branding, one needs to be authentic and true to one's self while making a living off doing what s/he loves. Accounts of authenticity, self-actualization, and empowerment have also been depicted in Fleming and Sturdy's (2011) study of workers in the modern call center, but as Kunda and Ailon-Souday (2009) put it: "between the lines of proclamations of

empowerment…lurks an image of control that puts clear constraints" on the "new found 'freedom'" (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2009: 206). Workers in Vallas and Christin's (2017) study, for example, mostly imbued to the demands of the discourse of personal branding and could only resist the discourse if they had access to another reservoir of culture, in their case occupational culture. Yet, organizational scholarship is just beginning to explore how such cultural ideals and discourses might contribute to self-imposed constraints.

Further, while organizational scholars have not yet paid particular attention to identity targeting practices of digital platforms, the use of rhetorical invocations on digital platforms has been documented by Rosenblat and Stark's (2016) study of Uber drivers. They provide multiple examples of Uber's linguistic efforts aimed at pitching an autonomous entrepreneurial image of work as an Uber driver (see also Rosenblat, 2018). Among media scholars, there is consensus that content platforms engage in discursive work, directly through language or indirectly through meanings implied about/by the algorithm/design, to increase their profit and minimize their responsibility (Gillespie, 2010, 2014). Yet, we understand little about platforms' efforts aimed at shaping cultural ideals and people's desired identities. This gap limits our ability to understand platforms' influence in fostering discourses that might shape workers' desired identities and contribute to the autonomy paradox. This is especially problematic as the discourses of entrepreneurial autonomy and passion have been associated with the influx of precarious and un(der)paid labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013; Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021).

Bringing the individual back: constraints embodied within the self

Building the backdrop of my recommendation for future research, I first provide a quick summary of the seminal work of Thaler and Sunstein (2008) that won the 2017's Nobel prize in economics. Well established by behavioral economics research, the main idea of the book is that without putting limits choice, people's decisions can be significantly influenced by choice architecture or by "organizing the context in which people make decisions" (Thaler, Sunstein, & Balz, 2013: 428). One of such contextual factors are social norms which, as reviewed here, have been extensively studied in organizational research. Other contextual factors, referred to as "nudges" in Thaler and Sunstein (2008), are subtle environmental cues embodied within the material structure that direct people towards a particular choice without limiting their freedom to choose other options, for example by default modes, notifications, or by facilitation of mapping of choices onto outcomes. Nudges work mainly because human thinking has both a "reflective system" which is directed by reflective and intentional thought and an "automatic system" which is directed by habits and is reactive to cues from the external environment (Kahneman, 2011).

Thaler and Sunstein's notion of choice architecture, described by the authors also as libertarian paternalism, has had large scale, sometimes country-level positive influences on people's decisions around health and finance. However, as the authors note, "much of the time, more money can made by catering to human frailties than by helping

people to avoid them. Bars make a lot more money than Alcoholics Anonymous" (1694). Therefore, it is possible that "the power of inertia" (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008: 215) embedded in strategies of choice architecture be harnessed by organizations to extract value from workers through influencing their decisions in directions that are consistent with organizations' objectives. Organizational scholarship, however, has not yet explored the possibility that the use of choice architecture work organizations might contribute to autonomy paradox. This is particularly problematic as digital technologies that mediate work increasingly rely on choice architecture and persuasive technology design practices (Fogg, 2003) to design habit forming technological products. This is particularly important in light of recent evidence of the use of persuasive technology design on labor platforms (Kahneman, 2011).

Michel's (2011) study of unobtrusive embodied controls that contributed to investment bankers' overwork, offers a stepping stone for future research on implications of environmental behavior design and choice architecture for the autonomy paradox. While the limited studies that consider the situatedness of autonomy within the structure of the self focus on individuals' reflective desires (Anteby, 2008), fears (Hafermalz, 2021), and their instrumental orientation towards success (Perlow, 1998), the internal structure of the self is not always organized by self-interest. Investment bankers in Michel's (2011) study, for example, did not make a conscious choice to work long hours and neglect their health and family lives to live up to a shared cultural norm, their

overwork a habitual reaction to the embodied and unobtrusive control that did not limit choice and therefore did not affect workers' perception of autonomy.

Covaleski et al. (1998) contended that external value structure can be "duplicated" within the self through normalization. I build on Michel's (2011) study to extend this notion and propose that material structure (environment and routines) can be duplicated within the self through habit forming behavior design. Specifically, I borrow insights from nudge theory and choice architecture (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) and Merleau-Ponty's (1945) concept of habit-body to extend this notion and propose that material structure can be duplicated within the self through habit forming behavior design. Merleau-Ponty (1945) contends that our experience of existing in the world is temporal and involves a dialectical process between the actual body in the present and the habit-body– the sedimentations of our past experiences and activities that takes on a habitual and autonomous life of its own (Toadvine, 2019). There occurs therefore, a "back and forth of existence that sometimes allows itself to exist as a [habit-]body and sometimes carries itself into personal acts [reflective acts in the present moment]" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 90). To Merleau-Ponty, therefore, autonomy is not only situated within the external sociomaterial context, but is also situated within the context of our past experience stored in the present body.

Conceptualizing the duplicated material structure within the self as habit-body could help scholars distinguish between workers' agency and the internal habitual

structure inhabited from and induced by the external environment, thus avoiding the trap of technological determinism. Acknowledging the embodied structures within the self should not be taken as denial of individual agency, not any more than acknowledging the social, cultural, and material structures. I propose that the habit-body, like any other contextual structure, imposes constraints within which human agency can be enacted. I further suggest that the individual actor can influence the habit-body structuration process in so far as the reflective system of thought, as opposed to automated system of thought (Kahneman, 2011) is activated. Control (i.e., behavior direction), therefore, would not only be achieved by normalization (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998) of the reflective internal structure, but also by habit forming design through activation of the automated system of thought and undermining the reflective system of thought.

Importance of quantification and reward systems in directing self-imposed constraints

Interestingly, the cultural control studies that discuss the role of individual desires in the autonomy paradox are those which attend to the structure of reward system (e.g., Barley & Kunda, 2004; Perlow, 1998, 1999). While individuals do have "instrumental orientations" for personal success, how success is defined and measured is usually a product of external structure (Perlow, 1998). In their study of knowledge workers, Beckman and Mazmanian (2020) demonstrate that professionals organize their life and day-to-day activities around enactment of ideal selves and that the pursuit of the ideal

selves is measured and intensified by means of self-quantification. Quantification, therefore, is a technique of normalization (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998). Normative power, according to Covaleski et al. (1998), requires situatedness within a larger frame that provides a norm or ideal, which is "stipulated as either a minimum threshold to be cleared, an average to be matched, or an optimum to be achieved and thereby permits a comparison and differentiation of individuals". When clear collective norms or ideals are not readily apparent, examining the process of quantification and reward system might lead us to uncover invisible power structures, perhaps in non-unifying ideal images. Traces of control in seemingly autonomous professions, therefore, could be found not only in social and cultural structure, but also in the design of reward and quantification structures. Specifically, while we know that cultural values do shape and inform reward systems (Perlow, 1998, 1999), there is less empirical evidence about how reward systems might shape idealized identities.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Overall, this essay inquiries about the individual and collective mechanisms that contributes to the paradox of self-imposed constraints and proposes a conceptual theory for examining the individual sources of self-imposed constraints. In doing so, it contributes to our understanding of autonomy as situated within the confines of both the reflective mind and the habit-bod and offers a framework for exploring how design features of advanced technology, especially those designed with persuasive technology

design practices, contribute to workers' degree of enactment of their available autonomy. It has been argued that organizations control their employees by mobilizing their subjectivities through discursive efforts (i.e., prescribing cultural ideals about desired identities) or through selective allocation of opportunities for enactment of desired identities. This paper extends that argument to suggest that independent workers, despite their lack of affiliation with any particular organization, are subject of identity-targeting control practices carried out by mediating digital platforms that enable them to sell their services to the market. Further, by discussing quantification and reward systems in directing self-imposed constraints. By paying attention to sociomateriality of technology– inseparability of material features of technology from its social construction (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008)– this essay elucidates more clearly the interplay between social forces, ideologies of work, and technological features of platforms in relation to workers' autonomy, thus responding to calls in the literature for studying "social controls… in concert with technological features" (Colbert et al., 2016: 736). I hope future researchers and practitioners draw on this sociomaterial lens to develop more nuanced insights and practices about workers' agency in the contemporary digitized world of work to foster well-being and productivity rather than constant connectivity.

Table 1.2- Collective and Individual Mechanisms of Self-imposed Constraints

Main domain	Cultural control	Identity regulation	Work and technology	Engaging control	Cultural control
Means of control	Socio-cultural norms	Cultural ideals	Sociomaterial assemblages	Individual desires and fears	Habitual behavior
Mechanism of self-imposed constraint	Individuals' propensity to adhere to social and cultural norms of the collective (e.g., group, organization, profession)	Individuals' adherence to (often prescribed) cultural ideals and identities (e.g., ideal worker image, the enterprising self)	Entanglement of sociocultural norms and the materiality of technical artefacts	reflective fears and desires of self-interested and instrumental-oriented individuals	Structural constraints embedded within workers' bodies through embodied control
Source of constraint	Situatedness of autonomy within socio-cultural norms	Situatedness of autonomy within cultural ideals	Situatedness of autonomy within sociomaterial assemblages of meaning and matter	Situatedness of autonomy within the reflective self	Situatedness of autonomy within the habit-body
Exemplar articles	Barker (1993); Sewell (1998); Ezzamel & Willmott (1998); Sewell and Taskin (2015); Perlow (1998)	Kunda (1992); Reid (2015); Vallas and Christin (2017)	Mazmanian et al. (2013); Wajcman & Rose (2011); Barley et al. (2011); Symon & Pritchard (2015)	Hafermalz, (2020); Anteby, (2008); Thornborrow & Brown (2009)	Michel, (2011); Lupu & Empson, (2015)

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3. METRICS AS IDENTITY BAITS: HOPE LABOR SUSTAINED

ABSTRACT

This paper explicates how evaluative metrics designed with persuasive technology design practices affect worker subjectivity and autonomy through an inductive field study of Instagram content creators and freelancers whose careers hinge on their online presence. I draw on 50 semi-structured interviews, four years of participant observation, and a walkthrough analysis of the platform's features. I find that through a recurring process that I label *identity baiting*, evaluative metrics provided by digital platforms function as habit-forming *pseudo identity incentives*–temporary identity confirming opportunities–that motivate workers' behavior and evoke a compulsive need for more identity incentives. Identity baits help sustain the continuation of work even in the absence of material rewards or actual identity enactment opportunities. Creators attempted to resist identity baiting and reclaim their autonomy through three strategies: optimism, abstinence, and mindfulness. This work illuminates how digital platforms' use of persuasive technology design allows them to direct workers' behavior and achieve the platforms' objectives by mobilizing workers' desired identities. It also highlights workers' material and discursive efforts to counteract this subtle mode of control.

INTRODUCTION

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.

It eluded us then, but that's no matter

Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...

And one fine morning...

So we beat on,

Boats against the current,

Borne back ceaselessly into the past

–The Great Gastby, Fitzgerald, 1925

Millions of people engage in the labor of cultural production on social media platforms. Commonly referred to as 'influencers', 'content creators', 'digital creators' or 'creators, these people possess a large number of social media followers, and seek to mobilize the influence they have on their audience to generate income. Most work performed on social media platforms, however, can be described as hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013); motivated by future oriented aspirations, hopes, and idealized desired identities rather than realized monetary rewards and accomplishments (Duffy, 2017). Desired identity–the self aspired to–is often unstable. Sustaining a desired identity and "keep[ing] a particular narrative going" (Giddens, 1991: 54), therefore, require "repeated work" (Anteby, 2008:203), constant social validation (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), and opportunities for continuous enactment of identity (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). Identity incentives–identity enactment opportunities–appear to be

"necessary to the preservation of [desired] identities" (Anteby, 2008: 204); absent opportunities for enactment, the desired identities are expected to lose their salience (Serpe & Stryker, 1987), and eventually be abandoned (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Organizations can "induce action or motivate effort" in workers by providing and selectively allocating identity incentives (Anteby, 2008: 203). By the same token, digital platforms can potentially mobilize platform workers' desired identities to direct their behavior and achieve the platforms' objectives. Media and communication scholars have noted the importance of evaluative metrics for sustaining creators' outward symbolic image (Christin, 2020, Christin and Lewis, 2021) and inward self-validation (Arvidsson, 2011; Baym, 2013). These examples point to the possibility that evaluative metrics might function as identity incentives. Organizational research, however, has yet to explore whether and how evaluative metrics provided by digital platforms contribute to the construction and maintenance of platform workers' desired self-narrative and their behavior at work.

This issue is particularly important in light of recent conversations concerning the alarming capacity of private technology corporations to use artificial intelligence (AI), behavioral experimentation, and persuasive technology design, such as refreshing options or lack of stopping cues, to orchestrate human choice, direct behavior, and "schedule little blocks of time in our minds" (Harris, 2017, 01:08; see also Optimizing for Engagement, 2019; Fogg & Euchner, 2019; Susser, 2019). The ongoing conversations about the use of

persuasive technology design revolve around platform service consumers and leave out an important population affected by such practices: platform workers. While the consumers can choose to disengage from a platform only to forgo its services, the choice is costly to workers; their viability depends on engaging with monopolistic platforms. The absence of said workers from these conversations is especially problematic in light of recent evidence suggesting that labor platforms such as Uber and Amazon Mechanical Turk use persuasive technology design to sway service providers toward working longer hours by inducing stress and anxiety (Lehdonvirta, 2018; Rosenblat, 2018; Scheiber, 2017). Additionally, the use of persuasive technology design is not limited to digital platforms; large corporations such as Nike, Samsung, Target, and Disney use technology design techniques to control and manage workers (Kim, 2018).

In this paper, I explore whether and how evaluative metrics provided by digital platforms contribute to the construction and maintenance of platform workers' desired identities and their behavior at work through an inductive, multi-method field study of Instagram content creators and freelancers whose careers hinge on their online presence. Instagram is a photo and video-sharing digital platform with over a billion active users. I draw principally on 50 semi-structured interviews, supplemented with four years of participant observation and a walkthrough analysis of the platform's features. My findings reveal that through a recurring and compulsion-evoking process that I label identity baiting, creators find fleeting moments of identity confirmation that keep the aspired identity afloat and motivate their future pursuit of identity validation. The

symbolic rewards (metrics) function as habit-forming identity rewards that motivate workers' behavior and evoke a compulsive need for more identity incentives. Importantly, as with all systems of control, instances of implicit or explicit resistance to identity baiting appeared in the data. Resistance strategies fell under three main tents: optimism, abstinence, and mindfulness. Optimism practices targeted the meanings and involved attempts to alter the values signaled by evaluative metrics or alter the target of evaluation. While appearing as resistance strategies on the surface, optimism practices further supported the continuation of the identity baiting process and thus hope labor by instilling optimism and preventing despair and disappointment. Abstinence strategies targeted the matter and included attempts to change the function and structure of interaction with technology. Mindfulness strategies involved practices that aimed to eliminate compulsion and cultivate intentionality.

This research makes several contributions to identity, hope labor, and platform control and resistance literature. Drawing on the concept of identity incentive (Anteby, 2008) and insights from human-computer interaction research on persuasive technology design (Fogg, 2003), I introduce identity baiting as a compulsive, recurring mechanism that helps sustain the continuation of work even in the absence of material rewards or actual identity enactment opportunities. While past research on evaluative metrics has mainly focused on their role in securing future work (e.g., Cameron & Rahman, 2021; Curchod et al., 2020), this study reveals how persuasively designed evaluative metrics mobilize workers' subjectivities and constrain their much-coveted autonomy by

unpredictably trickling down identity validating baits. By casting light on the identity-targeting nature of persuasive technology design, this study responds to the need for more research on symbolic and normative aspects of platform control (Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020b). I explore workers' pursuit of autonomy and their efforts to counteract the grip of persuasive technology on how they feel and behave to theorize two resistance strategies: abstinence and relabeling. In doing so, I contribute to the literature on platform control and resistance (e.g., Cameron & Rahman, 2021; Maffie, 2020; Shapiro, 2018; Wood et al., 2019).

DESIRED IDENTITY, IDENTITY INCENTIVE, AND HOPE LABOR

Identity is defined here as reflexively developed narratives about the self (Giddens, 1991) that are derived from an array of socially available discursive resources (Kuhn, 2006)(Kuhn, 2006) and situated social interactions (Beech, 2008; Goffman, 1959a; Mead, 1934). People engage in ongoing activities to construct, repair, maintain, revise, and display their selfhood (Alvesson et al., 2008; Owens et al., 2010; Ybema et al., 2009 in Brown, 2017). Organisations are believed to engage in efforts to shape workers' identities in ways that align with managerial objectives (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), but individuals are not reactive receptors of identity prescriptions and have "already preferred" (Endrissat, Kärreman, & Noppeney, 2017) or desired identities—preferred versions of self in the eyes of the self or others (Schlenker & Wellman, 1985)— that interact with organizationally prescribed identities (Reid, 2015).

Organizational research on preferred self-conceptions suggests that individuals' quest to enact a desired identity shapes work behavior in directions that provide the individuals with identity enactment opportunities (Costas & Grey, 2014; Elsbach, 2009; Endrissat et al., 2017). In his study of aeronautic plant workers, for example, Anteby (2008) shows that managers' selective leniency about using the company's resources during work hours to produce artifacts for personal use functioned as identity enactment opportunities for workers' desired "craftsman" identity (as opposed to unskilled laborer identity), which in turn motivated workers' behavior and became an engaging form of managerial control (Anteby, 2008). Anteby (2008) coined the term 'identity incentive' to describe opportunities for the enactment of a desired identity that "induce action or motivate effort" and can be mobilized to control workers (pp. 203). Opportunities for enactment of a desired identity, however, are not always provided by managers or the organizations; interactions with clients can become a site of identity enactment. In her ethnography of hospital nurses, DiBenigno (2022) demonstrates that nurses, faced with a mismatch between their idealized identity of maternal archetype and the reality of their profession, changed their behavior and work practices to avoid clients who rejected their idealized identities and sought interactions with clients that confirmed their unchecked idealized identity and allowed its enactment (DiBenigno, 2022).

These studies, however, focus on actual identity enactment opportunities in stable organizational contexts with stable monetary rewards and do not examine how potential (imagined present or future) enactment opportunities might function as identity incentives

to motivate sustained work effort in precarious work characterized by unstable and low financial rewards (Reid, Ghaedipour, & Obodaru, n.d., under review). Actual identity enactment opportunities are thought to be "necessary to the preservation of [desired] identities" (Anteby, 2008: 204); absent opportunities for enactment, the desired identities are expected to lose their salience (Serpe & Stryker, 1987) and eventually be abandoned (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Possible and unactualized self-conceptions, however, are "significant regulator of the individual's behavior" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) that can be sustained through imagined enactment even in the absence of actual enactment opportunities (Obodaru, 2017). While organizational research has documented that preferred unactualized self-conceptions are actively pursued in a future oriented and aspirational fashion (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009), how organizations might mobilize future preferred self-conceptions and potential enactment opportunities to motivate effort in the absence or scarcity of meaningful material rewards or actual identity enactment opportunities is not fully understood.

Of particular relevance to this discussion is a strand of scholarship at the intersection of political economy and cultural studies that explores hope labor – a mode of un(der)compensated labor carried out in the present, that is thought to be motivated by hope for future professional opportunities (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) and desire for self-realization (Arvidsson, 2011). Variously described as aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017), venture labor (Neff, 2012), speculative labor (Gregg, 2015), and prospecting labor (Fast,

Örnebring, & Karlsson, 2016), hope labor is believed to be animated by cultural ideals of entrepreneurial subjectivity (Loacker, 2013) that romanticize the notions of 'being your own boss' and 'doing what you love' (Duffy, 2017). On a related note, organizational research on precarious work suggests that the discourse of enterprising self "foster a view of the self as a revenue-generating enterprise", and defines this marketized condition as a source of agency, autonomy, and empowerment" that helps legitimize precarious work arrangements (Vallas and Christin, 2017: 29). The enterprise of the self is not only bound to be a source of revenue generation, but is expected to be a source of both 'profit' and 'self-actualization' by generating revenue from "doing what one loves" (Duffy, 2017). In her study of fashion bloggers, Duffy (2017) sheds light on how the ethos of "doing what you love" becomes a base for viewing the entrepreneurial self as a 'passion project' and the work as a 'self-actualization' outlet and demonstrates how the rhetoric of 'turning one's passion into a career' produces and legitimizes "a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love" (Duffy, 2017:4).

Argued to be exploitative by some (e.g., Hartley, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Kücklich, 2005) and empowering by others (e.g., Florida, 2014), free or underpaid labor carried out in the digital economy and its roots remain a topic of debate. The proponents' argument centers around the seeming voluntariness and self-chosen nature of the hope labor. The premise of voluntariness, however, potentially enfeebles if digital platforms

(organizations that benefit from workers' hope labor) enable, intensify, or prolong the romanticized pursuit of entrepreneurial/creative identity that motivates hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Thus, exploring the practices of digital platforms that might function as identity incentive for desired identities offers insight for understanding the entanglement of structural and individual animators of under-compensated labor in the digital economy. This is important especially because whether rewards in the form of identity incentive have the potential to "lessen the importance" of financial rewards "remains an open question" (Anteby, 2008: 215).

While the concept of hope labor has not been explicitly examined in organizational research, Markus and Nurius (1986)'s conceptualization of possible selves, highly cited in organizational scholarship, implicitly refers to this mode of labor by suggesting that some possible selves can be "symbols of hope...that provide direction for action" (p. 960). "What we hope to become" is considered a "bridge" between the present and future that can motivate present effort as long as the future desired identity is deemed to be within the realm of possibility (Markus & Nurius, 1986: 961). Desired identities are often unstable and require "repeated work" (Anteby, 2008:203), continuous "enactment and reenactment" (Pratt, 2000: 961), constant social validation (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), and "reaffirmation" (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009) to be sustained and remain within the confines of possibility. It is unclear, however, how the 'hope to become' is sustained in conditions of precarity and how unactualized desired identities are validated,

kept within the realm of possibility, and mobilized for behavior direction when actual enactment opportunities and material rewards are scarce or absent.

DESIRED IDENTITY, EVALUATIVE METRICS, AND PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY DESIGN

Research on possible selves suggests that unactualized self-conceptions are particularly vulnerable to doubt and require validation as they are not anchored in social experience (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Faced with uncertainty, people constantly revise their pool of possible selves by trying out provisional selves and discarding the possible selves that do not receive external validation (Ibarra, 1999).The ability to construct and maintain a desired identity, therefore, is affected by validation and doubt. External validation is deemed necessary to retain a future desired self, especially under conditions of uncertainty and existential, social, economic, and psychological insecurity (Collinson, 2003), which makes independent workers particularly susceptible to control in the form of identity affirming practices due to their existential precarity and their dependence on reputation for securing work. Independent workers need to maintain their reputation and draw on social relations to secure future work (e.g., Barley and Kunda, 2004; Hennekam and Bennett, 2016). While engaging in image management is generally important for work success (Reid, 2015; Rivera, 2015; Roberts, 2005), image management is particularly vital for independent workers because they depend on maintaining a positive image for appealing to new clients and gaining new contracts (Hennekam & Bennett,

2016; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Rowlands & Handy, 2012; Vallas & Christin, 2017). Further, independent workers frequently experience existential precarity and ontological insecurity (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018; Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2018), making them susceptible to evaluation, judgment, and validation. While the notion that evaluative metrics might function as identity incentives and mechanisms of control over work activities remains underexplored in managerial and organizational scholarship, communication and media scholars have documented that digital content platforms influence users' identity construction through affordances that enable identity affirmation by the community (Baym, 1999, 2015). Further, the importance of meanings attached to affordances such as social media metrics has been documented both for gaining outward symbolic value (Christin, 2020) and inward self-validation (Arvidsson, 2011; Baym, 2013). Yet, it remains unclear whether and how identity-affirming features provided by digital platforms interact with the desired identities of providers of service on the platforms.

Online reputational ratings and rankings are an important platform feature helps or impede workers' access to better opportunities and regular gigs (Irani, 2015; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Shapiro, 2018). On most digital platforms, client-generated data about each worker is reported as performance metrics visible to both the clients and the providers themselves to enable management by customers (Fuller & Smith, 1991). Platforms in this regard, play a permissive role by delegating some important aspects of control to the users/clients (Vallas and Schor, 2020), without distributing the power: "control is

radically distributed, while power remains centralized" (Kornberger et al., 2017: 79). Human computer interaction research has repeatedly documented that digital platforms increasingly use social recognition and identity-affirming symbols (e.g., metrics, badges) as incentives to increase users' engagement with the platforms (Deterding, 2014; Deterding, Sicart, Nacke, O'Hara, & Dixon, 2011; Fogg, 2003), but research on platform control has primarily focused on the reputational role of metrics in securing future work (e.g., Curchod et al., 2020; Orlikowski and Scott, 2014; Rahman, 2019) and has paid less attention to the role of identity affirming aspects of evaluative metrics in enabling platform control on workers.

The move of digital technologies towards creating a 'quantified self – aiming to cause behavior change and create disciplined selves "through self-knowledge" (Prince, 2014), has been associated with the preoccupation of professionals with pursuing cultural ideals. In their study of knowledge workers, Beckman and Mazmanian (2020) show how professionals organize their life and day-to-day activities around enactment of ideal selves and how the appeal of such desired self-conceptions underpins the prevalence and acceptance of the means of self-quantification –technologies that people use to be more "productive, vigilant, and at the ready" (12). Success in enacting these ideals, however, "is not an end state, instead, people experience elusive moments of success" (Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020: 11) in the continuous process of 'becoming' (cf. Ashforth, 1998: 213). In his qualitative study of online freelancers, Lehdonvirta, (2018) finds that on digital

platforms, the time constraint or the "tyranny of the clock" (Woodcock, 1996) is replaced by the "tyranny of the app" as design features of the platform induce workers to quantify themselves and strive to beat their "personal bests" as one would in sports or video games.

Pre-occupation of humans with progress, excellence, and achieving mythical ideals (Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020) is not limited to platform work, but what is different and arguably troublesome about self-quantification techniques used on digital platforms is the capacity of digital platforms in manipulating and intensifying the significance of enactment of those ideals. Similar to experiments done to direct consumers' behavior, digital platforms, by the virtue of sitting between providers and users, have the potential to conduct relentless experiments on workers' behavior in order to maximize the value extracted from each worker by changing how they feel, think, and behave (Calo & Rosenblat, 2017). Recent studies have documented evidence of the use of persuasive technology design (e.g., psychological inducements aimed to encourage drivers to work longer to achieve their personal bests) on digital platforms (Calo & Rosenblat, 2017; Lehdonvirta, 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Scheiber, 2017). In their study of Uber drivers, Rosenblat and Stark (2016) show that when the drivers receive a ride request, they were given only about 15 seconds to accept or reject a ride which is reminiscent of "management by stress" (Delbridge, Turnbull, & Wilkinson, 1992; Oliver,

1991; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992) identified in JIT and TQM production processes[2]. Similarly, in an article featured in New York Times, Scheiber (2017) reports that Uber uses "psychological inducements" including goal setting to make the workers drive longer hours by exploiting human's preoccupation with achieving earnings goals and hitting personal bests.

The meanings workers attach to evaluative metrics should be examined in light of their desired identities; how evaluations are interpreted is a "function of possible selves... the student with a physician possible self will attach a different interpretation to a grade of A in organic chemistry than will someone without this possible self. Possible selves furnish criteria against which outcomes are evaluated" (Markus & Nurius, 1986: 956). They theorize that possible desired self-conceptions are "cognitive representation" of the incentives for achieving positive evaluation, and absent such cognitive representation, evaluations should lose their significance in directing instrumental behavior (p. 961). While organizational scholars have not yet paid particular attention to digital platforms' identity targeting practices, recent studies suggest that platforms do target workers'

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[2] A common example is the 'amber light approach' which refers to "a system of lights at workstations on a workflow line (Delbridge, Turnbull, & Wilkinson, 1992). While green meant there was time to spare and red stopped the line, amber indicated that the worker was bordering on full capacity." (Green, 2004)

subjectivities. The use of rhetorical invocations on digital platforms has been documented by Rosenblat and Stark's (2016) study of Uber drivers. They provide multiple examples of Uber's linguistic efforts aimed at pitching an autonomous entrepreneurial image of work as an Uber driver (see also Rosenblat, 2018). Among media scholars, there is consensus that content platforms engage in discursive work, directly through language or indirectly through meanings implied in their design features, to increase their profit and minimize their responsibility (Gillespie, 2010, 2014). The limited extant research on identity targeting practices of digital platforms, however, has mainly focused on platforms' discursive and linguistic efforts and paid less attention to design features and sociomaterial practices that digital platforms might employ to mobilize workers' desired identities. The conceptualization of identity-based interpretations of evaluations as inducers of future-oriented behavior, combined with the connection between people's pursuit of cultural ideals and self-quantification technologies begets an inquiry about the meanings attached to evaluative metrics and their connection to desired identities and hope labor.

As labor platforms increasingly rely on indirect and subtle forms of control and technology design techniques that exploit human brain cognitive biases for behavior direction (Calo & Rosenblat, 2017; Rosenblat, 2018; Scheiber, 2017), particular attention should be given to specific design characteristics of evaluative metrics. The alerting capacity of technology design in "scheduling little blocks of time in our minds" that are not planned and intentional has been voiced by Silicon Valley's technology design insider

and whistleblower (Harris, 2017) as well as by human-computer interaction researchers (Bogost, 2015; Lockton, Harrison, & Stanton, 2010) and technology ethics scholars (Verbeek, 2005). But organizational research on technology does not adequately address "the degree of intentionality" in time use (Feldman et al., 2020: 616). The limited available research that considers the capacity of information technology in directing behavior at work focuses on 'behavioral addiction' to 'smartphones' at work (e.g., Porter and Kakabadse, 2006; Turel et al., 2008), leaving out both the nuances of design features of technology and the social complexities of interactions between human and technology. Thus, we understand little about how design techniques increasingly used by digital platforms interact with desired identities to contribute to compulsive work behavior.

I build on the literature on desired identities and platform control, and insights from persuasive technology literature to explore how technological features on digital platforms interact with desired identities to contribute to compulsive work behavior. I develop process theory depicting how even in the absence of actual identity enactment opportunities, evaluative metrics can sustain work effort by facilitating imagined enactment of future desired identity and instilling hope, and by inducing compulsive behavior. I further identify the practices workers employ to resist the process, and specify which practices appear effective and which appear to further intensify identity baiting.

METHODS

I conducted an inductive qualitative field study of Instagram content creators and freelancers whose careers depend on their online presence. I draw principally on semi-structured interview and participant observer data. Open-ended yet directed questions in semi-structured intensive interviews facilitate in-depth exploration of the lived experience of interviewees and therefore are especially suitable for studying cultural ideals, attached meanings, and desired identities (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Additionally, relying on my personal experience with the platform, I conducted a thorough analysis of the platform's features.

Research Setting

This study is situated in the context of digitally mediated cultural production – commonly referred to as content creation– on Instagram. Instagram, among other digital content platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitch, TikTok, Snapchat, Pinterest), is a platform that makes its revenue partially through advertisement impressions by bringing together businesses, content consumers, and content creators–people who upload content on the platform not only for leisure but also for economic and career purposes.

This setting is theoretically appropriate for exploring my research question for several reasons. First, the scene of cultural production is historically characterized by future oriented efforts for becoming who one aspires to be in the future (Duffy, 2017; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Thus, Instagram, as the cradle of digital cultural production

provides a suitable setting for studying aspired or desired identities. Second, Instagram creators need to compete for more visibility by grappling with the platform's algorithms to gain higher evaluative metrics (likes, comments, views, etc.). Such metrics are granted by content consumers, enabled by the platform affordances, and affected by the algorithm. Finally, Instagram is famous for employing persuasive design practices. These conditions combine to portray a suitable setting for studying the role of evaluative metrics, desired identities, and persuasive technology.

Personal Background

In 2017, I started an Instagram account through which I shared my day-to-day experiences as a graduate student and my thoughts on various topics that concerned me at the time such as gender inequality at work and work habits. Within six months, my audience base grew to over a hundred thousand. My background in content creation has helped me gain a deep understanding of the various platform features that I will be investigating in the present study. The personal connection I gained during this process has increased my empathy with informants and has positioned me as an insider in the creator community. This connection might also help me with the recruitment of informants as gaining field access to the mass entertainment and cultural production industry is deemed to be extremely difficult (Ortner, 2010). Further, a personal connection with the research setting can help the researcher to better analyze the tacit socialization processes, the “simultaneously desired and imposed identity” dynamics, and

power relations (Anteby, 2013: 1285). Despite being deeply familiar with the setting that I aim to study, I am not bound to its traditions and do not financially depend on it. These conditions help me maintain a professional distance from the field (Anteby, 2013) and place me in a liminal position between being insider and outsider which is deemed to be ideal for field research (Adler, Adler, & Rochford Jr, 1986; Bartunek & Louis, 1996; Emerson, 2001; Luker, 2008). To further balance my familiarity with the setting with the detachment necessary for ethnographic research, and to make "the familiar strange" (Van Maanen, 1995:20), I will rely primarily on the interview and observation rather than participation. I recognize that my own experience colors my interpretation of the data. To make known the lens through which I observed the data, I provide a detailed account of my experience in the findings.

Data Collection

Participants

I have conducted 50 interviews with independent workers who are or have been working as Instagram content creators. Content creators are defined here as people who are active on the platform not only for leisure but also for economic and career purposes. I limit the sample to creators who have been active on the platform at least for a year, have uploaded at least one piece of content per week in the past month, and have reached more than 5000 followers at the time of the interview. Using purposeful sampling, I recruited participants through acquaintances, online community forums, and snowball

sampling by asking participants if they have suggestions for potential interviewees at the end of each interview. I aimed for variation in the occupation –e.g., fashion bloggers, educators, lifestyle bloggers, gamers, etc.– (Patton, 1990) and include both successful and amateur creators to cover a wide range of experiences.

Th demographics of the informants and the range of their number of followers is reported in Table 1.3. Of the 50 people interviewed, seventy-two percent identified as women, and twenty-eight percent identified as men, which resembles the dominance of women in this industry. Fifty-eight percent identified as middle-eastern, thirty-two percent identified as white, four percent as Hispanic, two percent as black or African-American, and two percent as half middle eastern and half black. Their ages ranged from eighteen to eighty-five years old, and their income ranged from none to more than two hundred thousand dollars. The focus of their activities covered a wide range including modeling, fitness, Yoga, lifestyle, holistic healing, and comedy. Participants' audiences ranged from six thousand to more than one million followers.

[Insert Table 1.3 about here]

Interviews

I revised the interview protocol twice over the course of the data collection; once after analyzing the first ten interviews (Version 2), and once after analyzing the first twenty interviews (Version 3). The initial interview protocol (Version 1) began with a general question about participants' career history and professional aspirations and continued with questions about their day-to-day work lives, job tasks, time use,

perception of technology, perception of the industry, relationship to metrics, and social aspects of the work. The initial interview protocol was very elaborate and contained 32 questions. After the first 10 interviews, I refined the initial guide to make it more concise. In Version 2, I dropped some of the questions that did not fetch new insights compared to previous interviews or that were answered in informants' responses to other questions in the interview guide. For example, I removed the question that asked informants how they entered the industry as this was often covered in their description of their career history, and the question that asked informants to give a detailed explanation of all technological features of Instagram as the responses to this question remained the same across interviews.

While there were many commonalities within all three versions of the interviews (e.g., inquiries about informants' career aspirations, the importance of their work to their sense of self, and the importance of evaluative metrics in their work), the questions honed in on the emerging themes as the interview protocol evolved (Spradley, 1979; Charmaz, 2006). For example, in the first 20 interviews, several informants mentioned getting a sense of validation for who they aspired to be from evaluative metrics. They also spoke about obsessively monitoring the metrics after they shared a post on Instagram. Many described strategies they employed to resist the compulsion or to get the validation they needed from other sources when the metrics were not high. In light of such emerging observations, I revised the interview protocol to inquire further about the informants' desired identities, the significance of evaluative metrics in how they viewed themselves,

the frequency and the manner in which they monitored the evaluative metrics, the practices they engaged in to overcome compulsive monitoring of metrics, and the strategies they used in response to low evaluative metrics. For example, I asked about informants' dreams for the future of their Instagram account, and added open-ended questions about a recent experience of a time when a post did well (had high metrics), and when a post did not do well (had low metrics). My first interviews did not ask the informants about compulsion or addiction; this theme appeared naturally from the discussions about time use and the importance of metrics. In later interviews, however, I asked informants directly about their frequency of checking metrics after posting and about the intentionality of the frequency. In all three versions, I included structured questions about participants' demographics including age, gender, race, nationality, and income to enable comparison across social groups. Interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted between 40 to 85 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The informants received a $50 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation.

Secondary data sources

In addition to interviews, relying on my personal background with the platform, I conducted a walkthrough analysis (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018) of the Creator version of Instagram to fully identify and analyze the features, metrics, and embedded meanings within the sociomaterial context of the platform. The aim of a walkthrough analysis is to analyze the affordances of technological features within their sociocultural context. This method involves a technical walkthrough — "the step-by-step observation

and documentation of an app's screens, features, and flows of activity" (Light et al., 2018: pp)— and an analysis of app's vision, business model, and governance to understand the intention of app's designers and owners (Light et al., 2018: 10). The data gathered for the walkthrough analysis specifically involves 54 screenshots from Instagram Creator's user interface captured from January 2019 to June 2022. At the start of this research, 33 screenshots were taken and analyzed. During the progression of this research, I periodically monitored the app as updates and new features are common on digital platforms. When new features were introduced, I took a screenshot of their interface on the app, took note of the Instagram announcements about the feature, and wrote down my own experience interacting with the new feature. To situate this data, I collected all the data from Instagram's official communication channels including the Creators Blog and Help Center that related to Instagram features. This approach yielded 24 documents from the Help Centre and 23 documents from the Creator Blog.

Data Analysis

Walkthrough analysis

I took notes about the arrangement of the user interface and the functions of the features of the platform. In interpreting the intention behind each feature, I paid attention to the arrangement of features, the functions they enable or mandate, the text about the feature embedded in the inter-face, and the explanations provided on Instagram Help Centre. In doing so, I tried to "renders visible aspects of the interface that may otherwise

blend into the background of everyday use" (Light et al., 2018: 14). My personal experience with the app helped me have a better understanding of the sequence of behavior that the app's user interface induced. I open coded my notes and the textual data to categorize the features based on the functions they enabled. To deepen my understanding of the platform's intentions and goals, I open coded the textual data available on Professional Dashboard (a tool in Creator accounts- see Figure 1.3) and Instagram Creator's Blog based on the themes that emerged from the interview data.

[Insert Figure 1.3 about here]

Analysis of interview data

I analyzed the interview data according to inductive qualitative data analysis guidelines (Charmaz, 2006), iterating between the data and the literature. Following each interview, I wrote memos to record my emerging observations and intuitive understanding of the interaction (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008). I began the data analysis by line-by-line analysis of interviews, identifying common themes and categorizing them into first-order codes and preliminary categories. I noticed that informants referred to Instagram as an outlet for expressing who they wanted to be, as a means for signaling who they wanted to be perceived as, or as a lever to help them move towards who they hoped to become. I coded descriptions of Instagram content creation as an expression of who the informants wanted to be at present (e.g., "artist", a person of service) as "desired identity with actual enactment" and descriptions of who they hoped to become in the future (e.g., "business owner", a "TED talk" host) as "desired identity with

potential enactment". At this stage, I used in vivo codes (Locke, 2001) to note the meaning and function of evaluative metrics (e.g., "validation", "motivation") and the indications of habitual behaviors around monitoring metrics (e.g., "addiction", "compulsion").

As the data analysis progressed, I looked for connections between the first-order codes to create more abstract theoretical categories. For example, I combined statements about present desired identity (who the informants wanted to be) and future desired identity (who they wanted to become) under the umbrella of "desired identity" to represent the informants' preferred version of self both in the eyes of the self and others at present and in the future. I noticed that sharing a post was often an effort to enact and claim a desired identity and was followed by an episode of insecurity about the informants' right to claim the desired identity. I coded the existing and new data with the emerging themes in mind. For example, I extracted all the portions of data that described an episode of insecurity or doubt, or an episode of euphoria and excitement, following high or low metrics. Based on the emerging themes, I developed descriptive codes (e.g., "unintentional monitoring of metrics", episode of insecurity", "other sources of validation", "abstinence strategies"). Themes of future-oriented efforts emerged from the data. I labeled descriptions of present efforts directed towards future gains as "hope labor". I started noticing that when evaluative metrics were low, informants feared losing their claim to their desired identity, when the metrics were high, informants felt a sense of temporary validation for their claim to their desired identity. Emerging themes suggested

that when evaluative metrics for an Instagram post were high, they functioned as what I later labeled *pseudo identity incentive*; they allowed the creators to temporarily view themselves as their preferred version (or facilitated the imagined enactment of the desired identity), but the awareness of the fleeting nature and the uncertainty about the continuation of the opportunity in the future made the identity affirming experience fragile and liminal. I also noticed that while creators were adamant about not placing too much worth on metrics, they found themselves compulsively pursuing them or obsessing over them, a process I labeled *Identity Baiting*. I learned that as a defense mechanism against the liminality of the pseudo identity incentives, creators developed a reservoir of meanings that they could liberally attach to or detach from the evaluative metrics, but in doing so further reinforced the process of identity baiting by optimism practices that prevented abandoning of desired identity in face of low metrics. Further, I found that identity baiting sustains the process of hope labor by keeping the informants' optimism alive in the absence of other subjectively rational indications that warrant such optimism. The analysis evolved from a theory of evaluative metrics as pseudo identity incentives that keep the desired identities afloat and motivate further effort to a broader process model of how hope labor is sustained through intermittent identity rewarding.

I now report the findings that emerged from this analysis in two parts. In part 1, I outline and describe the features based on my walkthrough analysis of the platform and provide a detailed account of my personal experience with the platform. In part 2, I detail the findings from the analysis of the interview data. I begin by describing creators'

desired identities for which Instagram work was viewed as a (potential) enactment opportunity. I then explain the process of identity baiting in which evaluative metrics functioned as pseudo identity enactment opportunities that temporarily validated or rejected the preferred identity and, either way, animated the continuation of content production work. I describe how creators developed a reservoir of meanings that they could attach to metrics, and how they alternated between those meanings to keep the desired identity afloat. I close with a discussion of the study's contribution to theories of non-coercive and identity targeting management, people's management of their desired identities, and technology and work.

FINDINGS

Part One: Findings from the Walkthrough Analysis

In what follows, I describe the main affordances that are enabled by Instagram technological features, outline different methods through which Instagram communicates with the creators, and explicate the function of Instagram algorithm. I close this section with an elaborate report of my experience on the platform to familiarize the reader with the lens through which I inquired, observed, and analyzed the data.

Features and Affordances

Through a walkthrough analysis of the platform, I generated a list of the important features of Instagram, shown in Table 2.3. Based on the affordance they provide, I categorize the features into content creation, connection, evaluation, and job title/ identity

definition. I created an explanation of the function of each feature based on my own interaction with the platform and completed it based on information provided on Instagram Help Center. Most important to this paper, are self-evaluation and reputational tool which provide quantitative metrics about the performance of the account and each piece of uploaded content (i.e., posts, stories, lives, IGTV videos). The metrics are either demonstrated on the creators' account to everyone and are publicly visible (i.e., number of followers, number of comments and likes, number of views of videos), or are demonstrated privately only to the creators themselves. The private metrics are labeled 'Insights' and provide detailed performance reports about the account and about different pieces of content (see Figure 2.3).

[Insert Figure 2.3 about here]

Although these insights are only available to the creators themselves, creators can choose to share them with their audience or business partners by sharing a screenshot of the Insights page. Interactions with the audience are encouraged both through the rhetorical invocations on Instagram Creators Blog and by the features that enable and facilitate connection; in the words of Instagram, "tools that make… responding easier to do" (Instagram, nd). On Instagram, content creators can earn an income from their content creation activity in a variety of ways. They can generate income from producing branded content, from redirecting their audience to other platforms, and recently directly from Instagram Reels (available to some creators). Other mechanisms are detailed in Table 2.3.

[Insert Table 2.3 about here]

Communication with the creators

Instagram communicates with the creators through four main channels: the @Creators account, Creator blog, help and guidelines webpages, and the app interface. Creator blog and @Creators account are channels through which Instagram provides the creators with tips and training, updates about the features, policies, and algorithms, answers to frequently asked questions, and success stories about creators who 'made it'.

Algorithm and the visibility game

Since the introduction of non-chronological feed in 2016, visibility of the content has become dependent on an algorithm that defines what content should receive more exposure. On average, Instagram users follow an estimated 822 accounts (Byrne, 2014). Instagram creators, therefore, compete for visibility not only on Instagram 'explore' page—where new followers can be reached—, but also on their followers' populated feeds (Cotter, 2019; O'Meara, 2019). According to the @Creators, feed ranking depends on the number of views, likes, comments, and re-shares of a post. The income generated on Instagram is highly dependent on the visibility of the creators on the platform.

The lens of my personal experience

When I first started my account on Instagram in 2017, I just viewed it as a hobby but entertained the remote fantasy of growing big enough to establish my offline small jewelry design business as a successful online brand. I knew that to grow my business, I needed a large audience, but I did not know if that was possible. "Am I the kind of person

who could attract and engage the public audience?" I asked myself. The idea seemed remote, but despite the remoteness of the possibility, I decided to try it because it seemed fun. I had taken courses in fashion design in my early 20's, studied Italian for a year to be able to pursue a fashion-related degree in Italy, and even got admission with a partial scholarship to pursue a fashion management degree in Milan, but I ended up not pursuing the path. Given this forgone passion, putting together a few outfits and curating an aesthetic image felt like play, and not work. In my personal journal I had noted: "regardless of the results, my Instagram page will be my little corner to experience the parallel universe of me following fashion design".

In the beginning, I did not pay too much attention to how many likes or comments my posts received as I had no point of reference to know whether my metrics were high or low. Over time, however, I grew more attentive to metrics. Early on, I genuinely enjoyed the creative experience of producing content and did not put much thought into how my production was going to be perceived. I did not expect to receive recognition for what I did, and so was unbothered by not receiving it. As I shared more content, however, I did receive social recognition by getting more exposure and gaining more followers. With the growing sense of recognition, the once almost impossible fantasy suddenly seemed more possible. The recognition felt good not only because it fed my ego, but also because it was the "green light" that proved my 'small jewelry business owner' identity and I belonged to the same universe. With every instance of not being recognized for a piece of work, the light flickered and that possibility “receded” before me, “but that's no

matter" because I could “run faster, stretch out [my] arms farther" (Fitzgerald, 1925). I gradually started comparing the metrics of new posts with the metrics of my previous posts. The way Instagram reported the metrics on the Insights page encouraged and facilitated this comparison as it reported the metrics of the past seven days relative to the metrics of the seven-day prior to that period (see Figure 3.3). Soon I was in a competition with myself, and to win the competition, I needed to beat the Instagram algorithm. I started developing my own speculations about how the algorithm works. For example, I noticed that my metrics dropped when I took breaks, so I developed a practice to create multiple pieces of content in one sitting to be able to consistently churn out content. I later learned that this is a common practice among creators and is referred to as *content batching*. I also learned (or speculated) that once I share a post, I should remain online for at least half an hour to react (respond to or like) the audience's comments. My interpretation of this observation was that since my audience receives a notification about my reaction to their comments, they come back to my post and interact with it again, and the algorithm interprets this increased activity on my content as a sign of popularity and makes it visible on my audience's feed and the explore page. I also noticed that when my face appears in the content, it gets higher visibility. This speculation encouraged me to include myself in the content even when the content was unrelated to me, especially as my experience had led me to believe that when one post gets low exposure, it influences how the algorithm ranks my future posts and thus lowers the overall performance of my page. My strategies seemed to be working, my page reached more than 100 thousand

followers in less than six months and I directed my audience to the Instagram page of the small jewelry business that I had left behind in Iran. My work initiated the success story of this now flourishing Instagram-based jewelry business that is now run by my family without my involvement.

[Insert Figure 3.3 about here]

After a few months and a couple of dozens of style photoshoots and outfit videos, I realized that my passion for fashion belonged to the past and did not align with my values or who I was at the present. At that point, however, I had over fifty thousand followers, a very engaged audience, and a successful online jewelry business in the making. To keep my Instagram aligned with my values and who I was (which is the common Instagram success advice), I gradually steered away from fashion-related content and instead shared my thoughts about different topics that I was learning about at the time, though they were almost always paired with a photo of myself because I knew that was what the algorithm wanted. Regardless of what my content represented, it became increasingly apparent to me that the online entrepreneur dream is not mine anymore. Apart from my value judgments about being a part of the fashion industry, I found the day-to-day experience of engaging with the platform unpleasant and anxiety-inducing, and did not wish to continue to have that lifestyle. While I started creating content as a hobby/fun side hustle, over time, it grew to consume about thirty to forty hours of my week.

Long after both the dream and the fun were gone, however, I kept working on my Instagram. Without the fun, the once desired future, or financial rewards, I struggled to explain the continuation of my activity on Instagram, yet kept going and growing. When I was not productive and did not share content, the number of my followers and the reach of my accounts and posts dropped. Even though at that point the numbers did not matter to me in any rational way, noticing the drop was an unsettling experience and made me feel anxious and guilty about not working enough. I felt the need to share a post and multiple stories every day to keep my page in the clear in the eyes of the Instagram algorithm, and caught myself mindlessly refreshing and checking Insights multiple times a day. To ease the anxiety that I was experiencing, a friend suggested a week-long meditation retreat. During that week, I disconnected from Instagram. That pause brought back my lost awareness to reclaim my capacity for self-reflection to stop the mindless chase of the flickering light. Since then, I lost 18000 followers. At present, I still have the account but I rarely share anything on it.

I am cognizant of the fact that the narrative constructed from my personal experience and the current research interact and influence each other. The findings of the current research have shaped my retrospective reflection on the events described here. Inevitably, my experience has influenced the kind of questions I asked in the interview and has colored my interpretation of the data from my observation and interviews. I strived to minimize the influence of my personal experience by remaining faithful to the

data and grounding the findings in the current organizational literature and theories of professional identity.

Part Two: Findings from the Interviews

The process model of identity baiting, depicted in Figure 4.3, begins with the creators' perception that Instagram is a (potential) conduit for enactment of a desired identity, which motivated creators' effort to produce content and grow their accounts. To gauge whether they were on the right path to enact their desired identity, creators relied on *pseudo identity incentives* –evaluative metrics that provided temporary validation for the desired identity. Identity baiting entailed the process of compulsive pursuit of fleeting moments of pseudo identity incentives, intensified by persuasive technology design, that kept the wheel of content production going, even in the absence of actual identity enactment opportunities, thus sustained the process of hope labor. When faced with low metrics, informants employed optimism practices superficially appeared as resistance but over time contributed to the continuation of identity baiting by protecting the desired identity from identity threats. Some resisted the compulsive pursuit of identity baits and broke the cycle of sustained hope labor by cultivating mindfulness practices. Others relied on abstinence strategies to limit their own access to technology. The abstinence strategies, however, often led to relapse, shame, and self-blame. The mindfulness strategies, therefore, were relatively more effective than abstinence strategies.

[Insert Figure 4.3 about here]

Instagram as a Potential Conduit for Enactment of a Desired Identity

Viewing Instagram as a (potential) conduit for enactment of a desired identity, appeared frequently in creators' accounts of their aspirations for their Instagram accounts. A former figure skating champion explained that her Instagram filled the void she felt in herself after leaving figure skating. "My personality was developed with my competitions with my finger skating" (P30). When she stopped competing she felt that "that part of [her] was taken away" so she "was looking for something to like kind of get back to that habit. And then when this like opportunity [Instagram] came, it was really natural to me. So, I started to present myself, to express myself on social media." Despite the irrationality of spending about 30 hours per week on her Instagram for her life and career situation, she was not ready to give up that identity just yet: "I've been trying to close my Instagram for some period of time. And I kept postponing it...it's kind of a fear of losing that identity again. I don't want to like, let go of it". For some, the identity quest was directed outwardly, Instagram was used as a tool to prove an identity to other people. For others, the identity quest was directed inwardly, Instagram was a tool to reassure themselves that they are, or will become, who they want to be. Importantly, the desire to maintain or the hope to claim the desired identities motivated creators to continue their work in the absence of material reward or subjectively meaningful justifications. In addition to the examples described in this section, supporting data is provided in Table 3.3.

[Insert Table 3.3 Here]

My analysis suggests that Instagram functioned as a site for the appropriation of what is referred to in the literature as hope labor (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013, Neff, 2012) or aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017), that was sustained through the process of identity baiting. For the majority of my informants, the pursuit of a desired identity on Instagram did not yield financial rewards or career opportunities proportionate to their efforts and hours of work spent in the present time. They frequently reported not making a living off their Instagram content creation activity despite viewing it as their career and spending between 28 hours to 70 hours per week on it. Many held one or multiple day jobs (either part-time or full-time) besides the time spent on Instagram. Some were aware of this contradiction but struggled to resolve it. When asked if she would like to add any question to my interview guide, one informant suggested "If you're not making money, why are you continuing [the work]?" (P1). Reflecting back on her eight years of full-time Instagram work, and continuing it in a less intense capacity in the past two years, one said:

> If you're not monetizing on it, it's the weirdest time waster. Like, why do you need to post every smoothie every whatever, and that literally is where it– that is kind of like what happened to me. Like if I was going out for dinner, and I used to go out a lot, I would be running late, but I like couldn't leave without taking a picture. Because I wanted to show everybody my outfit. So, it just added this like stress, right? Be at dinner, I'd be like on my phone, you know, communicating with people or seeing how people reacted to my, um, my image or whatever. And it's like, it's just, it's just weird. So, I literally think, if you're not doing it and getting monetary results, like right away, why are people spending so much time and documenting their whole life? (P16)

Reflecting on their motivation to continue this work without being properly paid for it, many informants referred to their desired professional identity as their northern star that justified the cost and directed their efforts.

Desired identity with actual enactment opportunity

Informants consistently referred to Instagram as an outlet for acting out a desired identity. For many, Instagram was an outlet for expressing a creative identity. "Instagram, I think, has almost become like a platform where I showcase my work. And also, I get to express myself and my personality through Instagram... I use Instagram, predominantly for my creative side of my business" (P14). Another informant viewed Instagram as an outlet for expressing her everchanging artistic identity to the world:

> I'm a chameleon and I'm an artist, so I'm always changing. So, I feel like my Instagram is always changing...I didn't know what influencers were back then because, like, I'm 30. So, like when I started Instagram, like right at the beginning, you know, that wasn't really a thing. But I always knew, like, yeah, I'm going to use Instagram to showcase my talent. So that was always, from the get go– like, this is my art and I'm just going to show it to the world. So that's what I used Instagram for. (P6)

For some, Instagram became the main outlet for enacting a desired identity when enactment opportunities in the real world became dire in the aftermath of the pandemic. One participant described his Instagram as an outlet for expressing his identity as a comedian in the absence of face-to-face interaction opportunities:

> My sense of humor gets really put out there [on Instagram]. In terms of my content, my story content... People get a really kind of a gateway window into what I really think is funny. And people connect with that. And they go "not only do I want to book him, but I think he's funny for this specific reason" ...if you

> want to know who I am really as a comedian, just follow me on Instagram, which sounds like such a terr– crazy concept. But for the most part, especially with the pandemic, we haven't had a lot of the face to face– kind of who is this guy? So, people really get to kind of understand– more of an understanding of who I am based on my social media presence. (P9)

As this comment illustrates, participants felt that Instagram functioned as a window into who they were (or wanted to be); the platform functioned as a stage for enacting and claiming desired identities in the eyes of significant others–the informants' audience.

Not all the Instagram workers focused on claiming desired identities in the eyes of audiences. While some efforts were made to claim a desired identity in the frontstage, others were directed inwardly, to claim a desired identity at the backstage. Informants' accounts suggested that they used Instagram as a tool to claim a desired identity to themselves. Reminiscent of the Savior archetype, these identities described a person filled with desires to help others in need. "I've been told by my family and my partner that you're spending way too much time trying to respond to so many people that sometimes don't even appreciate it...I try to help people as much as I can. And that's just in my nature and personality" (P44). The desire to view one's self as a person of service appeared frequently in the data. "Everything I do in my life has to be of service to others", said a sacred geometry artist who hoped the content he shared was a means to affect people's "lives in a positive way, or helps them out" (P34). An informant whose content focused on advocating for people in marginalized bodies and "documenting [her] journey in [eating disorder] recovery" noted, "I've always wanted to help people in that sense, but I

was always told I had to look a certain way, so, I never get it. But social media and Instagram kind of drove me to trust and advocate and go for what I wanted to be" (P28). The opportunity to enact this desired identity later "drove" her to go to school part time to pursue a profession in "child and adolescent mental health".

In addition to the prominent desired identity of "person of service", some noted Instagram's role in enabling them to enact a part of their identity that they preferred to maintain, that would otherwise not have a lot of room for being enacted or expressed. One informant who was a paralegal "by day" mentioned that she creates food-related content on Instagram because "I think for someone like me, I'm a creative person, I think Instagram allows you to express your creativity" (P21). Reflecting on her motivation to spend more than twenty hours on her page that did not yield much financial reward, a university professor and researcher explained that her work on Instagram allows her to enact the creative or artsy side of her identity:

> I did my PhD in electrical engineering here in [name of the school] and I graduated in 2020. And it's been like two years that I'm working in the field of renewable energy. Specifically, I'm working on [a specific technology]. But, you know– the work that I'm doing is interesting, but I need something that allows me to be more creative or artsy. So that's what I'm doing on Instagram. (P24)

The attempt to claim a desired identity through content creation, thus, was not to claim the desired identity in the eyes of significant others, but was rather directed inwardly; to keep an aspired and sometimes forgone identity alive in one's internal self-narrative.

Desired identity with potential enactment

The future-oriented desired identities frequently depicted images inspired by cultural ideals of contemporary work including 'being one's own boss/ having the ultimate freedom', and 'making a living off the who one really is–the authentic self'. Having spent between 20 and 30 hours a week on her Instagram for the past ten years without getting paid for it, one participant explained, "I am trying to make my online business work by the time I graduate, to some extent at least, so that after graduation, I don't need to do a nine to five job. So, my ideal would be to be able to get more clients myself and have a flexible time schedule and work for myself" (P26). Another person told me that, even though his content creation work did not save him from becoming homeless, his dream of becoming an online entrepreneur motivated him to do whatever it took to make it on Instagram:

> I built a following but the numbers [of sales] weren't there–I wasn't converting sales. But it was fun for my artist in me to do the branding and to create the courses and things like that. Then I kind of skipped over a little bit where I was homeless for six months sleeping out of my car, didn't have money for food, and was really in a tough spot. And so going from that to switching over and saying like – I was so connected to the dream of being an online entrepreneur– and I said, sometimes you got to do what you got to do! And so I picked up a serving bartending job, more group fitness classes...I was working 19 hours a day, sleeping four hours a night, seven days a week for two months straight. And I got on my feet doing that, and then nearly like worked myself to death. (P11)

Thus, desired professional identities motivated informants' efforts even in the absence of material rewards.

Portraits of Instagram as a platform for personal and professional self-expression arose frequently in response to my inquiries about aspirations for starting out or motivation for the continuation of Instagram accounts. In most cases, however, the act of creating and sharing content in itself did not fulfill the desire to enact and claim a certain identity. As the quotes below suggest, without the external validation from significant others (i.e., the informants' audience), the void created by the fundamental question of 'am I good enough?' remained.

Identity Baiting

Low metrics as identity threats

A pervasive concern and sense of insecurity about one's right to claim a desired identity without the confirmation gained from high evaluative metrics emerged from my data. "If a post does really bad [low metrics] I'm like, oh my god, like, Am I not–? Did I lose it? Like, did I–? and then the my next one will do really good [high metrics]. And I'm like, no, I still got it," said a meme creator (P13). One choreographer noted, "when the numbers weren't getting higher, it was frustrating. You know, because I was like, okay, am I doing something wrong? Am I not a good dancer? Is this okay? Is this not okay, you know?" (P19). Another creator, a musician, expressed similar concerns about losing her claim to her musician identity when her metrics were lower than that of other musicians she saw as points of comparison:

> So generally, I don't really compare myself like physically with other people. It was more so just seeing like, the likes and just people's followings that we're growing, especially like different artists and like musicians. And I'm close to like, yeah, at this point in my life, like, I have a lot of cool musician and artist friends in my life and they are growing and it's great like I am such like, number one supporter. But like when your psyche's not good and you're seeing their growth happening and you're not [growing], it just makes you feel like, what am I doing wrong? There's something wrong with me. Like, I'm not good enough, I'm not as good as them. That's why I'm not getting the comments and the likes and all of that, which is like– when I say it out loud, I'm like, oh my god, [her name], I hate that. Like, how can you even compare yourself like in comments and likes. But it does–It does just–It messes with your head a little bit. (P6)

The insecurities concerned not only one's internal sense of self (i.e. am I good enough), but also one's image (am I perceived as good enough?). "When I think of it [metrics] as something that other people would see, I might feel [worried] like that, because people do tend to judge others based on their followers or the number of engagement and likes", said one. Another person told me that she thinks people who say that the metrics do not mean a lot to them "are not being truthful," because when the metrics are not high, "you take it [the post] down, and you delete it" (P16).

Self-doubt, insecurity, and the fear of losing one's claim to a desired identity in the eyes of the self and others, in short, were common responses to having low metrics. But, as suggested by what follows, even when the metrics were high, they did not eliminate participants' experience of insecurity and anxiety.

High metrics as pseudo identity incentives

High metrics gave the creators hope that they might, in the future, be able to enact their desired identity. "No writer, no creator probably, but certainly no writer wants to be

like speaking into the void like...So, if I am writing, and more people are aware of it, it means I've done my job on some level. So, if I have a particularly high reach, what that means to me is that something I wrote, resonated, delivered some amount of insight" said a writer in explaining the significance of metrics (P49). Another creator mentioned the role of metrics in validating her identity as a queer person who expressed her identity through her sense of humor:

> [Metrics] are pretty important. I like them. Like, it's cool. It's cool to see that your content resonates with other people. It's in that sense, like, it's super cool. Like, I love reading people's comments that are like, "Oh my god, like, me too". Or like, "yeah, this happened to me also". And like, it's very validating for me. And it's also very, like, it's cool to see that you're putting out something that you're just like, this is so stupid, because I do feel like a lot of my stuff is just like, because they're memes so I'm like, this is dumb, like, but it's funny because it's dumb, you know? And then so many people are like "this means a lot to me, like this validated my personal experience. Thank you so much for posting this". I'm like, cool, like, that's really cool. (P13)

High metrics offered a sense of validation, created hope, facilitated imagined future enactment of a desired identity, and most importantly, motivated work effort. However, creators' awareness of the temporary and unpredictable nature of the validation gained from high metrics stopped them from experiencing high metrics as actual identity incentives. Instead, they viewed them as what I call pseudo identity incentives, an impermanent sense of validation that did not feel completely genuine and significant, and could not be relied upon long-term. "There's a lot of us that thrive on those numbers. And even though it [high metrics] does bring opportunity, the more followers you have, and the more engagement you have, uh, I think it just it takes away from your everyday life, it

takes away from...being somewhere where life really is. Because at the end of day, this could disappear", said a videographer (P5). The difference between actual identity incentives and pseudo identity incentives is illustrated rather well in P19's comparison of a real-world dance performance and an Instagram post:

> I used to be like obsessive about–Okay, now, let me post this today, or let me think about a scenario and post it on Instagram, which was great, but it also kind of kept me– I mean, it was–it was more about just getting instant likes or instant comments. You know, it wasn't something that would last for another 10 years, you know, nobody's gonna look at my [Instagram] video in 10 years and be like, oh, this masterpiece that [her name] created– you know? [chuckles]. But if I create something in the real world now, somebody can at least say, "yeah, you know, she created this and this is going to stay". It's not like an Instagram post that you're going to forget, in like 10 days. (P19)

Thus, the experience of achieving high metrics instigated hope and fear simultaneously; hope for becoming who you want to be in the future, and fear of losing that fleeting claim on a desired identity.

Compulsive Pursuit of Pseudo Identity Incentive

Not leaning too much on metrics was a constant concern for creators. "There's the side of numbers evaluation, which I try not to get too caught up in it...that shouldn't be the measure of success" (P28), "so I really try not to look at those numbers going up and down and not really putting myself down for "oh, I didn't do a good job today". Because it's not really about that. It's that, you know, maybe the algorithm was not in my favor that day, but that's okay. Right?" (P26). These quotes illustrate a repeated theme that high metrics are not dependable, should be avoided, and should not be given too much value.

Yet, most creators found it hard and almost impossible not to pay attention to their metrics. Eloquent about the mismatch between their intention and lived experience, creators' choice of words regarding their relationship to metrics was almost always imperative (should not) and optative (try not to) rather than declarative. Note how the following person, like others in the sample, uses wishful language about not attending to metrics. I interpret "try to stay away" rather than "stay away" as an expression of feeling powerless and not fully in control:

> I feel like I would love to say no, but it does. Like, I feel like, if I don't, if all of a sudden, I get less engagement on a Saturday thing that I thought would get good engagement, it does make me feel a bit like oh, no, what's happened. But I'm trying to stay away from it, it is hard, it is very, very hard. But– because numbers don't mean anything, but it's a lot easier said than done. When you're used to getting like a certain number, or you're growing. Yeah, it's, it's hard to, like separate yourself, like from the numbers. (P18)

Even more expressive than the informants' choice of words was the repeated theme of blaming oneself for paying more attention to metrics than they are due. Absent intentionality and conscious choice, checking the metrics resulted in episodes of self-criticism. "I definitely like to see like– because if I have like a certain number of followers, I like my engagement to be aligned with it. So, I feel like I sometimes will look at other creators who are at a similar level to me or similar following level and see if our engagements are similar, but at the same time, like, I know, it's so bad and you shouldn't do that. But it is very inevitable." (P18). That the low metrics made her feel bad intensified one participant's feelings of self-hatred, "[I was] looking at myself in this

wave of real, like, kind of commingled sadness and hatred for myself, and then over the fact that this platform that shouldn't necessarily be making me feel so bad about myself, was making me feel really bad." (P4)

Creators, therefore, univocally stated that they tried their best not to rely on metrics too much, partially because the metrics were deemed as unpredictable and temporary, and partially because quantifying themselves did not feel right or was against their value system. Yet, for many, the experience of having high metrics on some posts resulted in a compulsive and obsessive future pursuit of high metrics, which translated into intensified work effort. "But that experience [of having a viral video with a million views] really made me kind of obsessed. So, after posting something I'd constantly check the insights...like hour by hour, to see if it's growing or it just stopped? Are people sharing it? Are people saving it?" said a lifestyle blogger (P29). A body-positivity advocate and creator recalled how achieving high metrics in one post created further anxiety and fed into the loop of the pursuit of more pseudo identity incentives:

> I have 800,000 people around my platforms following me. Like it's gonna, I'm gonna get views. So, I think the term virality and the numbers are going to get me stuck. I'm gonna burn out if I just focus on numbers, because it'll drive me absolutely nuts. And it has [in the past]. So, I think, really, it made me feel it's almost like this high of like, holy smokes. Like, why, like, why did this happen? But then it's like, well, now I'm less at the feelings, I have to get that high again. I have to do everything in my power to get those big numbers again. And I drive myself crazy doing that, because, like, what if it doesn't happen? It only happens when you don't expect it. So, stop expecting it. (P28)

In short, informants repeatedly talked about an intense preoccupation, an obsession of sorts, with the metrics that made the act of checking the metrics compulsive. Being aware of the obsession and its implications did not change their habits. “I think it's very bad for our health," said one creator, “everyone is so obsessed with the numbers and how I can beat the algorithm” (P27). One videographer told me how her partner’s obsession with metrics broke their relationship:

> I only had two exes. The first one kind of almost broke our relationship, because she was so obsessed with the idea of like, us being 'that Instagram couple'. And that's actually how my page– my first page took off because of that. And I saw that and I was like, oh, this is like, this is crazy. Like this can't be happening. But people were like fangirling us and stuff. But at the end of the day, we weren't a good couple, but we were like, we'd be literally be fighting, and then we'd be talking about how great we are. Like, that was just so dumb. So, the, the way it kind of broke us was when it just kind of– she started getting obsessed with numbers and likes. Like "no, let's go take Instagram pictures of us and stuff”. And I just– she just like, needed that all the time. And it started to get really obsessive and I just didn't like how that felt. (P5)

Awareness of compulsion-inducing persuasive technology design

The unintentionality of engaging with metrics was intensified by technology design features that persuaded the creators, in both overt and covert ways, to pay attention to metrics. They referred to the unintentionality of the process as “doom scrolling” (P7) or scrolling blackout:

> It maybe not an addiction, but it definitely sometimes feels like a compulsion. And I know that like— that hilarious feeling sometimes of when you scroll through Instagram, you've closed Instagram, locked your phone and then you like— blackout for a minute. And then all of a sudden, you're back on Instagram. And I catch myself doing that...Like scrolling blackout (P4).

She continued to explain that despite her wish not to check all the metrics that Instagram provides under the label "insights", she is now forced to check them all just to see the number of likes:

> I try not to go into my insights [metrics] too much–into like the actual 'view insights' [section] from my profile too much, because, again, I feel like it can be a bit of a black hole. But now that, because I have a business account and in [country name] you don't have likes on your photos anymore, you have to click on the picture and view Insights [to see the number of likes]. And so, it shows you likes, comments, shares, saves all on that one bar. And I do, I will look now less so at likes and more at my shares and my saves, because I know that those are the things that kind of push you up in the algorithm, and I will pay attention to what is getting shared or saved a lot. And like recently, I've really noticed that carousel posts rank way better than just a single picture on my grid. (P4)

A pervasive awareness about the habit-forming nature of the technology without being able to pinpoint its exact mechanics emerged from the data. Most creators could not name a specific feature of Instagram that contributed to their obsession, which is not surprising given the complex and subtle nature of persuasive technology design. However, general statements about technology design and addiction to "dopamine hits" gained from metrics repeatedly appeared in the data (P11). "When a photo did well, of course, it made me feel better. You know, I'd be like, it's not just the dress like it's me too," one fashion blogger explained, "but that's the addicting part, you see? And then you want to do it again. It does release those endorphins that feed the continuation of the process, you know?" (P16). Similarly, a lifestyle blogger noted:

> I think with social media, sometimes you're really driven to like, that dopamine or that engagement or that response or that number...And it's kind of mind-numbing to a degree where, like, I'm commenting and engaging on people's posts, I'm

> looking at it and I'm being sincere with it. But it's just that repetition of it, like being like the same thing. But I get excited. I love seeing new features... But I do find myself in like— patterns...Like my mind and my thumb, definitely have like their own thing going on that might even be subconscious [chuckles] (P7)

Habitual behavior, compulsion, and addiction, in short, were common and were frequently associated with 'how technology is' in a broad sense. However, most people did not question the design of the technology and viewed the predicament they found themselves in as an individual problem that pleaded individual solutions.

Instilling Hope through Identity Baiting

High metrics inducing continued hope labor

Regardless of whether they were able to monetize their work or not, most informants viewed their activity on Instagram as a career, or a career pursuit, and hoped it will become the basis or the facilitator for who they wanted to become in the future. "I'm still hoping that after graduation, I can use this platform as kind of a business– to improve my business or like private practice, or whatever," said a PhD candidate in Clinical Psychology with over a hundred thousand followers, who spent about 20 hours on her Instagram and had no income from it (P38). A beauty and fashion blogger who planned to "launch [her] own eyewear brand and advertise it through [her] social media", did make some money through partnerships with other brands, but did not view her Instagram as a job yet, but hoped to make it her job in the future:

> It's not my job yet. Because– yeah, I do make an income, some money from the main page that I have, by promoting products. But it's not my main source of income. But yeah, I have plans for the future. (P35)

Hope, however, is not self-sustained and requires encouragement and affirmation. My informants' accounts suggested that high metrics temporarily provided an affirmation and instilled a level of optimism and hope about their ability to become who they wanted to be in the future; in doing so they sustained hope labor over extended periods of time. “Some of my posts and reels, they have over a million views," said a medical doctor with over a million followers, “in the new account, [Instagram said] we're offering this thing, if you make a Reel, and it has more than, like, a million views, or between all your reels, if you have more than a million views in a month, you can make like, $1,000 a month, $2,000 a month from this. Reckoned the same person, “so, I have like a million subscriber page, and it keeps growing, and if I post a video...[that] gets like 500,000 views. And, you know, make two, I’ll make $3,000 a month just from making that. Yeah, that could change my thought process, but really, you know, it's something– it's kind of like a dream, you know, kind of, you know, like, you're daydreaming” (P40). Consider how this informant who struggled to describe her job title on Instagram due to her minimal income from it, used her high metrics to defend her content creator identity and protect her claim to it as a job:

> I am a content creator, influencer, I don't know what to call myself, because I'm not where I want to be with it financially... So it's like, what do I call myself if I'm not making the money I want to yet. Like I say it's a job. Yes, so I am a content creator. I have just around 50,000 followers on Instagram. I have 740,000

> followers on Tik Tok. And I just hit 5200 on YouTube. So, I think like, yes, I am a content creator. Would I like to get paid more for my work? Absolutely. But it doesn't mean that's not my job. (P28)

Prolonged low metrics interrupting hope labor.

The role of Identity baiting in sustaining hope labor was even more apparent in accounts of informants who disengaged from the platform after losing hope about being able to push their low metrics up again in the future. Observing her relatively low metrics compared to "paparazzi pages", noted P1, "I kind of lost my motivation, that's why I'm not interested that much, like I was in the past, to have more content" (P1). After her engagement dropped, P30 lost her motivation to create content and gave up her vision of becoming an online fitness business owner. At the time of the interview, she told me that "it's been maybe six months, seven months that I haven't been as active on IG":

> If you would asked me this question [what is your dream for the future of your Instagram], like six months ago, I would have a completely different vision for my Instagram. But ever since Instagram algorithms, like changed, and growing Instagram became very hard. And, like I started to lose a lot of followers, like nearly, like, almost 10k Like, I think right now I'm at 22k. So I kind of lost that motivation. And I just I didn't want to put that much effort that I used to put into it...And then because I wasn't active for a month, slowly my engagement dropped. And then all of a sudden, within a week, my engagement dropped significantly, like my stories would [normally] get views around like 3k 4k and within a week, it dropped to like 700 views 800 views. (P30)

She initially took an optimistic approach and treated the plunge in her metrics as a temporary threat and tried to push it back up before accepting the permanent rejection of her entrepreneurial identity:

> That was a lot of like, like, decline. And it was really demotivating so I tried a little bit to take back like the engagement up, but it wasn't as easy anymore. And then the algorithm changed. And it made it 10 times harder. And then the reels came and people started to grow their Instagram like very quick, like with tick tok and Reel...I don't know, it just became very hard for me to like, create that content and get that engagement up and going. So I kind of lost my motivation. (P30)

In sum, hope labor was motivated by the potential enactment of a future desired identity. Identity baiting helped sustain hope labor over time by facilitating the imagined enactment and reassuring the informants that they are moving toward their future goals. When the metrics remained low for prolonged periods of time, informants gave up or paused the pursuit of their desired identity through content creation.

Resistance to Identity Baiting

My analysis suggests that creators engaged in strategies to resist the compulsions of identity baiting and reclaim their autonomy. Resistance strategies fell under three main tents: abstinence, optimism, and mindfulness practices. Abstinence strategies targeted the matter and included attempts to change the function and structure of interaction with technology. Abstinence strategies, however, almost always were defeated by informants' relapse to old patterns of technology use. Relabeling and redirecting strategies targeted the meanings and attempted to alter the values signaled by evaluative metrics or the target of evaluation. In practicing such strategies, however, the informants kept the optimism alive and sustained hope labor by blaming external circumstances, emphasizing the impermanence of low metrics, and viewing the post that did not do well as an exception and not the rule. Mindfulness practices differed in nature from the other two, in that they

did not involve attempts to resist or change the events or their meanings, but to observe and be conscious of them.

Abstinence practices

Participants reported putting much effort into changing and controlling their relationship with technology that they deemed addictive by making changes in the structure of technology. They used a myriad of techniques including turning their notifications off, turning their screen black and white, changing where the application was located on their phone screen, and putting a limit on their time spent on the platform using a tool offered by Instagram. While most creators were not explicitly aware of persuasive technology design tactics, their abstinence techniques corresponded rather perfectly with different components and principles of persuasive technology design. For example, in the language of persuasive technology design, notifications are considered "social cues" that are designed to trigger "automatic responses in people" (Fogg, 2002: 85) –in this case, trigger the initiation of the behavior of engaging with social evaluation communicated through metrics. Similarly, turning the screen black and white is an attempt to decrease the visual attractiveness of the technology, another principle of persuasive technology design (ibid). Simplicity is another core principle in persuasive technology design, which my informants tried to overcome by changing the location of the application, thus making access to the application harder. Lack of stopping cues, which signal that it is time to move on and do something new or different (Alter, 2017), is another persuasive technology design technique that the creators tried to overcome by

setting up to receive a notification when they reached a certain time limit. This quote illustrates such techniques that one creator engaged in an effort to loosen the grip of technology on his behavior:

> So, um, this is in my three-day challenge that I've mentioned to you that I created. It's it's a dopamine fast, where you stop all the things that are subconsciously grabbing your attention, or you're addicted to. So, I have people turn their phone on black and white. So, this is mine right now. And then I triple click on the side. Hold on. Yeah. So now it's black and white [shows me his phone]. If you– hold on, let me pull it up, there's my calendar. See? It's all black and white now. So, it's boring to look at. Versus this [turns the screen to colored and shows me]. Right? So, then you're just– you actually see what's real, and your dopamine is not getting hit. So that's a tool that I use. Also, if you open up your phone, and then instantly click on a side of the screen, which is where Instagram is on your phone. I frequently– if I noticed that I do that I– and again, it takes self-awareness– I just change where the app is on my home screen. I jumble it all up to break the pattern. So that I'm like, oh yeah. Why am I doing this? (P11)

The technology, however, was more powerful than their techniques. More often than not, the abstinence strategies did not stop the compulsive use of technology or helped only temporarily. For example, many talked about turning their notifications off, but even then, the slightest glance at the app (which is necessary for the completion of work for these people) brought them back to the loop and made the strategy ineffective: "I literally have my Instagram notifications off just because I know that would keep me on my phone forever. I try not to have like any notifications on, but once I get on it, it just kind of sucks me in, and then I realize, like, oh, I just spent like an hour or half an hour or five minutes longer than I wanted to, and I shouldn't have done that. So, I just I try to not

look at how much I spend there [chuckles]" (#5). Another creator explained how her use of the Instagram time limit tool is ineffective as she uses the option 'ignore limit' that is built into the tool:

> It is so addictive; these platforms are ruining my life. I'm always glued to my phone. So whatever activity I'm doing throughout the day I will literally on my, like be on my phone when I'm doing it. And like it's really bad, it's very toxic because when you look at it from like a healthy standpoint, you're not doing anything productive, like there's no, like where are my efforts going. And there's no sustainable plan to this because like you're up there like what ten hours in a day, or like eleven hours, and out of that eight hours, and the day's not done yet, I still have a couple of hours to go. So, majority of my time is going to Instagram and what is coming out? Like, nothing. So, yeah, so Instagram, taking away from it is very difficult, yeah... And I used to set a timer on my Instagram, on my phone, that would be like, "OK, two hours, done, you're going to stop using this app". And I would be like ignoring the notifications and continue using Instagram. That's how addicting the platform is. (P8)

In short, abstinence strategies did not offer a sustainable long-term relief from unintentional engagement with technology. Such efforts were overridden either by inevitable technological pathways that creators needed to take to conduct their work or by creators' impulses to go back on the application.

Optimism practices

Creators relied on meanings and self-talk to protect their desired identity in the face of low metrics by interpreting the low metrics with an optimistic twist. Meanings were only loosely attached to metrics and informants selectively and liberally annexed value signals to metrics. Under the threat of low metrics, informants relabeled or redirected the meaning attached to the symbols (metrics) provided by the platform while

emphasizing the impermanence of the perceived threat by engaging in self-talk and turning to other sources for validation to make up for the temporary sense of rejection.

The relabeling and redirecting process involved changing the meanings signaled by low metrics (e.g., the timing of the post was bad), and redirecting the perceived threat from the desired identity to external entities such as the algorithm, the audience, or the false self (e.g., the algorithm is irrational, the audience is superficial). Many emphasized their perceived irrationality of the algorithm to reject the metrics as a legitimate source of validation. "There's obviously like an algorithm working behind there that only shows certain feeds to certain followers. Yeah. So, I think that's not just the case for me" (P14). Another person explained how he attributes the low metrics to algorithms and machine learning, while emphasizing the impermanence of low metrics and the possibility of doing better "next time":

> But at the end of the day, and I say this to a lot of people, is stop trying to figure out the algorithm because it's machine learning. It's constantly learning from itself. Yes, people put in little factories and like there's people that put in labels and attributes and they can monitor it a little bit, but it's constantly changing. It's not like they built the algorithm and let it do its thing, like it's constantly changing. So, if you're trying to keep up with, like, artificial intelligence, like they're smarter than us! That's a computer. So I really sort of like shifted my mindset.

He continued to explain, in a confessional tone, that the shift in his mindset does not mean that he does not care about metrics, but he views the low metrics as temporary setbacks induced by algorithms and focuses his attention on the possibility that "the next one" might do better:

> Yes, likes and comments and follows, like a hundred percent that's always going to be something that I worry about and care about. But at the end of the day, as soon as you kind of just like a little bit go over that, like it's like the algorithms, the algorithms. Sorry that my post only got 100 likes, like, maybe the next one will do better. So, I think I have an unpopular sort of easier disconnect from it. But I won't for a second say that I don't look at my numbers, obviously. I just don't think you can keep up with that [algorithm]. So, like, why try? (P7)

Similarly, another creator explained how the mental shift (redirecting the blame to the algorithm) helped her experience low metrics as a temporary identity threat rather than a permanent rejection of her creative identity:

> And I don't get affected by numbers either. Sometimes yes, I feel like, OK, why did this amazing painting get less likes. But it's sort of, it's just a very short period of thought I have, it goes away eventually. But it's something I'm like, OK, well this post, why isn't there more likes. Like where are my likes, why are people not liking this. And then I realize, OK, it's not my mistake, it is not my fault, it is the Instagram algorithm and people are like this. So, it's OK, that kind of a mentality. (P8)

To facilitate this mental shift, people turned to other sources of validation including the authentic self, their peers, or the norms of their profession to buffer the temporary sense of threat and protect their desired identity. A creator told me how she makes sure that what she shares is validated by herself so that the downs of metrics would not influence her much:

> I did notice that like, right now, sometimes the algorithms change. And sometimes posts are not getting as much visibility as they were before. Like a lot of my friends are talking about that and I noticed that. I think that like, the reason why I'm very particular about what I share, is because I want to share something I'm confident about so that no matter how many likes or comments it gets, it doesn't affect me because I know that this is something that I like (P12).

The meanings attached to metrics, therefore, were not fixed; people appeared to have a reservoir of meanings that they could attach to metrics depending on whether they validated or threatened their desired identity. “You start kind of feeding into that monster, you know?...Yeah it feels good if it's doing well. But if it's not doing well, I'm not going to like beat myself up about it. It's not personal, business is not personal” (P2). Another informant, P9, attributed the low metrics on his recent post to external factors (announcement of lockdown) but followed it by acknowledging the selective assignment of meanings to metrics in a confessional tone

> I launched an episode of my driving show last Thursday and it was April Fools which I did purposely kind of a launch on April Fools... But it was the day that Doug Ford announced that on Saturday we’re going into another 28 day lockdown. So, everyone’s coming onto Instagram just to look for that information. They’re scrolling past everything and going oh, there’s Doug and clicking on it and reading it. it got a bunch of shares and likes and stuff, but I thought to myself oh, this would have done better if fucking Doug didn’t make this announcement today. So, you understand that there’s external factors affecting your kind of performance. But I don’t think I feel down or depressed if I’m not getting a lot of likes, but on the flipside, which I was alluding to before, rather than feeling down and depressed if I don’t get a lot of likes, it’s funny to see how elated and excited I get when I do get a lot of likes. You know, for a guy who says I don’t really care (P9).

The selective assignment of meanings to metrics, however, further sustained identity baiting by allowing the informants to protect the desired identity against the threat of low metrics while remaining receptive to compulsion-evoking identity validation of high metrics. P16, for example, explained that when the metrics were low, she attributed the low metrics to the algorithm and protected her identity by 'removing herself'

from the image, but when high, the metrics did evoke positive identity feelings in her that fed "the continuation of the process":

> That means there's obviously like an algorithm working behind there that only shows certain feeds to certain followers. Yeah. So I think that's not just the case for me, but also a lot of, you know, other people. I looked at things from an editor [perspective], I looked at myself, like a magazine editor. So, I kind of removed myself from the images. And it was like, I was looking at it as like a model– like this is a product, so it didn't make me feel worse. It did make me feel better though [when the metrics were high]. That's where I feel like it does have an effect even on a confident person. I didn't think I needed external validation. [But] of course, when a photo did well, it made me feel better. You know, I'd be like, it's not just the dress, like– it's me too, it's the whole thing, the whole package. So yeah. And–but that's the addicting part, you see? and then you want to do it again. It does release those endorphins that feed the continuation of the process, you know? (P17)

Thus, while they appeared as resistance on the surface, optimism strategies enabled and helped sustain identity baiting by protecting the desired identity and keeping the future possibility of claiming it alive. In short, through relabeling the identity threat and redirecting the threat of low metrics, optimism practices enabled selective allocation of meaning to metrics, thus, allowing the informants to protect their desired identity against permanent rejection and further fed into the process of identity baiting.

Mindfulness practices

Participants repeatedly referred to mindfulness, awareness, and meditation practices as a way to escape the unintentional time use and episodes of insecurity created by low metrics. A yoga teacher who seemed to struggle less both with metrics and constant connectivity mentioned movement and meditation as an effective strategy:

"Well, for me, movement is huge and doing something besides yoga, like the fact that I have the ocean and surfing, it's really a great way to remove myself from that. But just meditation in general too." (P3)

Another participant told me that meditation helped her be "able to bounce back" from negative feelings she experiences when her metrics are low:

> Meditation every single day and journaling. And just when I'm not feeling like I can put myself— like my best self forward, I listen to myself now. I've always been, and I think it's just because of the way I grew up, but like, I've always been very go, go, go and never, like, praising myself for doing anything good just because I'm like onto the next, like, I got to keep going. I got to keep getting to where I need to be. And now I actually take a moment and I'm like, hey, [her name], that was really cool that you were able to do all of that. Like it's OK for you to take a break. So that tremendously has helped. (P6)

A common problem that creators faced regarding metrics was that they started with unique intentions and values, but found themselves confusing and losing their original intention as they engaged in the quantification game. Talking about her relationship with metrics, one creator mused: "it reached a level that I was really thinking to myself, "Wait, this is not what I wanted to be, this [metrics] is not my focus. This is not my main focus. So, I'd better stop that" (P29). A common practice that allowed the creators to cultivate mindfulness and reflect on their intentions and values was creating space for reflecting on what really mattered to them. One photographer explained how when her friend reminded about that metrics are about attention and are not a good measure for her intention, she overcame her obsession with metrics by taking a week-long break after the conversation that reminded her of her intentions:

> I guess I was at a point that I was caring too much about number of likes, always checking my insight, or was thinking why don't people like my photo that much?...I usually asked my husband like, do you think this is something that kind of, like, would go viral? Or are people gonna like it?... and I felt pressured about it sometimes... that [friend's comment] was an aha moment for me that, okay, stop bothering yourself. So for some time, I just got off Instagram, like maybe for a week, thinking and rethinking. And then I was like, I'm gonna continue what I like to do and what really makes me feel good, and look at it as a hobby. Even at that time when I was caring too much, I wasn't even caring about making money out of it, or getting more advertisement. But, but the whole idea of like reach, number of like, number of followers, just was bothering me at that time [chuckles] (P24).

Mindfulness practices, therefore, offered the creators the space to reflect on their intentions and internal guidance and undermined the mindless chase of external validation.

DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTION

The key contribution of my process model is to explicate the recursive process between the temporary affirmation of a desired identity derived from evaluative metrics and engaging in sustained hope labor, while highlighting the role of technology design in maintaining the repetition of this process. Drawing on the concept of identity incentive (Anteby, 2008) and insights from human-computer interaction research on persuasive technology design, I introduce identity baiting as a compulsive and recurring mechanism that helps sustain the continuation of work even in the scarcity of material rewards or actual identity enactment opportunities.

Desired identity and hope labor

Cultural ideals of entrepreneurial and self-actualized future identities have been repeatedly shown to animate free or underpaid hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), but the source of hope is assumed to reside solely in workers', often irrational, aspirations (Duffy, 2017). My findings, however, suggest that sustained hope in one's ability to realize a future ideal can feed on identity-affirming evaluative metrics provided by digital platforms. Thus, my model offers insight into how people engage in hope labor to enact (or imagine the enactment of) a desired identity, rely on evaluative metrics to achieve a temporary sense of affirmation about their fragile claim on a desired identity (or the possibility of claiming a much-desired identity), and repeat the process in search of fleeting moments of identity validation. Previous organizational research has mainly focused on the role of evaluative metrics in securing future work (e.g., Cameron & Rahman, 2021; Curchod et al., 2020), and attended less to the values signaled by metrics that might influence people's self-conceptions. My process model proposes that evaluative metrics can temporarily affirm people's attempts to enact a desired identity and motivate further effort. In the absence of actual enactment opportunities, high metrics facilitate imagined enactment of a desired identity, and in doing so, help sustain effort by instilling hope in one's ability to realize a potential in the future. People experience low metrics as a threat to their desired identities and engage in efforts to alleviate the negative emotions either by redirecting the rejection to external entities (e.g., algorithm, audience)

or by engaging in self-talk to convince themselves that the rejection is temporary. Appearing as resistance on the surface, ironically, these practices further feed into the process of identity baiting by cultivating optimism and protecting the hope for future actualization of the desired identity. If the metrics remain low for prolonged periods, however, optimism strategies prove ineffective, resulting in disappointment and ultimately disengagement from further identity pursuits, thus interrupting the hope labor.

This study contributes to our knowledge about the pursuit of desired identity by highlighting the central role of evaluative metrics in animating and sustaining identity pursuits manifested as work efforts, even when material rewards or actual identity enactment opportunities are absent or scarce. Extant studies that link preferred identities to work behavior focus on stable organizational contexts as sites for identity enactment and consider interactions with peers (Anteby, 2008; Elsbach, 2009) and clients (DiBenigno, 2022) as occasions for validation of identity enactment efforts. This study extends this line of research and contributes to professional identity literature in three main ways. First, by showing that interpretations of evaluative metrics as affirmation of the possibility of enacting a desired identity animate work effort, it proposes that organizations can mobilize desired identities not only by providing actual identity enactment opportunities but also by promising potential enactment opportunities and affirming the possibility of enactment through evaluations. This also contributes to research on possible selves (Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986) and forgone identities (Obodaru, 2017) as it suggests that even when a desired identity is unrealized, evaluations

of one's efforts are interpreted in light of the desired identity to reject or validate the possibility of its future enactment. Finally, by illuminating the link between identity-affirming evaluative metrics and un(der)paid labor, this study offers evidence for the previously speculated possibility that identity incentives might undermine the importance of monetary rewards (Anteby, 2008). In so doing, it offers insights for understanding how the so-called individual drivers of underpaid hope labor performed in the digital economy are shaped by structural practices of digital platforms that cumulate profit from individuals' identity pursuits.

Identity baiting, platform control, and resistance

Prior research has documented that digital platforms control and manage independent workers using artificial intelligence and algorithms (e.g., Curchod, Patriotta, Cohen, & Neysen, 2020; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2019) and rely on indirect and subtle forms of control including customer ranking and reputational metrics (e.g., Cameron & Rahman, 2021; Curchod, Patriotta, Cohen, & Neysen, 2020; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015; Rahman, 2021) and technology design techniques that exploit human brain cognitive biases for behavior direction (Calo & Rosenblat, 2017; Scheiber, 2017). This study builds on this growing body of work by revealing how persuasively designed evaluative metrics mobilize workers' subjectivities to constrain their much-coveted autonomy through unpredictable trickling down of identity validating baits. By casting light on the identity-targeting nature of persuasive

technology design, this study responds to the need for more research on symbolic and normative aspects of platform control (Kellogg et al., 2020b). I explore workers' pursuit of autonomy and their efforts to counteract the grip of persuasive technology on how they feel and behave to theorize two resistance strategies: abstinence and mindfulness. In doing so, I contribute to the literature that investigates resistance to platform control (e.g., Cameron & Rahman, 2021; Maffie, 2020; Shapiro, 2018; Wood et al., 2019).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Contributions of this study should be considered in light of its several limitations, some of which provide directions for future research. While this study explores design features and implicitly investigates the possible intention behind design features of technology, without having field access to inquire about these features from those who designed the features, my investigation remain incomplete. Future research might extend these findings by adding the perspective of platform owners and designers. Second, like much ethnographic research, the theoretical process model explicated in this study, namely identity baiting, is derived from interviews and observations in the context of digital cultural production. The aim of this study is not to measure the frequency of occurrence of this form of control and judgment about applicability of identity baiting across different context requires further investigation and empirical testing. This study, however, raises intriguing questions about whether practices that resemble identity baiting can be found in traditional organizations. For example, can institutions sustain

engagement in unpaid work by providing symbolic rewards that arouse positive identity feelings that might or might not contribute to actual identity enactment opportunities? Finally, this study did not collect longitudinal data and thus its power to understand the shifting patterns of work effort in response to identity baiting over time remains limited to comparisons between participants who were in different stages of their careers. Future research can benefit from investigating the career trajectories of workers affected by identity baiting.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary world of work is witnessing a surge of hope laborers who engage in underpaid work in pursuit of future ideals of entrepreneurial autonomy and creativity. By attending to the proposition that desired possible selves color interpretations of evaluations, my study reveals that, interpreted as an affirmation for the possibility of a future identity, evaluative symbols can motivate workers efforts, even in the scarcity of actual identity enactment opportunities or material rewards. The underpaid identity pursuits are often viewed as absolutely autonomous and voluntary. My study, however, highlights the role of digital platforms in directing workers' behavior through technological features on which the sustained continuation of hope labor depends.

Table 1.3- Sample Demographics

Gender		
	Women	36
	Men	14
Race		
	Middle Eastern	29
	White	16
	Black/African-American	1
	Hispanic	1
	Other	1
	Age	18-85
	Income	0–>$100k
	# of followers	6000–>1000,000

Table 2.3- Summary of Platform Features

General function	Specific features	Explanation (some adopted from Instagram Help Centre)
Content Creation Tools	**Posts**	Photos and videos that can be shared on Instagram and will remain permanently unless deleted
	Stories	Photos and videos that disappear after 24 hours unless they are added to Stories highlights.
	Live	Creators can start a live broadcast in real time. Once a live broadcast has ended, they can share a replay or access it in Live Archive. Audience can chat with the creators during live sessions. Creators can disable the chat. The number of people who view the live at any moment is shown on the screen.
	Reels	One-minute videos that can be created with Instagram video editing tools, designed to be snappy to compete with TikTok
	Instagram Direct Professional Inbox	When creators switch to a professional account, they are provided with tools that allows them to organize their direct messages. The tools include Primary and General Tabs in the Inbox.
Connection and	**Secondary Inbox**	Enables the creators to organize large volumes of messages and control notifications by assigning the message threads to Primary and General tabs
	Ranked Requests	Enables the creators to rank the message requests by date or by top accounts—top accounts are not explicitly defined.
	Saved replies	To make interactions with the general audience easier, Instagram has recently introduced 'saved replies', a feature that allows creators to create templates or shortcuts for common responses (Instagram Help Center, n.d.).
	Chronological/priority sorting of comments	Creators can sort the comments to see the most recent one or to see the top comments
	Prompt Stickers	In their Stories, creators can add a prompt to engage their audience by inviting them to share their stories. Instagram also offers a list of suggested prompts.
	Poll Stickers	Write your own question and customize the answers. Anyone who can see your story or reel can tap an

relational tools		option in the poll or slide the emoji you've chosen. Once posted, people can vote and see realtime results. Swipe up on your own story or reel to see how many votes each option received and how each person voted.
	Question Stickers	Enables creators to share a question on their stories. Anyone who can see the story can tap the sticker and send a response. To see who responded, they can swipe up on their story. They can tap a response from someone to share it.
	Quiz Stickers	Enables creators to share multiple-choice question and customize the answers. Anyone who can see the story can respond by tapping an option. Once posted, people can vote and learn whether they got it right. Creators can swipe up on their story to see how many votes each option received and how each person voted.
Self-evaluation and reputational tools	**Publicly visible metrics (number of likes, comments, followers)**	Number of likes, views, and comments can be found below a post on Instagram. Number of followers can be found on the main page.
	Post insights	Enables creators to see how many likes, comments, saves, and shares their post got. They can also see other Engagement and Post Interactions metrics, such as Accounts Reached.
	Stories Insights	Enables creators to view metrics related to Stories. While stories only last for 24 hours before expiring, they can view insights on past stories for up to seven days after they're created.
	Account Insights	Creators can use Account Insights to learn more about their account's followers and performance. They can also view insights on audience's engagement with specific posts, Stories, videos, Reels and Live videos. **Other details** (from Instagram help centre) - **Recent Highlights:** This section announces any notable increases in account performance in your selected preset or custom timeframe within the past 90 days. - **Overview:** This section showcases the number of accounts reached, accounts

		engaged, total followers and approximate earnings (if applicable) for a selected preset or custom timeframe within the past 90 days. - **Accounts Reached or Accounts Engaged:** Creators can tap on these metrics to see demographic information on the accounts they've reached or engaged, including top countries, top cities, top age ranges and gender breakdown. - **Total Followers:** Information about trends across followers. These insights include growth (how many followers gained or lost), top locations of your followers, age range and times they're most active on Instagram. - **Content Interactions:** This section displays what actions people take when they engage with your content, such as likes, comments, saves, shares and replies.
Labels, titles, and identity-defining features	**Professional Dashboard**	A specific set of tools labeled as 'Professional Dashboard' that allows creators to use branded content tools and set up their online shop and encourages them to follow @creators to see "the best practices and tips from the Instagram team". According to Instagram, creators can use Professional Dashboard to track their performance (using Insights), grow their business (using Branded Content, Badges, Ads, and Quick Replies), and stay informed by tips and tricks from @creators). This section expands and gives creators access to more tools over time.
	Title to view in bio	The Creator version allows creators to choose a title from a list to be viewed on their bio (e.g., athlete, author, or blogger).
Monetization	**Bonuses**	Available to some creators, Bonuses allow creators to earn money directly from Instagram. This feature is exclusive to Reels at this time. If a creator is qualified (criteria not announced), they will be notified on the app to onboard and enable bonus payouts. The offer expires after a while if the creators do not accept it.
	Instagram Shop	In 2020, "Instagram Shopping" was introduced on the creator version, a feature that allows creators to add a shop to their profile and 'make their look shoppable' by tagging the products on their stories and posts.

	Badges in Instagram live	Badges in Live are a recent feature of Instagram which allow content consumers to show their support to businesses and creators during a live video. When users purchase a badge during a live video, their purchase amount goes to the creators/business and a heart icon appears next to their name in the comments section of the live video.

Table 3.3- Illustrative Examples

Codes	Examples
Desired Identity	
Desired identity with actual enactment	There are a lot of times where you can have projects where a lot of people watch it, but it's senseless, or it's funny, but it's silly, there's no point. But then there's a lot of people like the Dave Chappelle of the world, or the Jon Stewart, or Trevor Noah, or Wanda Sykes, people who have a strong message, and they get that message across to their entertainment as well. And that's what I hope to do with my social media. (P43) My career aspirations pretty much just to continue to grow the YouTube channel and. Keep educating myself so I can help people the best I can (P3).
Desired identity with potential enactment	I've been planning to have my own [eyewear] brand since [I was] 19 years old. And I haven't changed my mind since then. So yeah, doing this whole social media thing was one step to go toward my goal. and that's why I went to optometry school to become an eye doctor. So people can trust me and trust my product (P35) I think my dream is kind of not realistic, but it's a dream. I think and I would love to create videos and make it my full time [job]. In general, just spreading awareness for eating disorders and mental health, especially in marginalized bodies. I'd love to do TED Talks and go on talk shows and be that famous, rich celebrity. But I know it's not realistic... Nobody ever would have thought I get to where I was today, if I was realistic. So I'm gonna keep being

	delusional because hopefully those delusions become realities (P28)
Identity Baiting	
Low Metrics as Identity Threats	[when you get low numbers], you always think to yourself, "am I doing the right thing", you start questioning yourself. (P43) I've struggled with a lot of self esteem issues my entire life. So in every aspect, I felt like that, but here is this platform, but it's like, oh shit, like maybe I am, like, I do have a voice. And that's what it's taught me. But it's like, it's both like I do sometimes get wrapped up in it. Like maybe I'm not worthy enough, because I didn't get the number of views that I always do. (P28)
High Metrics as Pseudo Identity Incentives	Yeah, I'm amused by it. And of course, I'm kind of slightly stimulated if things go great. But I also learned to recognize that, you know, you get, you know, 100,000 you know, thing goes. And then the next time you do something, you get, like 50 It's like, it's like a come down after a high or something. And so I kind of, I don't measure that at all. You know, I used to be excited, like, five years ago, or maybe 10 years ago, I used to get really excited and kind of stay up till three in the morning, you know, watching statistics and things. And, but I pretty soon realized that that's like, a, it's like, a bad thing to look at, is like watching your bank balance or something, you know, it's like, you know, you're gonna be okay, at the end of the year, you know, that everything's kind of cool. So I kind of, I don't really play with that in my mind [anymore]. (P34) It feels like I'm putting all my eggs in one basket. You know, like, if this is my primary place of work, or where I put a lot of stock into, like, how I make a living. You know, social media is very, here today gone tomorrow. It's like, who knows what could happen? Like? I don't know, I don't know how to explain that. It just, it's not like it's not, it's not– I don't have any job security. You just never know. What if my page gets deleted tomorrow. I can't have all my eggs, all my eggs in one basket here, you know, so yeah. (P13)

Compulsive Pursuit of Pseudo Identity Incentives	So, every time I would be on Instagram, automatically, I would check the latest post and I would look to see like how many likes my post got. If it wasn't high, I would get anxiety. I would get the depressed, like, I would get obsessed. (P30) The steps after, right? So it's like me refreshing that post, like 20 times may be seeing what's happening, like checking the insights, seeing how many people have share how– And by the way, all of these are, like, closed in Germany...And yeah, I would do that 10 times. And throughout the day, if phase like first is like, 10 times, and now we're just after two hours, it's like five times an hour. And, you know, gradually [reduce] (P44)
Awareness of persuasive Technology inducing compulsion	the screen on your phone, those vibrant colors elicit a lot of dopamine in your body. And so you get you know, when you get that red notification [for likes], your phone buzzes, you get a dopamine hit in your body. And that's why you go and look at the notification. And so, and then, you know, you roll over first thing [in the morning], you start checking Instagram or you roll over, because it's all there's always something new. So, your dopamine receptors are online, and you have a sense of feeling good. It's literally like, a hit of dopamine. (P11) [the reason I spend time and create content on Instagram] is just the addiction at this stage...it doesn't change the fact that I want to help others, but for example, because of dopamine, because I want to get dopamine probably in my unconscious I want to go to the direction that gets more likes, comments, shares or something... [and share] something that people want to see more, but doesn't change the fact that I want to help. (P1)
Sustaining Hope Labor through Identity Baits	
Future Desired Identity Inducing Current Un(der)paid Effort	My goal forever was freedom. Like whenever you want to think of like what do you want in life. It was like free. I want to be free with myself. I want to be free with work. I want to like feel security and that obviously stems from like, having a real unstable upbringing because of the whole gay and religious thing, so I just channeled that into work and then it was able to give me that obsession because you need obsession when it comes to entrepreneurship...You kind of have to use that pain as a revenge plan. That's what fueled me, was this is revenge for a lot of people who have put me down and it worked because now they're like, oh, my God, you are like, popular! (P2)

	Yeah, so I think for for someone like me, I'm a creative person, I think it allows you to express your creativity in a way that that benefits you as well. If it's a job and if you could potentially be getting paid for doing something that you love, and you will be really good at it as well. And you're not only fulfilling yourself, you're also– it also shines through the work that you do. People will also appreciate it and they'll recognize that you know, you're doing a good job because you love what you're doing. And it's if if you ended up doing well, then it's an it's a good motivating factor because then you keep keep going and keep doing better. You keep you know, it's an it's an exponential results. So and I think the potential for growth and something like content creation on social media, is far higher than a nine to five. In the nine to five, maybe once a year you can level up to– maybe you get a small raise or you'll get a little bit more responsibility, and that that's not usually in your hands. You You can't really accelerate that, or you can only do so much do it. But I think with social media, you can. You can, you can pretty much within overnight days, weeks, you can, you know, increase your audience and then it gives you back a lot more opportunities. (P21)
High Metrics Inducing Continued Hope Labor	I was really obsessive about okay, I'm going to post this this week, or I'm going to have a theme for my three posts. And then I had to think about the other two. So, the time that I spent on Instagram, it might have been like four to, I guess, yeah, four to five hours a day. But then also the time that I had to think about creating something for Instagram was also about four hours a day. Yeah, which was a little too much. But like the four or five hours a day that I used to have, like spend time on Instagram. Some of it was during the night, when like I just scrolled through or posted my thing and then I had to like watch comments or wait for likes (P19) So, [in the past] I used to get it [validation] mostly just from a small group of friends and family in some occasions. But this is– right now I'm getting it every day from a lot of people...I don't identify myself as an artist, but you get these things like "you're an artist", "you're a photographer". So, all these definitions are something that I'm gaining from Instagram these days. And I'm now used to it, so I'm thinking if I'm not putting my photos and videos out there to get these reactions from people, I don't even continue doing it, you know, just for [the sake of] taking pictures of an architecture bricks. If it's not worth sharing with people, and [I'm] just doing it for myself. I guess I wouldn't have that much

	motivation to do it regularly. I may do it [here and there] because it's something that I'm passionate about, but this motivation for doing it regularly or like planning for it, to go somewhere [just] to make content, all these is coming from Instagram. (P24)
Prolonged Low Metrics Interrupting Hope Labor	Because like, sometimes, like, sometimes you have a really great like, insight. And then like, the post has like a really high reach. And then you only have like, 1000 likes, and you're like, Why? Why would I do that? Like, why wouldn't you just like? And then sometimes it just, it doesn't reach as many people and you're like, why would it do that?...it affects how I feel about Instagram? For sure. Because then I'm like, Mommy, why am I even doing this? If it's not showing it to anybody, you know? It doesn't affect me, like how I view myself, but it does affect how I want to work on my Instagram. (P15) As I mentioned, it was a time that was elected months ago that I lost so many followers that I was like, for me to get get back to being active content creator being active on my page. It was hard because I already lost so many audiences. And I wasn't active at all I was like, getting out of the habit of posting daily on a daily basis posting making reels, making videos, I wanted, like, two three times a week. So I was getting out of the habit so I was really not I was losing the hope honestly. Because because I didn't because I wasn't getting the interaction getting the audience's that I thought that I was like, expected to have. (P29)
Resistance to identity baiting	
Abstinence practices	It is so addictive; these platforms are ruining my life. I'm always glued to my phone. So whatever activity I'm doing throughout the day I will literally on my, like be on my phone when I'm doing it...So, majority of my time is going to Instagram and what is coming out? Like, nothing. So, yeah, so Instagram, taking away from it is very difficult, yeah... And I used to set a timer on my Instagram, on my phone, that would be like, "OK, two hours, done, you're going to stop using this app". And I would be like ignoring the notifications and continue using Instagram. That's how addicting the platform is (P8) I think that it's like it's like addictive and like I don't like, that's partially just like, iPhones in general, but certainly the Instagram

	app. What induces that compulsion, like? It's like a reflex to like, boredom aversion, like, like, it's impossible to just like, sit and be still and be quiet. And therefore, I pick up my phone. Also aversion to like, sustained work, like, like, I literally have gotten in the in to the point now where like, I have to leave my phone in another room when I'm trying to sit down to write because if I don't, you know, every 10 minutes, I'm looking at Instagram on my phone. So it's just like any sort of sustained focus, or just quiet time must be interrupted with, you know, checking Instagram. (P49)
Mindfulness practices	So I think people get lost. And all through our history, people, humans like to get lost. And now we just have this convenient thing in our hand that we can get lost in all the time. But at some point, I think people will step back enough, or maybe join one app that actually helps people stand back and recognize that oh, yeah, you can turn it off. ...It's the whole mindfulness thing. I think that's why that whole movement is growing. That if you don't get up in the morning and look at yourself and then take a moment throughout the day to see, what am I doing? How am I walking? What am I eating? You're not going to look at what you're doing on your phone. And it's easy to blame the phone. Right? (P10) I'm very conscious of when I am on Instagram, whether what I'm looking at is making me feel good or whether it's making me feel bad and I have to kind of actively check in on myself if I'm lying in bed at night like it's just me and my phone screen glowing in the dark of is this is this serving me or is this just kind of making me feel bad about. My life. So, yes, I am. And and then I also am very conscious of not spending just too much time on my phone. I find it quite distracting. (P4)
Optimism practices (Resistance with opposite effect)	If a video or a post or something doesn't get, like, amazing engagement, I don't really beat myself up over it, because it is what it is like, you can't always control the algorithm. (P21) And that's the problem with a lot of these social media influencers ...they say I have to take a break, but that's because their ego is getting involved. You have to have the awareness to not take it personally because essentially this is business. If I look at data not getting a lot of likes, I'm going to be like, OK, what did I do wrong? Not, Oh, I am wrong. Like, it's a victim mentality. It's like

	weak, you know what I mean? ...that is why you're stuck and that's why I'm going to keep growing. I'm going to keep learning instead of, like, just absorbing this criticism, you know. (P2)

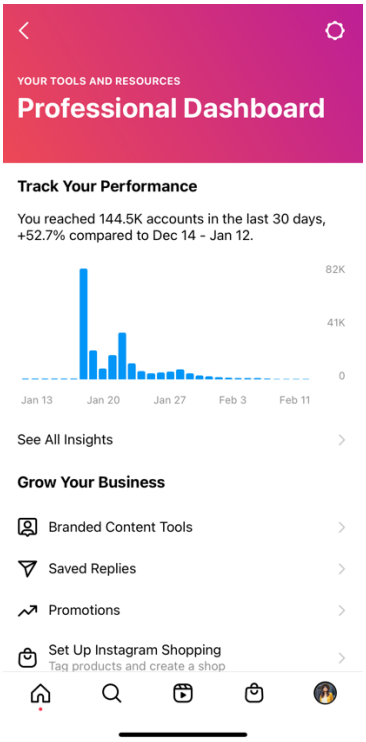

Figure 1.3- Professional Dashboard

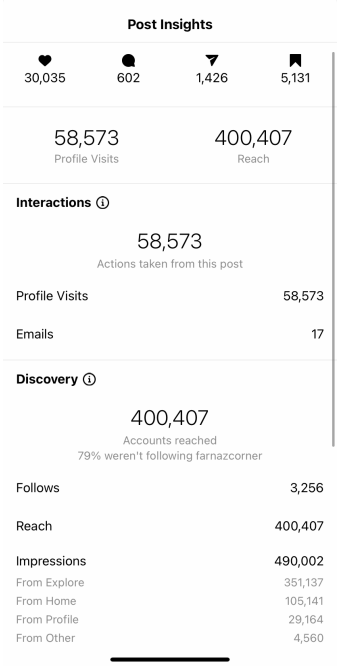

Figure 2.3- Instagram Insights

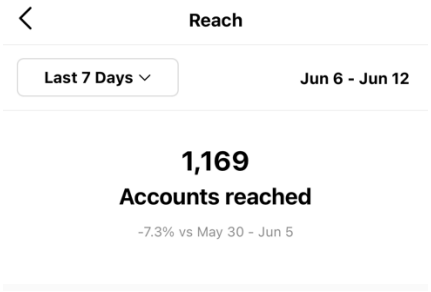

Figure 3.3- Comparative reporting in Instagram Insights

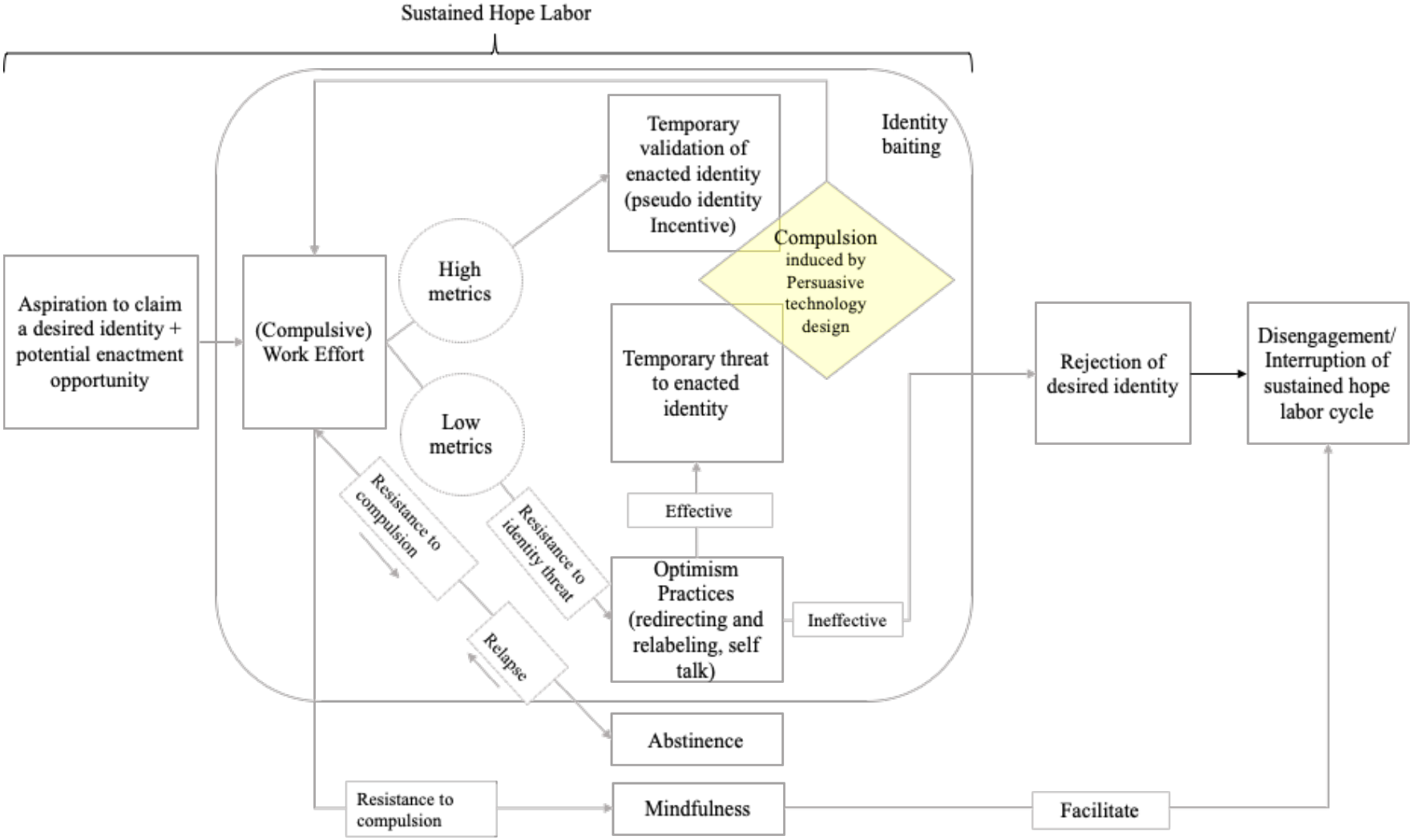

Figure 4.3- Process Model of Identity Baiting

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4. PERSONAL BRANDING AND THE PARADOX OF PRESCRIBED AUTHENTICITY

ABSTRACT

A qualitative study of 50 Instagram content creators examines the practices and processes involved in navigating the tensions arising from the collocation of externally prescribed authenticity with the internal desire to reveal (or hide) the authentic self in contemporary work. It shows how rhetorical invocations of authenticity prevalent in the discourse of personal branding can transform the once protective shield of the personal brand into a self-revelatory looking glass stipulated to reveal flaws, imperfections, and vulnerabilities of the self. Specifically, the tension arose from the juxtaposition of (a) the cohesion required to maintain an 'authentic personal brand' with the inherent incoherence of the authentic self, and (b) the pressure to reveal the imperfect authentic self (to facilitate the commodification of the authentic self through relatability and credibility) with the internal need for balancing privacy and authentic self-expression. Many succumbed to external prescriptions and engaged in what I label as *in-vivo personal branding*– self-revelatory practices that involved unfiltered exposure of the authentic self. Faced with negative implications for their psychological well-being, privacy, time use, and monetary gains, to resolve the paradox and elevate some of the negative implications, some informants employed practices that I label as *in-vitro personal branding.* These involved revealing only a curated non-inclusive montage of flawed and vulnerable pieces of the authentic self that informants did not feel powerless about due to temporal or emotional distance. A general model of resolving the paradox of prescribed authenticity is proposed and implications for theory and practice are discussed.

I misdoubt a song that is crooned simultaneously by both the prisoner and the guard...

—From a poem by Panahi (2005), translated from Farsi by the author

How the invitations to 'just be yourself' and 'show who you really are' at work interact with individuals' internal desire for revealing or hiding their authentic self at work? Since the popularization of "the brand called you" by Tom Peters (1997), the cultural zeitgeist around personal branding has slightly shifted from "marketing of oneself as a distinctive bundle of skills and assets" (Vallas & Cummins, 2014: 312) to emphasize the selling of the "authentic self" (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020). The once polished curated persona featuring one's "greatest clearest strength" and most "noteworthy" traits (Peters, 1997) is now outdated. The new advice is to view the "personal brand as a portable suitcase—an authentic self that travels" ("How to Feel Authentic While Building Your Personal Brand," 2019) and appear "raw, scrappy, unedited, and vulnerable" (Hunter, 2017; see also Rampersad, 2015; Chritton, 2014). This shift is especially important as the market for the authentic self is not limited to independent workers and 'the economy of the self'; organizations increasingly view workers' authentic self as "a resource to be leveraged" (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). Organizational workers, too, are called to bring their whole selves to work and be who they 'really' are (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011).

The push for authenticity at work complicates our understandings of identity management, normative control, and socialization at work. Most extant research focuses on authentic self-expression as a sought-after individual opportunity or interest, examined

in opposition to normative modes of collective control (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Grusec & Hastings, 2014). Authentic self-expression, however, is increasingly becoming a prescribed norm and requirement rather than a privilege in contemporary work (Fleming, 2009). In their ethnographic study of ghostwriters, for example, Anteby & Occhiuto (2020) show that the demand for crafting and presentation of the "authentic" self in personal branding has become so dominant that it has given rise to the practice of "outsourcing of the self" to an invisible group of professionals whose jobs include authoring a sellable narrative of the self that appears authentic. This calls attention to a possible paradigm shift from authenticity as a "moral imperative" (Harter, 2002) to authenticity as a product and function of the market imperative. In a similar vein, Fleming and Sturdy's (2011) study of call center employees shows how management demands about bringing 'authentic' or 'non-work' selves to work function as a mode of normative control to direct workers' emotional labor. Thus, authentic self-expression at work is not only desired by workers but is also increasingly promoted and demanded by employers and the market.

Yet, the dominant assumption regarding the relationship between authentic self-expression and normative control remains one of discordance. Studies that explore conditions in which individuals' preferred identities and prescribed collective identities are aligned (e.g., Anteby, 2008; Pratt, 2000) provide valuable insights into our understanding of congruent preferred individual and prescribed identities, but the external prescriptions examined in these studies are still one of conformity to a singular and

unifying identity (that is also desired by the members) rather than authenticity. Socialization and identity management research have begun to explore the tensions between collective demands for assimilation and individuals' experienced identity (Reid, 2015) or authentic self-expression (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). How collective demands of authenticity and differentiation, rather than assimilation, interact with individuals' needs for authenticity remains poorly understood (Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Thus, our knowledge is limited on how strong cultural expectation of authenticity intersect with people's desire for (not) revealing their authentic selves and shape their practices of work. This research, therefore, examines in more detail workers' understanding of and reactions to the rhetoric of authenticity in relation to their internal need for self-revelation, and the implications of this rhetoric for their daily practices of work.

I choose to examine the tensions of desired and prescribed authenticity in the context of personal branding on Instagram. On the one hand, personal brands are now preached to be 'authentic' and 'real' (Cherry, 2021) as opposed to "relying on lists of attributes to characterize our strengths" ("How to Feel Authentic While Building Your Personal Brand," 2019). On the other hand, cultural production on social media is believed to be highly animated by desires for autonomous self-actualization (Duffy, 2017). My aim is to better understand how people navigate the tensions between external

demands that they appear authentic with their internal desire to reveal or hide their authentic self.

It is important to note that authenticity has both negative and positive psychological and emotional consequences. Much research on image management and authenticity has emphasized the positive consequences of true self-expression at work (e.g., Emmerich & Rigotti, 2017; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; van den Bosch & Taris, 2014) and negative psychological consequences of being inauthentic—or having a gap between the true self (backstage identity) and who one appears to be (frontstage identity) (e.g., Bono & Vey, 2005; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch, & Wax, 2012). Psycho-analytic traditions of research, however, acknowledge the importance of the false self– the self developed out of the need for compliance with external expectations– in protecting and defending the privacy of the true self in circumstances that the true self might not be accepted (Winnicott, 1965). While authentic self-expression can have positive psychological implications, absent external pressures for authenticity, people tend not to reveal their true selves all the times; they make intentional and strategic calls on revealing or concealing based on circumstances (e.g., Reid, 2015; see Roberts, 2005 for a review). Demanding authenticity and absolute demolition of the false self (as opposed to self-chosen authentic self-expression), however, might influence how much people exercise their choice around self-revelation.

Much extant research on authenticity has focused on individual-level processes and practices (e.g., Cable & Kay, 2012; Peus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, & Frey, 2012; Peus et al., 2012) rather than examining structural and contextual factors that might enable or constrain authentic self-expression (see Cha et al., 2019 for a review) or organizational values and standards that might encourage or suppress authentic self-expression (Hewlin, 2003; Hewlin, Dumas, & Burnett, 2017; Hewlin, Kim, & Song, 2016) and less attention has been given to the structure and material environment in which work practices are carried out. This is especially problematic as workers increasingly interact with material features of digital technology that enable self-expression and facilitate visibility (Hearn, 2008; Illouz, 2007; Leonardi & Treem, 2020). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to build theory by illustrating the practices and processes involved in compliance with prescribed authenticity that are enacted by the individual within the material structure, and by showing how individuals are affected by and react to such practices.

AUTHENTICITY IN THE CONTEXT OF PERSONAL BRANDING

Rooted in classic scholarship on impression management (Goffman, 1959), authenticity in organizational research is usually conceptualized as the alignment between one's internal sense of self and outward self-presentation (Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2018; Harter, 2002). Looking through Goffman (1959)'s notion of front-stage and backstage identity, authenticity can be conceptualized as "the sincere expression of the backstage"

in the frontstage (Lehman, O'Connor, Kovács, & Newman, 2019: 22). Institutional research on authenticity, mostly concerned with the audience, conceptualizes authenticity as conforming to a previously claimed or ascribed identity (Negro, Koçak, & Hsu, 2010; Zuckerman, 1999 in Lehman et al., 2019). However, given the inconsistency of the true self over time, authenticity as conformity to the past self contradicts the conceptualization of authenticity as consistency between the front and backstage identities. Authenticity can be both experienced by the self (internal/experienced authenticity) (e.g., Kernis & Goldman, 2006; van den Bosch & Taris, 2014) and perceived by others (external authenticity) (Avolio, Gardner, & Walumbwa, 2007). The majority of organizational research concerning external authenticity assumes that others (e.g., clients, peers, and followers) can detect consistency of the front and backstage identities by viewing a person's outward behavior (e.g., Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005; Moore, Lee, Kim, & Cable, 2017), but the conceptualization of authenticity as conformity to past selves, and the capacity of individuals for faking the appearance of authenticity (Harter, 2002) complicates this assumption.

Feeling authentic at work (experienced authenticity) has been associated with positive consequences for the individuals including psychological well-being and work engagement, while appearing authentic (external authenticity) has been linked to positive image and career outcomes through likeability and? perceived trustworthiness (see Cha et al., 2019 for a review). Feeling inauthentic, on the other hand, creates a sense of

alienation from the self (Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005; Roberts, 2012) that requires expenditure of cognitive resources to maintain the gap between the true self and the persona (Hewlin, 2003; Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1996) and leads to emotional exhaustion (Goffman, 1959; Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005).). Despite the positive consequences of authenticity and negative consequences of inauthenticity, in presence of organizational norms that prescribe appropriate unifying identities, some people suppress their authentic selves and engage in image management practices in order to fulfill external expectations and fit in (Gino, Kouchaki, & Galinsky, 2015). Others express their authentic self by revealing their deviance from the expected identity (Reid, 2015). Authentic self-expression, therefore, is regarded as an act of resistance to unifying cultural control.

In this paper, I am concerned with the tension between internal desire for revealing, or rather concealing, the authentic self and external expectations of authenticity in contexts in which being authentic itself is a prescribed cultural script. Relevant to discussions of authenticity and conformity is a strand of socialization research that focuses on how organizations enculturate employees to adapt organizational cultural norms and values and abandon the parts of themselves that do not align with organizational culture (e.g., Barker, 1993; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Kunda, 1992). When external prescriptions do not align with one's true self, people create facades of conformity, which include suppressing the authentic self and feigning conformity to external expectations and prescribed values

of the collective (Hewlin, 2003). In her study of professional service workers, for example, Reid (2015) found that some people mask their deviance from prescribed ideals of devotion to "pass" as ideal workers. Facades of conformity are considered alienating (Grandey, 2003; Roberts, 2012) and inconsistent with people's natural desire to express themselves authentically (Ibarra, 1999). Therefore, unless the collective prescribed identity aligns with individual desired identity (e.g., Anteby, 2008), authenticity is generally thought to stand in opposition to conformity to external expectations and cultural control (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998). To resolve the "tension between employee self-expression and organizational control" and to weather the negative consequences of conformity, Cable et al., (2013) invite organizations to incorporate invitations for authentic self-expression in their socialization process. This suggestion accords well with emerging evidence suggesting that organizations, perhaps in an attempt to rectify the dysfunctionalities of normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011) or to use the growing diversity of the workforce to their advantage, increasingly refrain from prescribing a singular ideal image and embrace the plurality of personal identities (Ramarajan, 2014). Organizations increasingly invite people to bring their authentic selves to work (Fleming, 2009) and prescribe authenticity as a core organizational value (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998; Hsieh, 2010). Outside the boundaries of organizations, the demand for the authenticity, perhaps even more accentuated, is prescribed through prevalent discourses of personal branding (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020; Peterson, 2005). Yet, research on people's responses to external cultural

demands has focused on unifying cultural scripts that oppose individuality and authenticity in their nature (e.g., Barker, 1993; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Kunda, 1992) and paid less attention to how people respond to and experience cultural scripts that demand and idealize exposure of the authentic-self and condemn masquerading. This is perhaps due to the common image of work as a site of coercion and control (Fleming, 2009) and the lingering assumption about the oppositional nature of authenticity and control.

The shift towards authenticity in both managerial and entrepreneurial discourse coincides with growing desire for meaningful work and self-actualization at work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) and the increasing popularity of discourses of 'doing what one loves' being one's own boss and making a living off who one really is (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020; Duffy, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2017). Such discourses that emphasize freedom and being yourself are argued to be rooted in the late 1960s lexicon of liberation (Fleming, 2009). This shift can most obviously be observed in popular management books that promote commodification of workers' authentic self at work, and entrepreneurial books that teach marketization of the authentic self (e.g., Authentic Personal Branding: A New Blueprint for Building and Aligning a Powerful Leadership Brand –Rampersad, 2009; Just Do You: Authenticity, Leadership, & Your Personal Brand–King, 2019). In recent years, scholars of socialization, identity management, and critical management have begun to react to this shift (Anteby, 2008; Cable, Gino, &

Staats, 2013; Fleming, 2009; Ramarajan & Reid, 2020), resulting in divergent views on the implications of this shift for workers. On the one hand, encouragement of authenticity by management is considered beneficial for both workers (by resolving the problem of alienation) and organizations (by allowing them to mobilize the reservoir of innovation hidden in workers true selves) (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). On the other hand, critical management scholars have raised concerns about the slogan "just be yourself" is a diktat disguised as encouragement that helps exploit the non-work and private aspects of workers' selfhood and life (Fleming, 2009: 4) and further constraints workers' autonomy (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Less strongly positioned, Anteby (2008)'s study of a production plant showed that allowing expression and enactment of who workers wanted to be (desired identities) functioned as an 'engaging form of control' (Anteby, 2008).

Having the opportunity to express one's true self can have positive consequences when people get a chance to craft and express a positive social identity (i.e., "the best self"–2005 Roberts et al., 2005) and a signature strength based on their authentic self (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). It is unclear, however, how people are affected by the push to reveal not only the strengths, but also the flaws of the authentic self. While expressing oneself authentically can positively influence one's internal state, without external pressure, people tend not to reveal their authentic selves all the time; they make strategic choices based on how they expect their revelation to be perceived (Roberts, 2005). While we know that display rules that require inauthentic expressions of

emotions can be exhausting (Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005; Hochschild, 1983), it remains unclear how workers are affected by display rules that mandate visibility of the authentic self and condemn image management, thus, the implications of demanded radical authenticity remain unexplored. The need for consistency of the expressed self over time to establish external authenticity in personal branding (Clark, 2011; Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011) adds another dimension of complication to understanding how prescribed authenticity influences workers. While people might be able to give the impression of consistency through image management and resist the mandate of authenticity by faking a display of authenticity (Harter, 2002), the faking of authenticity stands in opposition to the growing desire for authentic self-expression in contemporary work.

I begin to address these issues here with an inductive study of how independent workers whose careers hinge on their presence on Instagram respond to and are affected by prescriptions of authenticity prevalent in the discourse of personal branding. I build theory on the processes and practices involved in people's reactions to display rules of authenticity as a requirement for sustaining their contemporary careers while attending to material features of technology through which such practices are enacted. The consequences of these practices on people's works and lives are explicated.

METHODS

For a full description of the methods, please see the method section of second paper in this dissertation on page 81.

Data Collection

Interviews

While the first interview protocol did not include any direct questions about personal branding, the topic came up so frequently without prompts that I inquired about it in almost all the interviews even before having the question in the interview protocol. In Version 2, I asked if personal branding means anything to the informants. Informants' responses to this question frequently took the form of advice about being authentic for creating a successful personal brand. In Version 3 of the interview protocol, following my informants' footsteps, I asked "what's your advice about creating a personal brand for someone who's just starting out?" As the interviews evolved, I added questions that focused on the emerging themes (Charmaz, 2006; Spradley, 1979). In the initial interviews, for example, several informants mentioned the importance of showing who one really is by sharing personal side of one's life. They also talked about the difficulty of keeping their brand consistent with who they were over time. Therefore, in Version 3, I asked how important sharing one's personal life is for creating a successful personal brand. I did not directly ask about authenticity, instead, I asked "How different or similar are you to the image that your audience see on your Instagram?" and "Do you have a

persona or do you show your authentic self on Instagram?" To understand whether they have a singular description of their personal brand, I asked them to describe what their personal brand is.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the interview data based on inductive qualitative data analysis guidelines (Charmaz, 2006), moving back and forth between the interview data and the literature. I began the analysis by developing preliminary codes using open coding techniques informed by my focus on the cultural scripts within the discourse of personal branding and their connection to workers' image management practices. I then refined the preliminary codes by focusing on codes that appeared more frequently in the data and seemed more theoretically significant, and by coding the preliminary codes. Finally, I used theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978, in charmaz, 2006) to identify the relationship between focused sharpen the theoretical direction of the analysis. In practice, the analysis included multiple iterations and stages of the data analysis were more intertwined than described here. For simplicity, however, I refer to the preliminary stage as Stage 1 and the focused stage as Stage 2.

In stage 1, to understand the cultural prescriptions of personal branding, I coded for traits, behaviors, and practices informants associated with successful personal branding. This process revealed that authenticity was considered necessary for successful personal branding, and being "fake" or "having a front" was believed to result in lack of

success (e.g., losing followers, low engagement). I noticed that informants viewed being (and showing) vulnerable, imperfect, and relatable as important practices for showing who one really is. Embracing and revealing marginalized identity was another practice for establishing realness. I also noticed that to show these qualities informants rely on Instagram Stories. People mentioned podcasts and searching online as the source of their perception about the importance of authenticity in successful personal branding. They also mentioned that their followers demand authenticity. For example, their followers communicated with them (through comments or direct messages) that they want to see them in the content, even when the content was about a topic unrelated to them such as nutrition or art. Additionally, their followers praised them for showing their "real" self and nudged them when they sensed "fakeness". At this point, I noticed some tension between these demands and creators' desire for how much of their 'real' selves they wanted to reveal. In addition to the tension between demanded and desired levels of self-revelation, identity related tensions appeared in the data, too. For example, people were concerned about being boxed into a personal brand if they claimed a personal brand for themselves, or talked about not being able to articulate their personal brand yet because they did not know who they really were yet. My analysis further revealed that some people showed vulnerabilities and private lives of their past selves rather than their present.

While my analysis of the Instagram Creators Blog revealed the presence of rhetorical invocations about authenticity and personal branding, the majority of my

informants did not follow the Creators Blog; many were not even aware that it existed. However, I noticed that ideas about success and failure of personal branding was understood in relation to evaluative metrics. Authenticity was considered an effective strategy for personal branding based on informants' experiences that personal content garnered higher evaluative metrics (i.e., number of followers, likes, comments, shares, etc.). At this stage, I used in-vivo codes whenever possible (e.g., "just be yourself", "show who you really are", "be vulnerable", "be relatable", "you shouldn't be perfect"), and descriptive codes when in-vivo coding was not possible (e.g., "authenticity encouraged by metrics", "sharing personal life facilitated by stories", "revelation tensions", "identity-based tensions", "manifestation of marginalized identity").

As the analysis progressed, in Stage 2, I compared the initial codes with each-other, with the subsequent interview data, and with the literature on authenticity and cultural control to develop a more focused coding scheme (Charmaz, 2006). At this stage, I collapsed similar codes together. For example, I collapsed descriptions of required vulnerability, imperfection, and relatability with descriptions of embracing and revealing marginalized identity as they both described practices of self-revelation in response to calls for authenticity. I also abandoned some codes. For example, I initially coded the crisp statement describing personal brands as the "elevator pitch of the personal brand". But the concept did not appear theoretically significant. I also initially coded resistance to the discourse of personal branding, but abandoned it as the number of people who resisted the discourse as a whole did not exceed 3.

To advance the theoretical direction of the analysis, in Stage 3, I developed the constructs underlying focused codes and looked for patterns of relationships between the constructs. For example, I combined the "identity-based tensions" and "revelation tensions" under the umbrella of authenticity paradox as they align with previous conceptions of the concept in literature on authentic leadership (e.g., Ibarra, 2015). Further, I used the label *in-vivo* – "within the living" in Latin – to describe the self-revelatory practices as they were involved real-time capturing and broadcasting of informants' real selves and lives. I used the label *in-vitro*–within a glass in Latin–to describe practices that revealed vulnerabilities and private lives of the past selves as opposed to present. Through comparison between codes and data I came to realize that informants use in-vitro practices to resolve the authenticity paradox. Figure 3.4 and Table 1.4 report the process model and illustrative examples of the codes, respectively.

FINDINGS

I was initially interested in understanding how Instagram creators react to the discourse of personal branding to guide their image-management practices (i.e., the choice to conceal or reveal the authentic self- Reid, 2015). My analysis, however, unveiled a prevalent rhetorical interpretation of personal branding that commanded radical authenticity rather than providing criteria for when to reveal or conceal parts of the self. Participants experienced this rhetoric as paradoxical; once born to protect the inner self by putting up a façade and a positive persona, the armor of 'personal brand'

was now a self-revelatory apparatus, a public mirror stipulated to reveal flaws, imperfections, and vulnerabilities of the self. The juxtaposition between the fluidity of the authentic self and the need for consistency of the personal brand introduced further tensions to the paradox.

Three key findings helped me to model the process of resolving authenticity paradox in personal branding among Instagram content creators. First, I noticed that in response to rhetorical invocations about the importance of authenticity in personal branding, informants initially viewed their personal brand as an emergent by-product of them living and expressing themselves authentically (labeled here as *in-vivo* personal branding). While feeling the need to project a positive image and being aware that the practice of personal branding involves managing one's self-presentation to curate a positive image, the ethos of authenticity pressured the informants to publicize the most vulnerable, imperfect, and personal aspects of themselves and their lives. To further complicate the paradox, informants felt the need to keep their brand consistent across time, which proved challenging as 'who they really were' did not remain consistent across time. As a result, informants experienced a tension between their internal guide on how much of their authentic self they must reveal and external pressure to reveal their whole self. This aligns with the authenticity paradox discussed in studies of authentic leadership (e.g., Ford & Harding, 2011; Ibarra, 2015).

Second, I noticed that informants engaged in deliberate and continuous efforts to establish authenticity in the eyes of their audience (referred to as credibility in image

management literature and external authenticity in authenticity literature). To appear authentic, creators felt pressured to reveal their flaws and imperfections, display vulnerability, and broadcast private aspects of their lives. Instagram's technological features enabled these practices in two main ways. First, evaluative metrics intensified the said pressure by allowing the creators to see that personal, imperfect, and vulnerable content garnered more attention on the platform. Second, certain features facilitated the creation and sharing of self-revelatory content. For example, Instagram Stories facilitated daily informal and short-lived interactions with the audience, and Instagram Lives facilitated real-time broadcasting of informants' lives.

Practices informants used to display authenticity had implications for their psychological well-being, privacy, time use, and monetary gains. Showing who they really are helped many feel empowered and even in some cases connected to their marginalized communities. Yet, for most people, showcasing flaws and sharing one's deepest personal experiences took an emotional toll on their psychological well-being and proved to be unsustainable. Recording and broadcasting their personal lives, informants experienced constant connectivity and extended work hours. Surprisingly, the pressure to appear authentic had monetary setbacks, too. The need to leave a personal touch of who they really are in their communications and their content prevented informants from hiring support and expanding their business even when they had the financial means to do so. Additionally, it prevented them from accepting the majority of brand partnership deals that they were offered because those brands did not fit with who they really were. Most of

the informants I interviewed worked more than 30 hours per week and made less than $20,000 per year. Many made no income at all from Instagram.

Third, to resolve the authenticity paradox and to elevate some of the negative implications mentioned above, I noticed that some informants resided in what I label as *in-vitro* personal branding–an intentional practice of personal branding that entailed conscious curation, thoughtful self-positioning, and *performance of authenticity* rather than an authentic representation of the true self. The key difference between the performance of authenticity and the authentic self-representation found in the in-vivo practice was that the self-revelations in the performance of authenticity did not hold the same power over the informants as did those in in-vivo practices. Informants intentionally put up a selective collage of imperfect and vulnerable pieces of their authentic self that they did not feel powerless about. They reduced the power of personal revelations by putting a temporal or emotional distance between the exposed episode and the authentic self.

[Insert Table 1.4 about here]

I describe the findings in four parts. First, I describe how informants were exposed to and made sense of expectations of authenticity in their personal brand. Second, I describe how they strove to fulfill the external authenticity prescription through self-revelatory practices that had mostly negative emotional and psychological, temporal, and monetary implications for them. Third, I illustrate how such external expectations contradicted people's internal need for authenticity. I close by describing how informants

navigated the tension by selective revelation of parts of the authentic self that they had some emotional or temporal distance from.

Institutional and Social Context: The Thirst for the Authentic Self

My analysis suggests that there was a consensus among informants that to become successful, they need to have a personal brand built around who they 'really' are, or their 'authentic' self. Informants univocally stated that the key to successful personal branding is to "(just) be yourself" (e.g., P41, P35, P7, P17, P35, P37, P40) and to show "who you (really) are" (e.g., P2, P4, P14, P37, P40). Fakeness or inauthenticity were stigmatized and policed by the audience. "The most negative thing I can say is the fake label, you are fake, you're faking this feeling you're faking this compassion or empathy" said one (P45). "My Instagram followers can tell when I'm trying," said a standup comedian, "so, I just am continuously me, I'm unapologetically myself. The less I think about it, the less – the more I just do it is where it gets really more well- received" (P9). In explaining the importance of authenticity in his personal brand, one informant mentioned that the audience "can sense it" when someone is not authentic, "there's an innate human ability to sense performative actions" (P43). He continued to explain the denounce of performativity and increasing importance of authenticity and coming from a "real place" for millennials and Gen-Z:

> Authenticity is not only a very important part of my personal brand, but I think that as we move to the newer generations, authenticity is something that's expressly important to the younger generation...we want to believe, and we want

> to be truthful, we come from a real place. We're tired of the performative nature of so many things...And so sincerity and authenticity is something that we correlate with the solutions of tomorrow (P43)

The rhetoric of authenticity in personal branding and the pushback against performativity reflected the broader market trend that demands authenticity from commercial brands (discussed in detail in the introduction). In parallel with broader market trends, Instagram rhetorical invocations and technological features reflected and perhaps amplified the ideology of authenticity in creating a personal brand. Consider the following invitations shared on Instagram Creators Blog that encourage creators to figure out "what makes you, you?", "craft your voice", and "express yourself", and suggests that to grow their brand, they should use features such as Stories:

> Express yourself. What makes you, you? Craft your voice, bring your ideas to life, and share them with the world... Grow your following: We've got the essentials for growing your brand. Sharing across formats (like Reels, Stories, Instagram Video, etc.) can help you find new followers and expand your reach... (Instagram Creators Blog)

Instagram features seem to be strategically designed to facilitate such recommendations. According to Instagram Creators Blog, Instagram Stories, short lived content pieces that last 24 hours, facilitate "expressing your truest self" by allowing you to "showcase your everyday life" and letting people "get to know the real you": "What's your story? Use Stories to express your truest self. Showcasing your everyday life and passions will make it so much easier for people to get to know the real you" (Instagram Creator Blog, May 2,2022). "[Use Instagram lives to] easily connect with your community in real time", recommends Instagram Creators Blog, "share experiences with

fans as they happen". The explanation provided by Instagram dovetailed with how informants described the features:

> My posts, my posts need to be, in my opinion, a lot more perfect. I'm a lot more calculated with what I post versus what I put on a story because I know a story basically disappears in 24 hours, but the post is forever. So a post feels like a tattoo. It feels like a tattoo. Like what are you gonna get? This tattoo is on your body almost forever. And the story, the story feels like a shirt, like I can just wear the shirt, but if it's an ugly shirt, I can just take it off and wear something else. (P43)

Other features that appeared frequently in discussions of authenticity and personal branding were evaluative metrics and engagement reports (labeled as Insights in the app). When she shared her struggles in her divorce process, a small business owner noticed that the post "went viral" and was "17000 [times] saved and 42000 [times] shared". To replicate the success, she tried "to be myself" and "show them how – what kind of problems I have and what's my approach to solve them" (P1). Similarly, a fashion model was made aware of the demand for "the real you" by comparing the metrics on an imperfect post that "did well":

> Those stories dumped post thing that everyone is doing now, which is just 10 kind of unconnected photos all posted together over the last two weeks or months of your life, they seem to do really well now on Instagram. I posted one last week on the end of February. That was like just 10 different kind of silly selfies that I had taken in February. And I made the caption February and selfies. And it was the best post that I did all month. And it was— so it was really kind of this attitude— It was really– irreverent, I think is the word that I'm looking for. And I think that that is really starting to connect with audiences a lot more than the very kind of curated aesthetic Instagrams of way back in twenty fifteen. So, it's like there is a bigger demand for the real you, like showing who you really are (P4)

Engagement reports made the creators aware that to engage their audience they needed to "show face" (P6). Many informants expressed that they preferred the content to be centered around their work rather than themselves. Said one creator, "when I post my face, that sounds super narcissistic, but the Insights show that, like, I get more reach and I get more likes and those are the posts that do well. But I like my feed the show like products and different levels of content and like angles and different settings" (P7). A personal stylist who noticed that her "work-related" and "personal styling stuff don't get as much interaction" as when she posts a "selfie" expressed her dissatisfaction with how social media pushes creators to become "narcissists":

> I don't know, I think [if I follow the metrics] then I would be fully like giving in, I would just have to... focus on me, you know, become a full-on narcissist. I just noticed, like, on social media, the more of a narcissist you are, the more self-obsessed, the more photos you posted of yourself, and the more you talk about yourself and your experiences and your opinions, the more people interact with you. I don't know. It's very strange. Psychologically, it's very strange. And it seems like it's regardless of like, independent of what you do. Like, doesn't matter what your job is, and what you're trying to sell on Instagram. It's always like, you need to be you in the picture. (P14)

Another creator, a dancer who started a page to showcase the national dance of her country, at first did not want herself to appear in the content, but was advised to do so by a friend, and noticed a difference in exposure when she did:

> Well, um, at first, I didn't want to have my own picture on dancers of [name]...but my friend who had done a lot of marketing, he was like, no, it has to be your face. So that's why I put my face...He also advised me...to get in front of the camera and talk to people about it, because you could make it interesting. I took his advice. And I did that. So, like, a lot of the videos right now they have my face and, and I tried to look like myself, you know, like, not really dress up, but have

> my own style in the videos. And I realized when I post those, like when I have my face in it, people watch it better. Like they want to see it, sometimes, like I've heard, I've had these comments to that, oh, when you don't talk in the video, we don't want to watch the video, we want to see you. (P19)

Thus, informants were faced with a choice between what they envisioned for their work on Instagram and the demand for showing who they were. A photographer told me that she "would appreciate it more if people were into the work that I create" and questioned whether she should showcase herself or her work in the content to get higher engagement:

> I realized that my engagement on social media on my photography account, it's higher when it's photos of me. But I would appreciate it more if people were into the work that I create. And so like I have this, this, I guess, maybe paradox or like, I'm just questioning, like, what should I put out there? (P23)

Some creators, especially those who had a day job and did not depend on their Instagram to make a living, could afford to resist the pressure. A photographer told me that she has noticed that "when I put a picture of myself it gets more likes" but has asked herself "is that really something I want to do? ...yes, there are ways and possibilities to get more views and likes, but is it really something that I'm looking for? Is it my true intention or is it just an intention for getting more attention? So I usually– if I find myself losing perspective or getting off-track, I remind myself that, don't forget, this is an intention, we are not gonna ruin it for the attention" (P24). A meme creator explained that she never considered this work to become her career because the pressure to show herself and become visible contradicted her internal need for privacy:

> I never seriously considered it [content creation] for a career because I'm pretty, like, I'm kind of a private person. And regardless of how anonymous I am online,

> it's still I think, in order to get past the phase that I'm in right now, as an anonymous creator, it would require me to become more, like, visible online, and I never wanted that, like public facing (P13)

Putting the Armor Down: In-Vivo Personal Branding

Many informants, especially those with smaller accounts or those who were less experienced, viewed their personal brand as an emergent by-product of them existing authentically. “I'm not trying to create a persona. A lot of branding is about creating a persona, and how you want other people to perceive you. But for me, I don't necessarily try to do that. I just try to keep it as organic as possible, and like true to myself. So, I'm not trying to overtly brand myself on the internet” (P15). Another person’s explanation suggested that in this practice authenticity was understood as consistency between frontstage and backstage identity; having the inward and outward persona “correlate, coordinate, and be exact”:

> Honestly, it [personal branding] means, I don't want to say everything, but it means a lot to me. It means a lot to me. And I think about it often, I think about it because I stand for something as a person. And I want to always be in a position where I'm outwardly and inwardly, standing for the same things. I want my outward persona and my inward persona, to correlate, coordinate, and be exact. I do not want to be performative. And so that's why my personal brand means so much to me, because it is very, and the key word is personal. (P43)

Informants believed that if one’s personal brand is a representation of who one really is, it enables the consistency required in personal branding. “Be ready to create it [your personal brand] every day. If it's something you're interested in today and get bored of tomorrow, that's not good... That's why I say it must be who you are. Because when

something is who you are, you cannot get bored of yourself" (P37). Being who you really are, or being genuine and real, as opposed to putting up a "front", therefore, was assumed not only to help make the personal brand more successful, but also to help sustain the personal long term:

> In my experience [the way to have a successful personal brand] is just like, be as genuine as you can. Because like having a, a front, like where you're, you know, pretending to be something you're not can only last for so long or you're going to have to do a lot of work on the back end to like, actually make that part of who you are. Yeah, just like, be yourself, because that's all I did the whole time. And then randomly it started, like, the community that loves you will find you eventually if there is enough of a community that exists. (P50)

The self and the personal brand were viewed inseparable to an extent that to create a personal brand one needed "to decide what are your three to five pillars of who you are" (P2), and to "work on" oneself.

Quenching the Thirst of Authenticity: In-Vivo Practices

It was commonly accepted and even advised that to establish authenticity in a "sellable" (P28) or "marketable" (P2) way, one needs to commodify the most personal aspects of the self. These personal aspects included mundane personal interests (e.g., liking coffee), family life (e.g., being a mum/dad), gender identity (e.g., queerness), racialized identity (e.g., being middle eastern), professional struggles (e.g., being laid off), relationship struggles (e.g., getting a divorce), and even deeply personal tragic life events (e.g., being diagnosed or having a loved one diagnosed with cancer). Successful personal branding, my analysis revealed, rested on establishing authenticity in the eyes of

the audience by appearing vulnerable, imperfect, and relatable, and by embracing and celebrating one's membership in any marginalized social groups.

Be vulnerable, imperfect, and relatable

Displaying vulnerability was understood as sharing unpleasant, painful, or tragic experiences and life events, such as mental health problems, the experience of being bullied, death of family member, relationship struggles, or diseases. "[My relationship] helped me to stretch and show up more as myself because... you know, we were very open about the struggles that we're having and other things. So yeah, it helped my work and personal brand," said one life coach, "people really like it when I'm vulnerable" (P11). A fashion blogger who shared the story of her divorce and the death of her dad after being diagnosed with a terminal disease explained, "I use my personal relationships to grow my brand, relationship with my dad, with my ex-husband. I tell stories about them to people, to my followers, and they love it. They love personal stuff (P35)". "You really have to be vulnerable," emphasized a fitness creator and recalled encouraging her creator friend to make the story of surviving cancer the centerpiece of her personal brand:

> People are all over the board...I'm like, what are you offering me? I'm like, what is your brand voice? And they're like "love". And I'm like, That's not marketable, just not marketable! You need something better! Like she had a scar, a cancer scar here [on her neck]. And I'm like, brand yourself with this cancer scar, make that into T-shirts, make that your emblem, you know? Talk about the pain. Talk about—overcoming that and like, how you feel now, and like make necklaces that people can wear that's like the scar of your neck. Like, that's branding. That's marketing (P2)

To appear relatable, many felt the need to broadcast and showcase their personal lives. Reflecting on the reasons for her success in personal branding in her previous page, a fashion business owner explained: "That is the key to my social media success previously, we were relatable. I was just a normal girl who owned a shop who went on buying trips, you know I was very relatable to many women, and it was super authentic. Like, there was no fakeness... So, it is true that all that stuff works. It does work, it's just a matter of whether someone wants to do it or not" (P16). A doctor whose main focus was medical content explained that sharing details about his family and showcasing his life as an average life cultivated trust in his brand by demonstrating that he is a "normal person":

> [the name of his pesonal brand] is really who I am, like, I like to hang out with my kids, I like medical stuff. I like to play music, and it encompasses all of that, as opposed to kind of trying to meet somebody else's standard, you know, like, I have to just talk about this topic, because that's what gets the most views you know? I feel like if you do that, you're gonna dig a hole for yourself.... And, you know, showing your life as an average life [helps build a successful personal brand]. Which really, I do have an average life. We're like, not poor, we're kind of well off. But we're not like super rich either. But we just show what we have. Not in your face, just kind of like, Oh, nice, I got a new car, and we're gonna go on a trip. These are the kids [and this is] what they do. I think that really, people connect with that... And that's why people are like, you're the only doctor I trust because they see me as kind of like a normal person who lives a normal life with a family, he loves his kids and his wife. (P41)

Sharing private, imperfect, and vulnerable moments was facilitated by Stories on Instagram. A common practice among creators was to use Posts for sharing serious work-related content and stories for fun non-work (private) content. "In my stories, I'm more informal. Sometimes I share funny things, sometimes I write something which is not

related to English language at all, and people like it. But on my posts, I never share something which is not related to English learning. And all of my posts are very formal" (P39). Similarly, said an acupuncture professional:

> Posts are usually the content that I create with a Chinese medicine, facemasks acupressure, acupuncture, just like random things about facts about Chinese medicine, different things related to different seasons and Chinese medicine, what to eat, what not to eat. And usually for my stories, it's either like a picture of me what I've been doing just like a little bit of personal stuff on my Instagram Stories (P44)

Thus, to establish authenticity many felt the need to appear relatable and normal by sharing their personal lives. The Stories feature on Instagram encouraged and facilitated this practice.

Another practice to establish authenticity and 'realness' was to reveal imperfections: imperfect lives, skills, minds, bodies, and souls. Over time, participants learned that trying to look perfect all the time does not work as well as displaying imperfections. The types of imperfections revealed varied depending on the field they were in; a mummy blogger, For example, did not hide that she felt "relieved" that the children are "back to school" after the pandemic (P37), a mental health/lifestyle blogger was not "shy to admit" that she had a "rubbish day" (P31), or a chef told the audience that he "burned" a dish or that the meat was "chewy" despite looking great (P20). A dancer noticed that one of the things her followers like about her is that she shares her "failures", her follower "liked it because they said, this seems real, because all you see on Instagram is people like, you know, having perfect handstands or perfect dance techniques. But

when you share those moments where you fail, it feels like, Okay, so this is a real human being, you know, there are fails while there are like achievements too" (P19). A fashion blogger explained that demonstrating that imperfections (e.g., having frizzy or greasy hair) are "very normal" is her "main thing":

> Like, I post a lot of hair videos. And like, I have, obviously, Middle Eastern hair, which can be very frizzy. And sometimes I just don't want to put product in it. So I just leave it to be frizzy. And I will do like hair style videos on how to like cover up frizzy hair, or do hairstyles for specific hair types, or even to disguise greasy hair because it's very normal. But people just don't put it on social media because it's meant to be seen as like a perfect thing. So I think that's my main thing. (P18)

Appearing perfect stood in the way of appearing relatable. "They [the audience] need to see themselves through you", said one fashion blogger, "and when they see a very successful, wealthy, pretty girl, they can't see themselves in you." (P35). The motive animating the practice of revealing imperfections, thus, was to appear as someone the audience "can be":

> I think that it is potentially, I think that it has potentially come kind of hand in hand and step in step with the way that the conversations we are having about mental health have been changing over the last few years. And that I do know that. Instagrammers that really were very shiny, and it was these girls that looked like there was just nothing ever wrong with their life and they never had a stain on that shirt were becoming quite distant. It was very hard to connect with them, that kind of idea of the like the perfect almost celebrity styled Influencer was no longer something that somebody could connect to, because I think that the reason that we follow our influencers instead of celebrities is because we want them to feel like real people. We want to feel like we can be them (P4)

Embrace, celebrate, and represent your marginalized identity

Members of socially marginalized groups are often expected to attempt to affiliate themselves with groups that are more positively valued (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999; Tajfel, 1978 in Roberts, 2005). My informants, however, did not try to hide or deny their marginalized identity. Instead, in pursuit of authenticity, they put their marginalized identities at the forefront of their personal brand. P28 told me that being in a marginalized body is the centerpiece of her personal brand: "I think that it [my personal brand]'s still being crafted but it's like, it's a lifestyle for people in marginalized bodies or people who suffer with body images" (P28). Being at the "center of center of the Venn diagram" of two racialized identities was the climax of a comedian's personal brand:

> The other part of my personal brand is that I'm black and Persian, and I'm equally proud of being both. I'm very proud to be Persian, I'm very proud to be black. And I'm proud to be very vocal on issues that are principles, not political. And so, my brand has that. And also corresponds with my unique perspective of how I look at the world because I come from all these different worlds, I'm this center of the Venn diagram, an intersectionality of so many different worlds, a perspective that very few people on this planet have. And I'm very true to myself. (P43)

Marginalized identities, therefore, were not only suppressed, but were also actively demonstrated and emphasized in pursuit of authenticity.

Quenching the Thirst of Authenticity: Implications

Emotional and Psychological Implication

Most informants treated the invitation to commodify themselves and their life as natural and 'the way things are'. Only during later years did some informants contested the discourse and noticed how such radical self-commodification was unsustainable and detrimental to their mental health. After practicing in-vivo personal branding for several years, P16 told me that she does not want to have her personal brand anymore and does not think that "people need to sell themselves and sell their soul to like make a dollar":

> I don't want to make a personal brand, or brand about me and my life and all this kind of stuff, which really is almost what everybody is doing, and it's almost what is being shoved down our throats that we should be doing. So many people preach that we should– everybody should have a personal brand, the key to success is branding yourself, everyone wants to know, the person behind the thing, everyone is interested in their life and all that kind of stuff. I don't want to do that, and in fact, I don't actually recommend it...And I speak to this because I was somebody for seven years, that I did have a personal brand, I documented everything... your privacy is jeopardized, your safety is jeopardized, people become obsessive about you. You know, it's not the safest space, I think it also can play on your mental health, because you also get very much used to external validation... I think it's maybe great short term... I just don't think it's sustainable, long term (P16)

The decision to be vulnerable came with an emotional toll on many. After revealing an episode of grief for her father who passed away, an informant was bombarded with comments judging her way of expressing grief: "I really got frustrated with the way people responded...It was too much for me, because I was still grieving and then feeling like people don't get it, they judge me or they kind of question my love for my dad" (P38). When asked whether she finds the new trend of authenticity easier

compared to the curated Instagram of "back in the day" (her own words), a fashion model explained that creating a polished feed might be logistically harder, but the unfiltered representation of the self is more "emotionally taxing" and can feel "suffocating":

> I don't necessarily think as an influencer that having to plan your content and to go out and find like a beautiful pink wall and style an outfit... is easy, but emotionally, it potentially is not so taxing. Then I also think it's there is an aspect of ease to representing yourself just the way that you are at home in your sweats without makeup on pictures of you crying...but that in its way, I think, is more emotionally taxing...I think after a while, the pressure to share your life that way can become just as kind of suffocating or constricted as only showing the really stylish...curated pictures. And so I think it's a bit of a Chinese finger trap. Like, you go far enough in one direction and far enough in the other, you're going to end up feeling like you live your life online. (P4)

Being authentic by representing their marginalized identities accrued both positive and negative implications for informants. They mentioned helping members of marginalized communities by representing them and becoming their voice (e.g., P31, P18, P1), becoming more confident in who they were (e.g., P2, P28), getting more followers from their niche community (P13, P18), and even getting brand partnership from brands that were trying to improve their image within the woke culture as the positive aspects (P18). At the same time, representing their marginalized identities authentically often made the informants subject to hate and negative comments:

> If you're the only representation, and people don't like what you do, they will be negative about it. Like, for example, some people don't like the fact that I don't touch my eyebrows, which I don't really understand because it's not theirs!... I think in the beginning, it did affect my confidence a bit when I was getting negative comments, just because in real life, no one ever comes up to you and tells you like, Oh, you're ugly, or like, why your eyebrows are like this, like no

> one in real life would ever say that. So I think seeing on social media, it was an adjustment with my confidence (P18).

While the negative comments had the potential to hurt informants' self-esteem, some talked about weathering the negative comments by reminding themselves that their authentic self-representation is "helping other people" (P31). A lifestyle blogger who "got bullied quite a lot for my nose" and viewed herself as representation for people with imperfect features said: "I have had so much hate but it doesn't really affect me too much. I don't care. But it also makes me realize like, I'm kind of becoming like someone that people, like younger people might look up to and be like, this is representation. This is what I want to see more of (P31). Expressing lack of care and a sense of invincibility towards negative comments was not uncommon among revealers of devalued social identities. The person who represented marginalized-bodies explained that having been subjected to repeated hate has made her "desensitized" to them, and that the positive impact she has on the community outweighs the burden of the hate:

> Oh, my God, like, I feel like it's saved my life, having a community that wants to hear my story, that allowed me to share it and advocate and resonates with my content. I feel less alone, like, I feel like I found myself through my content... It gave me the confidence and the advocacy to exist as a person and I'll never be able to, I would never have been able to do without taking that risk of sharing my story on these platforms. It gave me a voice... And I've had people hated on me all my life. Obviously, it's a lot more people on social media. But I've been constantly dragged and tortured for years. So in comments, it's like I'm desensitized to it, which is awful. I just, I expect it, I don't deserve it. That's just what I've come to a point in my life. And it's like, there are so many people who I am helping, who want to see me win who enjoy my content that outweighs any troll that comes on to my page (P28)

On the other hand, if not revealing a marginalized social identity was induced by secrecy rather than privacy, it affected informants negatively:

> and oh, I can't be fully gay on my Instagram because I'm afraid I might go back to Iran. And my parents don't know. Like, no one knows. And I've been like into fuc*ing five year old relationship with this guy. And no one in my Instagram knows. Like, they know if they're smart. Yeah, but I always have to have this mask on... I don't feel good about my Instagram. I think it's I think it's shitty... It's not giving [his name], you know? And how can I Be [his name], if I'm not showing publicly that I'm gay?...you know, a lot of it is missing. So when people say, like, oh my god, you're so cool, I'm like you don't know me. You know? It doesn't feel like you know me. (P46)

In sum, revealing of the devalued social identities appeared to lead to more positive psychological and emotional outcomes compared to revealing the vulnerable and imperfect parts of the authentic self.

Temporal implications

The data suggests that there is a connection between prescriptions of authenticity in personal branding and constant connectivity. First, the rhetoric of authenticity intensified constant connectivity by encouraging creators to document and broadcast their personal and non-work time. Said one, "I don't really take a break [during vacation], I kind of use it as an opportunity to create content...and my followers love seeing what I'm up to, they find it really interesting. So, I just share what I'm seeing and doing on a day to day basis" (P21). Similarly, another informant explained that he does not disconnect from the app because showing personal and fun side of who he is a part of his brand:

> [I don't disconnect from the app during my vacation or weekends] because I think that's part of my brand. Because I want to show people the personal side of it and the fun side...And that's offline time for the most part. But even then, it's still

> tough because as a creator, I want to share what I'm doing so that people can kind of get a better idea of me. (P7)

In addition to pressure for broadcasting personal life, having an authentic personal brand for many meant showing up regularly and consistently.

> My advice for having a successful personal brand would be, they have to be prepared, especially in the beginning, they have to have enough content to be regular, because people get to know you over time, like the trust that the community is not built overnight. Like no matter how good your content is, still, it's gonna take time for people to trust you to get to know you. So just be consistent with whatever you have to post or whatever content you want to, you want to have... that's important to be very regular, and have a schedule (P38)

The idea of required consistency was affirmed by the algorithm and evaluative metrics. "On weekends I'm working hard to make posts for every day in advance not to lose any of them [the followers]. Like I'm doing a game that's making me stressed," said one (P24). Many emphasized that "consistency is key" in personal branding, and backed up their claim with a story about how not being consistent costed them followers:

> The thing is like consistency is key. So like, even just, I went three days, I believe, really not even like a full three days, without really like paying attention to my social media this weekend. And like, I didn't lose a ton of followers. But I like I definitely lost followers and normally I'm gaining. Even if it's like a slow gain, it's normally going up. So just like even taking a few days off is if you're trying to grow is really not good for your account. (P12)

Monetary implications

Subscribing to the rhetoric of authenticity in personal branding had negative monetary implications for informants through two mechanisms. First, it pushed the informants to be personally involved in all aspects of their business, and thus prevented them from hiring support and growing their business. Second, the desire to have an

authentic brand and the fear of appearing fake prevented informants from collaborating with commercial brands despite the scarcity of other monetization opportunities.

The rhetoric of authenticity entrapped the informants by making them feel obligated to be personally involved in all aspects of their small business, thus, preventing them from delegating tasks and organizing their work logically, even when it was financially feasible for them.

> I'm pretty much in my brand now. So, I represent the look. I am the creator. So, I have to have that voice ...Yes, I can hire people, but it's not the same, that's why I'm in this tough situation cause I need more time to focus on creation. So, I can outsource my emails and my programming, but at the same time, I have to still do these big parts of the brand, which is good, is just very overwhelming. (P2)

Despite having the financial means to hire support and despite feeling overwhelmed with the tasks that she needed to do, she felt uneasy about outsourcing tasks that were related to her personal brand and her brand voice. Another informant explained that even if he had a million dollars to invest in his business, he would not "change much" because to build a personal brand "you need to be involved in it":

> [Even if I had a million dollars] I don't know if it would change much because the big thing that I remind clients of is if I'm building a personal brand, you need to be involved in it. There's thousands of other people that do exactly what you do. But they come to me because, it's still weird to say, but they come to me because they like me (P7).

Hiring people to do the communication necessary in their work was especially frowned upon as it was deemed inauthentic and fake. "So, I was working with an admin for a while. But I just decided not to," said one person reflecting on her experience with

hiring support for her comments and messages, "I really did not like it. It was just– I would rather not respond rather than have like a 'fake' response... it was a help for sure. But then at some point...I was like, that's not something I would ever say. So, yeah, I wanted keep things consistent. It's hard because people think that it's you. So, it kind of affect your brand" (P15). Informants' sense of authenticity, as opposed to being fake, depended very much on doing everything themselves. When asked if she ever considered hiring someone to help her with the massive amount of communication that she needed to do, one responded:

> That's a hard question because I was so attached to it. And I was so like, authentic, if you will. I didn't want anybody else speaking my voice. I don't want anybody else answering my customers or emails. Yes, I had people do all my emails and things like that. But the social media I really held very dear. I was like, this is mine. Like I write my own captions. I answered the people back. So I don't know. I mean, I think that's something that I would have wanted to do myself. If not, then it's just so fake in my opinion. (P16)

Thus, the rhetoric of authenticity stopped the informants from moving forward and transitioning from sole entrepreneurs to running a small organization.

In addition, the analysis suggests that efforts to remain and appear authentic prevented informants from taking partnership deals with commercial brands even when that was the only monetization option or when they really needed the money it could generate to sustain their business. "I never take a brand deal, because I don't want to dilute my reputation and my brand value", said a fitness creator (P2). She recalled juggling multiple day jobs for five years to finance her Instagram and refusing to take any

brand deals. Even those who did accept brand partnerships, were very careful about alignment of their personal brand and the brands they work with. "[I do brand partnerships only] if it makes sense, not financially, but if it makes sense, in terms of, you know, I have had brands reach out, you know, with certain things that doesn't make sense in terms of, it's just not, doesn't tie into my brand. I don't want to just do it" (P20). He went on to explain that he does not advertise an irrelevant brand just "because they want to give me a freebie, or like they want to give me like 200 bucks. Because the moment you don't– the moment you're just thinking of like, dollar or like, an opportunity only, you start separating yourself from that authentic brand that you've kind of built".

Preoccupation with appearing inauthentic or fake appeared frequently in my inquiries about brand partnerships and advertisements. When inquired about working with brands, a fashion designer referred to her desire to be authentic and her concern about not being "fake" as the reason why she is very selective about accepting brand deals now that her personal brand grew to become an authentic representation of middle eastern women:

> I feel like before with brand deals [I was not as selective], I feel very free [now]. Like if– I'm very particular with what brands I will work with. So, if I don't want to do [it] I just won't do it. But– it doesn't matter about money for me. Like I'm more, I don't want to– I like to be authentic, especially with my Instagram because I feel like that's what I've brought up to expect myself to be, so I don't want to be like fake (P18).

Notice how accepting brand deals that do not align with her personal brand is evaluated with value judgments about her character. Partnering with brands that do not align with her personal brand for P18 was not only a business decision with negative

business implications but was an identity-defining choice; a signal of character flaw–that she is a "fake" person. Similarly, "It just wouldn't be who I am," said a medical doctor with over a million followers and zero monetary benefits from Instagram discussing brand partnerships (P40). He told me that he "did get offers about people helping me like make animation and kind of manage my account" and "offers about participating with drug companies in [name of the country] and doing advertisement, but refused them all. "I haven't done any of that, I've thought about it," ruminated the same person, "I've thought a lot about it. I even thought about making an app". But concerns about being "commercial" and not true to himself stopped him from realizing those thoughts: "I think the page becomes more commercial [if someone else is involved or if I do brand partnerships]. It just wouldn't be who I am"(P40)

Thus, informants frequently associated their choices around not accepting brand partnership and not hiring support with their desire to be authentic and have an authentic brand.

Authenticity Paradox: The Difficulty of 'Just Being Yourself'

The need for radical authenticity erased the self–image distinction, thus counteracting the consistency and constant image management needed in personal branding. Informants said in unison that personal brands need to be consistent over time. "I'm not as comfortable marketing myself right now", said one, "if I were to, like start marking myself on my photography page, I would see myself being super consistent"

(P23). On a similar note, another person explained why she cannot show herself differently than she did in the past:

> I think like being authentic is the number one rule [for having a successful personal brand]. That's why like, for me, I couldn't really post me tanning in the sun, you know, after, you know, on my public page, because I never did it. So now I feel like okay, if I do this, this might scare some people away. So it's kind of like being consistent about who you, who you showed yourself to be and who you are now (P19)

The authentic self, however, is not a solid consistent construct; conceptions about 'who one is' change over time. The dissolution of self–image boundary, therefore, introduced a tension between the innate inconsistencies in one's sense of self and the consistency required to sustain an 'authentic personal brand'. One who did not engage in practices of personal branding despite the success branding could bring explained her choice as she does not like "to box myself into like a certain brand" (P15). Similarly, another who was aware of the paradox, expressed worry that if she chooses a personal brand "sticking to that" might limit who she can be as a person:

> I don't think I could pick my dance for like a few words or sentences [to describe my personal brand]. Like, I think I'm always growing and changing. So, I think to think it's, I mean, this might sound kind of, I don't know, I think it's quite limiting to put yourself to just one personal brand because then you kind of have the pressure of sticking to it. Whereas I would just rather continue to grow and evolve as a person and like what I'm doing in my life. I don't think I'd really want to peg myself down to that and like just have to stick to it. Because I don't know what's gonna happen in my life. Like, I don't know if I'm gonna be able to stick to that. (P31)

Another way that such worry appeared in informants accounts was in their deferral of developing their personal brand; they felt the need to first make up their mind about who they wanted to be:

> there's a lot of things I'm actually planning to do, and I think I'll eventually only be able to start those things if I find out what my niche is and who I am as a brand... it does become very difficult to like sit down and figure out like, hey, who am I and what is my brand. ...Like am I the artist here, or am I a businesswoman, or am I a saleswoman for my art, right? (P8)

To fulfil their internal need for authenticity, the informants felt the need to change their brand when their sense of self and identity changed. A former mummy blogger who initially branded herself as "a happy successful mom", felt the need to change her brand when after a while she realized that motherhood is not her whole identity: "I realized I'm not just about motherhood, because being a mom involves all aspects of a woman's life, that's why I changed my brand" (P37). Similarly, a relationship coach felt the need to shift the focus of his brand from successful relationships to break-up recovery when he broke up with his partner; talking about successful relationships when he did not have one felt inauthentic and "out of integrity":

> [my personal brand] morphed into like, like relationship coaching with couples but I'm like, this feels out of integrity because I don't have a relationship now. And so, I sat with myself and I was like, what have you done [his name]? And I was like, okay I know how to genuinely heal from a breakup and let go of that attachment and I know how to heal codependency and find self-love because that's what I've done. So, fu*k it, let's go all-in on that, and then I created my breakup recovery course. (P11)

Those who changed their personal brand one too many times, however, took a hit because appearing authentic required conformity to the once claimed identity. An informant who believed changing his brand was responsible for his lack of success in personal branding learned that if one wants to change their personal brand and still remain successful, the change needs to be "on brand":

> You always have to stick to one thing. Only one thing. For example, for me, it [personal branding] is not working on my Instagram, because I was like, I can do art, I can do photography, see I do advertisements. See, I did this thing for this brand...This is not gonna make a brand. You know, when doing a personal brand, the thing is, you have to find that one thing, and you don't even have to find it, you just have to grab that one thing. And make sure everyone is going to remember you for that one thing. I would say that, for example, I'm gonna get a cup. And I want to be the cup guy, you know... I would say it will be really hard to do so [change who you are and keep a personal brand succesful]... but when you change your mind, it doesn't really have to be like, oh completely trash whatever I had and start this new thing. For example, for a cup guy, he can add a straw, you know? [laughter] It's like, it's still on brand. And it's a good addition to what has been shown. You know? A straw with a cup, what a perfect match! (P46)

In addition to the paradox arose from inconsistency of the self and the consistency required for maintaining the appearance of authenticity in a personal brand, the demands for radical self-revelation contradicted people's internal guide about how much of their authentic self is to be exposed. A landscape photographer resisted the constant pressure from her audience to show herself in her pictures and did not want to "fall into the trap of just sharing myself" because that would not be authentic and true to her intention (P24). For many, appearing authentic through overexposure felt "truly inauthentic":

> My goal is to like, for that brand, to be one of authenticity, and one that is not overexposed... it's almost like, not caring about the audience. Like, sure, it'd be great if more people follow me, but like, the goal is to communicate what is authentically me. And I'm not someone that's like sharing everything. And I don't, I don't want to compromise that just for the sake of more followers... Yeah, I mean, like, in part that in part, just because like, I don't think that I don't think people are entitled to all of you. Like, I share the parts that I want people to see. And like, yeah, it's off brand for me to be in the club, maybe. But it's also just like, Y'all don't need to know when I'm in the club...Like, it's just not, it is truly inauthentic for me to share every part of that. (P49)

In sum, informants' accounts pointed to a continual war of opposites that emerged from introducing the rhetoric of authenticity into the discourse of personal branding. Contradictions arose from inconsistency of the self and consistency required for maintaining authenticity in one's personal brand. Further, externally demanded authenticity contradicted people's internal guidance for optimal balance between authentic self-expression/image management.

Resolving the Paradox and Reclaiming the Armor: In-Vitro Personal Branding

Faced with the clashing of needs and expectations, some informants strove to resolve the paradox without compromising neither their need for authenticity nor their conformance to the prescriptions of authenticity. Resistance to external pressure about revealing and over-exposing the private-self meant either dismissing the whole rhetoric and missing on its promised benefits or faking display of authenticity at the expense of feeling inauthentic. One who considered sharing of private life necessary for establishing that "you're a human" added "you can also fake it" (P46). However, "fakeness" (P16) was highly stigmatized and frowned upon; most emphasized with no prompt that they

"don't want to be fake" (P18). To reconcile the internal and external authenticity, therefore, people engaged in what I label as in-vitro personal branding–selective revelations of aspects of the authentic self that appeared both imperfect and private, but that they did not feel powerless about. Not being powerless appeared to be the result of emotional or temporal distance between the exposed parts of the self and the present authentic self. The creator who shared the story of her divorce and her dad's terminal disease explained that "social media doesn't affect my personal relationships because I do choose what personal things to share. And I don't really share like my personal-personal stuff" (P35). One described this practice as showing who you are "in a calculated way" and explained that how this calculated "positioning" of the authentic self helps her not take the negative comments or low metrics personally:

> It comes down to you positioning yourself in the eyes of the audience… You just show them who you are in a calculated way... when you realize all these things I've told you, it's kind of interesting because you kind of realize there's a sense of psychology, there's a sense of manipulation, there's a sense of positioning myself. And so how can I take that personally?... people get lost in the popularity game, and I'm just like, I've never been popular, so I don't give a f*ck, I'm trying to make money, you know what I mean? (P2)

Having already overcome the pain of being unpopular and weird meant not being hurt by it anymore. She therefore, commodified the conquer of overcoming the pain and "exploited" the very thing that she used to be bullied for to create her personal brand:

> It goes back to the brand voice. Like, if I don't speak how I speak, which is very sometimes off the wall, like random and like funny, like I'll make fun of myself. Like, people don't feel like they know me, a lot of people think they're weird, but it's the more you show the weird, the more people will love it. And it's like I've been told all my life how weird, how different I am. I got bullied. I got made fun

> of. So then I was like, oh, man, there must be something wrong with me. And then I kept being myself and it kept getting more confidence. And people were like, Oh my God, you're hilarious. I'm like, what the fuck? so many people used to make fun of me. And so then I just keep doing it. And now I have a following and I'm like, fuck these guys that, like, made fun of me when I was growing up, you know, because it was like you have star potential in you, but it's usually the thing you're most insecure about. So you have to like, exploit that and have self-belief. And once you have self belief, you can be yourself. (P2)

Notice how despite the language of "manipulation" and "calculation", she still feels that she is being herself in her personal brand. By revealing an episode of her authentic self that went through painful emotions (rather than making up an untrue narrative), she fulfilled both the self-revelation expectation and feeling authentic, while protecting the present authentic self by strategically picking an episode that she did not feel powerless about anymore. In doing so, she appeared relatable and felt authentic while maintaining the heroin image.

The difference between in-vitro practices and faking of authenticity previously discussed in the literature is that in-vitro personal branding allowed the informants feel authentic despite deliberate effort toward curation of an authentic image. The difference is captured well in a fashion model's framing of the practice as "performance of authenticity" as opposed to "inauthentic representation of the self":

> I wonder about it being this kind of performance of authenticity, because you are still making this considered choice to share something online. And I see sometimes girls, posting... a girl that I followed posted at the end of the year, a carousel of like 10 pictures of her crying that she had taken throughout the year and was like, cheers 2020. And at first, I thought, oh, wow, that's quite funny and quite cute. But then I went, who the hell thinks to take a selfie when they're crying? She's obviously really thought this through. And then the cynic in me

> goes, she thought this through because it makes her feel and seem relatable and yes, everyone cries and everybody is relatable. We're still all humans. But there is this real concise and concerted effort to seem relatable online. And I think it's, I definitely think it's a good thing, and I definitely think it still has to be considered a performance of authenticity as opposed to just inauthentic representation (P4).

Affirming the centrality of power over the decision to whether or not reveal a vulnerable episode, one told me that in the past sharing insecurities and struggles felt empowering for her because she felt confident that she could "overcome" them, but now she was going through an episode of insecurity that felt like a permanent "failure", which made her refrain from revealing it:

> For me was really empowering...because I was able to express the thoughts and the feelings that I was experiencing. And it was very empowering. Whereas right now, I don't share as much, maybe because, again, deep down, I'm kind of like experiencing some failure. And by sharing those like feelings, I'm kind of– it's like, it's like, confirming that failure. Whereas before, deep down, I didn't believe that I'm failing, I just believed that this is just a, like a short period of time. It's just a small struggle a challenge, and I will overcome it. Whereas right now, I'm kind of like struggling to decide whether or not this is a failure, or again this is just a setback and I will get there...So like, ever since I'm experiencing all of these, like feelings and thoughts. I'm struggling with everything. And I'm not willing to be like [share my struggles], unless I have everything figured out. (P30)

In addition to sharing the pain already overcome or the temporary episode of insecurity, people used multiple other ways to maintain power over the exposure of the authentic self by creating distance between the present authentic self and the authentic self that they? projected. For example, one created temporal distance to protect her privacy: "what I do like to do for privacy concerns is that I always post something a few weeks after it happens... Like my son was six months when I told everyone that I even have a second son" (P 25). A comedian used exaggeration:

> I've always said my Instagram page is an exaggerated version, a hyped-up version of who I really am... it's like taking my personality and firing it out of a canon... I'm definitely kind of positioning myself to be that person for those people. You know, in terms of like an elevator pitch, of who is [his name] (P9).

In sum, in-vitro personal branding practices involved selective and calculated revelations of private or imperfect parts of the authentic self that informants did not feel powerless about. The sense of power and control was created by creating some distance between the exposed parts of the authentic self and the present authentic self. Informants' approaches to the practice of personal branding could not be categorized as purely in-vivo or purely in-vitro, instead, they fell somewhere on the spectrum of the two.

A PROCESS MODEL OF RESOLVING THE PARADOX OF PRESCRIBED AUTHENTICITY

I build on these findings to propose a process model of how people navigate the tension between external demands of authenticity, which prescribes radical self-revelation and requires conformity to previously claimed identity, and their internal need for expressing the authentic self, which is guided by a balance between needs for self-revelation and privacy, and is inconsistent over time. My model, depicted in Figure 1.4, reveals the centrality of in-vitro practices– selective revelation of the authentic self, as opposed to inauthentic representation of the self or overexposure of the authentic self, in this process. I now further explicate the individual, collective, and structural drivers of this process.

In-vitro personal branding is induced by the (a) contradiction of radical self-revelation demanded by the market and amplified by technology, and individuals' internal guide on the optimum level of authentic self-revelation, and (b) demand for consistency of the displayed authentic self and the inconsistency of the authentic self over time. To fulfil the external expectation of authenticity, people engaged in in-vivo personal branding that included self-revelation practices such as revealing the imperfect and vulnerable sides of the self, exposure of private life, and emphasizing of their devalued social identity. Self-exposure practices mainly resulted in negative psychological, emotional, temporal, and monetary implications for workers. Implications of manifestation and emphasizing of devalued social identities were both positive (sense of community and empowerment) and negative (hate and discrimination) implications.

[Insert Figure 1.4 about here]

To resolve the paradoxical tensions and to avoid the negative impacts of in-vivo practices, informants engaged in practices that I label "in-vitro personal branding". In-vitro personal branding involves a selective montage of revelations of private or imperfect episodes of the authentic self that people did not feel powerless about. The source of power over these episodes was emotional and/or temporal distance between the exposed parts and the present authentic self. Through in-vitro practices, people fulfilled both the self-revelation expectation and feeling authentic, while attending to the much-needed distance between the image presented and the self.

This research advances our understanding of authenticity and cultural control at work in three main ways. First, it moves beyond simply viewing authenticity as an opportunity desired by the individual to understanding the interaction of the internal desire for authenticity with increasingly growing external demand for authenticity at work. Socialization scholarship often assumes authenticity as an opportunity that is desired by the workers, and opposes organizational control (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Grusec & Hastings, 2014; Ramarajan & Reid, 2020). Authenticity, however, is increasingly demanded by both organizations and the market (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020; Fleming, 2009). As shown in Figure 1.4, the external demand for authenticity in practice translates into an invitation to commodify and reveal the imperfect authentic self to increase trust and relatability, which contradicts people's internal desire to protect the authentic self by making strategic choices about positive self-presentation based on how the authentic self might be perceived (Roberts, 2005). Additionally, displayed authenticity often requires conformity to previously claimed identities (Lehman, O′Connor, Kovács, & Newman, 2019), which contradicts the need for sincere expression of the authentic self that changes over time and is fluid. Thus, the external pressure to appearing authentic does not always translate into experienced authenticity. By introducing the practice of in-vitro personal branding as a tool for protecting the private self without compromising the experienced and expected authenticity, this research sheds light on practices people employ to reconcile the tension

arising from internal desires and external prescriptions. In doing so, this research contributes to the body of research that explores the crossing of externally prescribed cultural scripts of collectives with internal individual desires and unique traits (Anteby, 2008; Ramarajan & Reid, 2020; Reid, 2015).

Second, this research explores both positive and negative consequences of externally demanded authenticity. The limited organizational research on prescribed authenticity has either celebrated (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013) or condemned (Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011) the appropriation of this increasingly popularized discourse in managerial practice. The current research begins to converge these antithetical views by proposing the subjective interpretations of the ethos of 'just be yourself" and 'show who you really are' as boundary conditions for how such prescriptions could influence workers' practices and experience of work. I show that workers' interpretations of external demands for authenticity translated into experienced authenticity and had positive implications such as sense of belongingness when they interpreted the prescribed authenticity as an invitation for manifesting their devalued social identity (e.g., racialized or LGBTQ+ identities). Interpretations of external authenticity as radical exposure of private life and imperfect self, however, was associated with negative implications on well-being and privacy. Differentiating between inauthenticity and privacy (the state of being free from being observed by other people) appeared to be key in constructive conceptualizations of authenticity. The choice of not sharing parts of the self understood as inauthenticity resulted in an unsettling state of

hypervisibility, when understood as privacy, the seemingly self-imposed state of hyper visibility was avoided.

Third, by highlighting how the seemingly neutral features of digital technology entwine with discourses of contemporary work to intensify work effort, this research suggests a novel mechanism through which digital platforms might direct workers behavior, in doing so, it contributes to the growing research on platform control and resistance (e.g., Cameron & Rahman, 2021; Maffie, 2020; Shapiro, 2018; Wood et al., 2019), and answers calls on examining digital platform's normative modes of control (Kellogg et al., 2020). It further responds to calls for attending simultaneously to both social construction of technology and its material features (Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Specifically, the current research demonstrates how technological features that enable visibility of the private life, promote practices that are based on understandings of authenticity as visibility and commodification of the non-work self at work. Importantly, these findings suggest that in the absence of managerial control, the practices enabled and the meanings implied by technological features shape how people understand and enact popular discourses of independent work. Thus, research on normative and cultural control should not only look for traces of normative control in discourses and linguistic efforts of digital platforms, but also in features that are created to enable and materialize those discourses.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While offering a potentially useful approach for understanding the intersection of desired and prescribed authenticity, this model remains the product of intense involvement in one setting. Specifically, the model provided here might unfold differently in more structured settings, such as organizations, in which managerial direction can shape and unify people's understandings of a cultural script. Future research, therefore, can explore how people understand and appropriate demanded authenticity in traditional organizations in which authenticity is mentioned as a core value. Further, this research studied people's practices at one point in time. While retrospective accounts of informants provided some insight into understanding how people's practices and responses to authenticity demand change and evolve through time, a longitudinal study of practices of authenticity can uncover more nuances about whether people's receptivity towards the rhetoric remain constant over time. Considering that expression of non-private aspects of self is traditionally feminized and considered against norms of professionalism, it might be fruitful to explore whether subscription to rhetoric of authenticity differs for independent workers in traditionally feminine versus masculine professions.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this research highlights the growing dominance of the "just be yourself" ethos in the discourse of personal branding, and the multiplicity of ways through which it

shapes independent workers' practices and experiences of work. Surprisingly, despite authentic self-expression being viewed as an internal need with positive psychological and productivity outcomes, responses to demanded authenticity negatively impacted psychological well-being and monetary rewards for many. The demand for authenticity for many did not end just by being who they really are, instead, it translated into commodification and exposure of the non-work and imperfect self. This highlights the importance of examining interpretation of contemporary cultural scripts, exploring the work practices they evoke, and understanding structural features that shape those interpretations and practices. While the surface message can appear liberating, the true function of contemporary discourses of work is a product of how they are understood and enacted. Power, therefore, need not only be imposed by the production of the script itself, but by shaping the ways the script is understood and enacted.

Table 1.4- Representative Supportive Data

Codes	Illustrative Examples
External Authenticity Demands	So a lot of branding experts. You know, so if you listen to any podcast, or you might be filtered with different ads on Instagram, or, you know, there's coaches that coach now on like building a personal brand. So it's just a lot of like people in the business industry, or marketing industry. Um, they it's just spoken about now, you know, and so yeah, there'll be podcasts on it, or I'm sure there's books on it, Instagram stuff on it, and even if but in addition to the personal brand, it's like, all of those channels, even if they're not speaking to personal brand, what they are speaking to is the importance of, you know, your brand needs to have a story, there needs to be a face behind the brand... big marketing companies are all really saying it, I think are really putting the pressure on any entrepreneur that like you need to be a brand. You know, and even if you're not documenting every step of the way, it's like, there needs to be a face there. There needs to be your personal story. If not, no one's gonna buy your stuff. (P16) Like I said about the brand voice, you need to identify your five pillars, next is look at your content. The posts are like magazines. So you've got to make it aesthetic, OK, your stories are the behind the scenes of this magazine. Make it relatable, make it funny, engage with them. And then your captions are the emotional aspect, how you connect with them. So if you focus on those three things, make it work with your five pillars, you can build the brand (P2)
In-vivo practices Being relatable, imperfect, and vulnerable	I started being just more authentic and transparent with who I am. And even though people feel scared about, like, being vulnerable and talking or making videos or anything like that, I think they get scared by that. But that's what I feel personally attracted to the most. I don't follow people if they're just genuinely posting like influencer stuff or they're being fake (P?Jess)

Embrace and represent marginalized social identity	And so the most important thing and personal branding, I feel like it's building trust. So in order to do that, you need to both talk about yourself and your own experiences, and also what you know, and talk about the topics that you work around. So I feel like a combination of personal and business would be the best thing to offer for personal branding. (P27) It's crazy. But for the most part, ten stories a day, eight to 10, you know, which is a lot... All the time. You're welcome to take a photo of your boot with your black leather style. Right. I eat take photo of my food. I'm like in the mirror, take a photo of that workout, take a quick video and then do it all over again [the next day]. Just do it again in different ways. (P2) Starting off, my goal was to just publish my work. But then, as it grew, I feel like now my goal is to be a formal representation [of Middle Eastern women]. Because I think accidentally it, just because of obviously the way I look, I attracted a lot more Middle Eastern people. So, it just fell into this whole thing of like, helping them accept their features. And that's not how it was meant to be at all. Like it literally just started for me to just post my work. I think that's what, how I got like a lot of my audience was, I think I just posted one video of people to follow it if you're Middle Eastern, and it just blew up. And then the whole goal changed. And now my goal is just to hopefully help people and like be a form of representation and change beauty standards and everything. (P18) I do more discussion of like my values and things in my stories than I do in the posts, the posts, I try to keep pretty simple, but like, I talk about being like a queer person on my Instagram. And so obviously, there's a lot of like, support for the queer community within that. I am a low-income student. So I talk about like, navigating like the thrift store or just like how to consume sustainably without like, going broke pretty much, because like, I'm trying to figure that out myself. (P50)
Implications of In-vivo practices	

Emotional and psychological	Yeah. Sharing personal life can be really hard. And yeah, yeah, time consuming. And also, like, emotionally difficult. (P18) So there are a lot of tension like I do not do specific mommy posts, but like there's so lots of attention being drawn to my kids, which what doesn't make you comfortable, you get judged on different things or people know your name your kids names. Very awkward, especially me being a private person. And like in the US, someone can search your name, and your address will pop up. (P25)
Temporal	So when I'm on vacation, I feel it, it's too much pressure, taking [recording] the content and also sharing. So, I usually when I'm in the, when I'm traveling, I put limited number of a story maybe one or two or just random things that like a daily like morning coffee... But yeah, usually I'll do the story about the travel after I came back. (P24) I'm always [on], never disconnect. I think people uninstall your audience, people that follow you. They don't understand or they don't want to see you disappear for a short period or long period of time. Because for them you live on their phone. If you for a week doesn't know what's going on, where is he? What is he doing? Right? So they want to see what's going on, on a regular basis. That's why they follow you. That's why they want to see what is the new project? What is your new painting? What is your personal life? So if they see a long period of absence, they will lose their interest in you slowly? (P17)
Monetary	It [not hiring support] is very much related to personal branding, because you know, I don't trust people, when you hire people, they just want to do their job and go home. When I'm doing it myself, it's me, it's me, you know, when they, if they do a low quality job, and people won't say oh, it's the employee of a Brambleberry they say this is Ebrin. So it hurts your personal brand (P17) My thing has always been you don't have to spend crazy amounts of money to find things that like, speak to you or also just like dressing in a way that feels authentic to yourself and not feeling like you need to be following trends. And I think

	that, that still tracks it's a little bit more complicated now that I have a following. And there are like actual brands that want me to like, represent them in a in a way and so I've like, had to kind of try to navigate that in a way that like most of what I am doing is still like secondhand but then like adding in companies that I think are worth supporting... I definitely wouldn't want them [the hired support] to be answering DMS I think that that's very in genuine if it was like a foundation or something like a an actual organization...I would want the communication to still be like holistic and like from me alone. (P50)
Authenticity Paradox	If you wanna look at it ethically it's always better to come up, show up as your authentic self and like, show different parts of your life and yourself. But it's kind of a– on social media and having thousands and thousands, and for some other people, like millions of people following you, it could be hurtful for that person who is running that platform because it makes you really vulnerable (P38) People like to follow your– they always interested more in your personal life than your professional life. I think like whenever I post something personal, for example of my son, it gets more likes and more comments. But I don't like to do that for just gaining followers, like it's not the right way for me, not the right direction for me to go. (P33) I think people want to know more about my personal life, people would like to know, like what I do on my normal every day, or like, where I'm where I'm going, but I just feel more safe if it's not on Instagram, because there's so many people I can I can see. Yeah, I keep my personal life very private to me (P18) as social media grows, and especially with the advent of reality TV, that aspect of reality, reality is a big part of your authenticity. And it actually it's very interesting because it it clashes with my middle eastern sensibilities sometimes with Middle Eastern culture. One of the things that is very important is our privacy, keeping things very private, sometimes to the point where it's secretive, sometimes to the point where it's, it feels like we're hiding it, or we're being deceitful about it, rather than just keeping it private. And yet

	with the pop culture trends, especially in the Western world, it's all about being very transparent and revealing, and at least revealing in it in a very exciting and sometimes dramatic way. And so there is a clash that happens. (P43)
In-Vitro practices	I was very relatable to many women, and it was super authentic. Like, there was no, there was no fakeness...Um, I definitely think it [the person people saw on instagram] was a persona. I also used a different name. I only use my real name now. So for the past 10 years, everybody has known me under a different name...Um, so it was a persona because it wasn't even my real name. And it's only one element like, in my real life, do I change my outfit– my clothes into 15 Different glamorous outfits a day? No! you know, is just only one element of my life for me, because I did share a lot...But only like half of it or something. I don't know, because I'm actually a shy person. But when you look at that, it'd be like No, she's not she's like so extroverted. So I think every human we have layers, right? Like an onion. And so there's just so much more to us than anybody could ever even share on social media kind of thing. So but I definitely think it was more like a persona. (P16) So what is me and how do I want to show that and how much do I want to show that? Because I'm not the creator that goes on my stories and starts crying...that's not me...I'm very mindful of it. So like, I'm not like a super oversharer. I don't think people need to know the nitty gritty, but at the same time, like, show some of that stuff because it's relatable. But like, there's certain things that, like, I just don't think need to be shared. And it goes back to that brand. Does it align with the message or like how I want to be perceived..... And unless I turn comments off, anyone can tell you what they want. And that's unhealthy...Yes, some people have thicker skin, but like, you're opening that door to people that give you a message, whether you want that or not, you're going to get it. And that can be harmful. So when you're sharing certain things like that, also, then create dialog. So do you want the dialog around, like, certain things, or is this something that you really want to hear other people's opinions on or would you rather just not? (P7) I think we were too vulnerable in that time in the last year, we were just way too vulnerable and we just didn't want to even give that much because like what if what if the feedback is

	bad? You know, it was almost like to that point of feeling where you're going to like break. So, like, we just needed to keep it calm [and didn't share content during that period]. But now we're just-- we've worked so hard individually and with each other, like in this last five, six months that we're just ready... Like, why am I going in trying to be this vulnerable person, creating art when I don't even like what I'm doing right now? You know? (P6) I have a persona, which isn't that much different, but it's not the whole picture of me. So for example, Instagram, I'm kind of emotionless as robot time, the robot like person who is very logical and just goes with the flow. And, but in the, in the real life, well, it's a little different. So and I can say that because when the people see me in real life, I can see that oh, I didn't expect you to be like that. We thought that you're very restricted, very, you know, kind of sometimes aggressive, because I write a very, you know, dedicated and very strong words, I use it, but when I'm with them, personally, it's very open and very, you know, friendly. So it's something that I prefer it on social media because it helps me to kind of block the negative people so they don't dare to say something just because they want to, you know, hurt your image on social media said Something by time I developed and to, to show some, some are stronger than what I am outside. (P45) I think I'm similar. I've had several people recently tell me that like that like I'm a goofball. And you wouldn't think that from from like, my Instagram page, it's actually funny you asked that question like three literally three different people said that unprompted to me, probably in the last two weeks. So there's probably like a goofiness that like my close friends are aware of that like some random person that follows me on Instagram wouldn't be but outside of that, like I think I'm pretty similar...I think that like so much of my work dear deals with serious stuff. I probably over index on like, seriousness, that and I don't and like this also goes back to what we were talking about earlier in terms of like capturing personal moments. Like, I don't post every time I'm like, in the club, or like, at a party or at dinner and like, that's often so like it I'm cutting out a large portion of my life that, that I would give people the impression that it's just never happening. (P49)

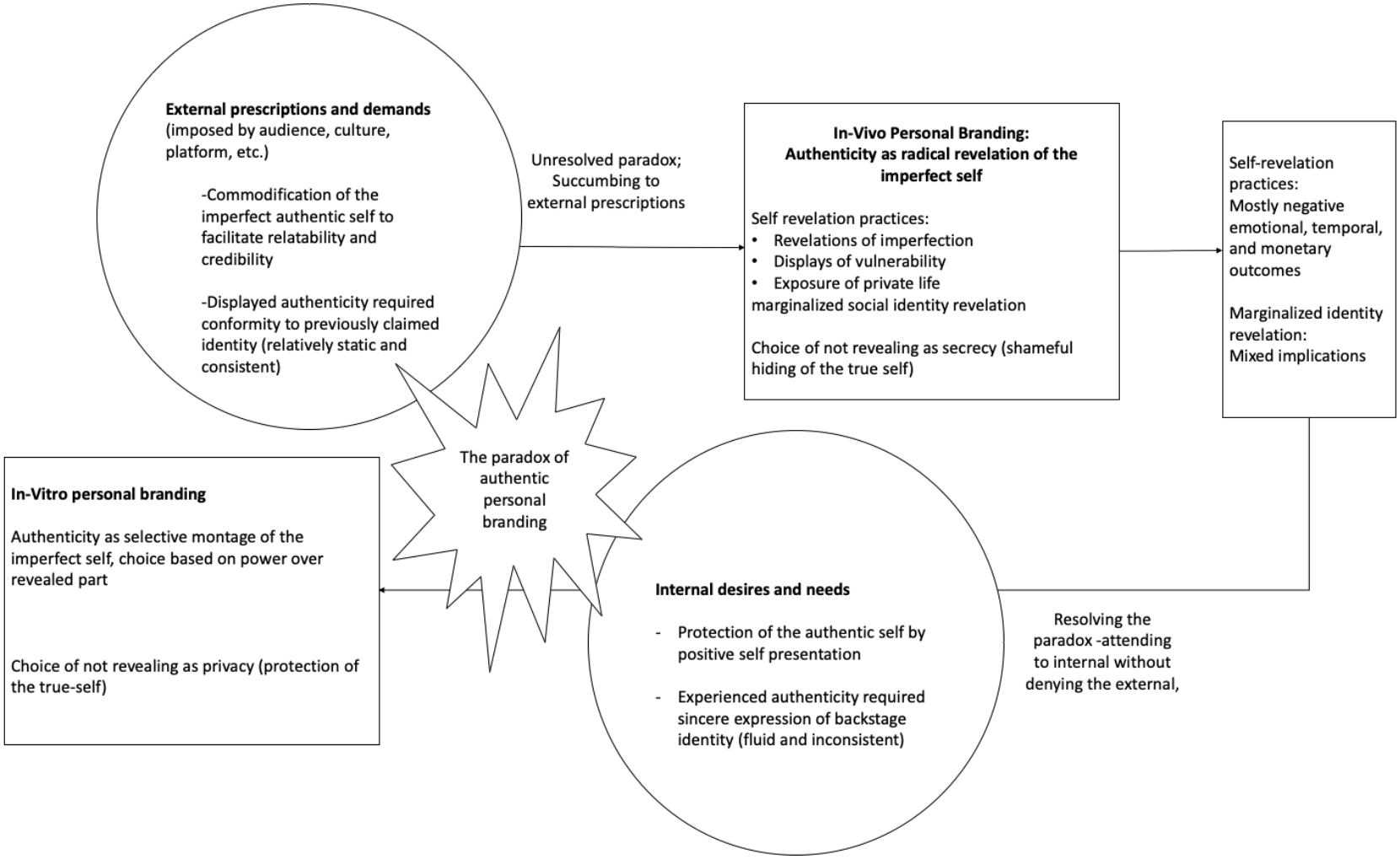

Figure 5- Process Model of Resolving the Authenticity Paradox

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5. CONCLUSION

To understand how and why workers might (choose to) constrain their own autonomy in the context of platform work, this thesis (1) reviewed and integrated organizational research that explores mechanisms of autonomy paradox from multiple streams of research, namely work and technology use, cultural control, identity management, and platform control, (2) examined how persuasively designed evaluative metrics provided by digital platforms affect workers' subjectivity and autonomy, and (3) how workers navigate the interaction of externally prescribed authenticity with the internal desire to reveal or hide their authentic self.

In Chapter 2, I reviewed and integrated the organizational research to date on the autonomy paradox. Scholarship on the interplay between autonomy and self-imposed constraints is scattered across multiple interconnected streams of research including work research on work and technology, identity management, and cultural control. While these streams of research differ in many aspects, this chapter shows that they are connected by their common interest in understanding the situated nature of freedom and autonomy; situatedness within cultural, social, and material structures. A large body of organizational literature is concerned with individuals' propensity to conformity to collective social norms or cultural ideals. Identity management scholars are concerned with organizations' efforts aimed at mobilizing workers' propensity to pursue cultural ideals, and cultural control studies view this propensity to conform to social norms as an

explanation for why workers constrain their own autonomy. Also concerned with social norms, albeit in tandem with technological structure, is a stream of work and technology that examines sociomaterial forces in shaping patterns of technology use at work.

This chapter contributes to the literature on the autonomy paradox by offering future directions for expanding our understanding of autonomy and non-coercive control in the context of digitally mediated work. Studies of technology use at work and research concerned with individuals' propensity to conformity are similar in that they both emphasize the role of social structure in shaping individual behavior, but differ in two main ways which provide learning and advancement opportunities for both areas. Unlike the work and technology research, identity management and cultural control studies have not considered the role of material structure in constraining workers' autonomy. Doing so could offer insights on how organizations/digital platforms might direct workers' behavior by manipulating the structure while appearing non-coercive. Scholarship on technology use at work can advance by moving beyond social and material structures to include cultural ideals and attend to identity pursuits. Doing so could offer insights into the possibility that meanings signaled by material features of technology shape patterns of technology use if they appeal to workers' identity pursuits.

In Chapter 3, I examined how persuasively designed evaluative metrics designed affect workers' self-conceptions and autonomy through an inductive field study of Instagram content creators. Based on the findings, I developed a process of model of sustaining hope labor through identity baiting. This model explicates the recursive

process between the temporary affirmation of a desired identity derived from evaluative metrics and workers' engagement in sustained hope labor.

This model contributes to our understanding of the autonomy paradox in the context of platform work in three main ways. First, by documenting how a technological feature provided by a digital platform can connect with and mobilize workers' subjectivities, this study responds to Chapter 2's suggestion on connecting workers' identity pursuits and patterns of technology use by exploring the meanings signaled by material features of technology. Second, by revealing the compulsivity embedded in the process of identity biting, this chapter contributes to the limited number of studies that move beyond collective explanations of autonomy paradox to consider individual unreflective and habitual patterns of work (Lupu & Empson, 2015; Michel, 2011). This chapter specifically advances this line of work by adding a novel insight into the role of technology design in perpetuating such habitual behavior. Third, by showing that desired possible selves animate the autonomy paradox, this research departs from the current literature on identity control that focuses on unifying identity management practices (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998). In doing so, it contributes to emerging scholarship on mobilizing preferred and individuated (rather than prescribed and collective) to control workers (Anteby, 2008).

In Chapter 4, I investigated how people navigate the intersection of externally demanded (prescribed) authenticity in the discourse of personal branding with their internal desire for revealing or hiding the authentic self. Based on the findings from this

study I developed a process model of how people navigate the tension between prescribed authenticity, which demands radical self-revelation and conformity to previously claimed identity, and their internal need for authentic self-expression, which is balanced by strategic choices between needs for self-revelation and image management and is inconsistent over time.

This chapter advances our understanding of the autonomy paradox in platform work in three main ways. First, similar to Chapter 2, this research departs from the current literature that examines the intersection of divergent individual desires and collective unifying norms. Second, by showing that despite encouraging difference and individuation, the practices to fulfill the prescription of authenticity ironically restricted workers' autonomy and did not fully translate into fulfilling the individual desires for authenticity, this chapter contributes to scholarship on desired identity and control (Anteby, 2008). Specifically, this chapter complicates the assumption that practices involved in mobilizing preferred identities align with workers' needs and desires for enacting a preferred identity. Third, by demonstrating how supposedly neutral features of technology combine with and mobilize cultural discourses to direct workers' behavior, this chapter offers new insight for understanding the autonomy paradox on platform work.

Since the great recession in 2008, the platform economy, characterized by digitally mediated independent work, has experienced exponential growth (Kenney &

Zysman, 2016; OECD, 2019). Its market value, an estimated 7 trillion USD in 2018, is projected to expand to approximately 60 trillion USD by 2025 (Fijneman et al., 2018).

This growth is likely to accelerate in the aftermath of the pandemic as more workers lose employment and are pushed into self-employment (Statistics Canada, 2020)

and more online gigs become available (Umar et al., 2021). Digital platforms have now entered a wide array of markets: professional freelance services and knowledge work (e.g., UpWork, Freelancer); offline services such as ride-hailing, food delivery, and care work (e.g., Uber, DoorDash); micro-tasking (e.g., Taskrabbit); and cultural production (e.g., Instagram, YouTube). Additionally, the use of choice architecture and persuasive technology design is not limited to digital platforms; organizations increasingly rely on technology design to direct and manage workers (Kim, 2018).

More than one-third (36%) of all workers in the United States engage in independent work (Gallup, 2018). To secure future work, these workers need to engage in the labor of self-presentation (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018). Even those employed by organizations are increasingly invited to make themselves findable online and manage their social media presence. As more workers come to depend on digital technologies to perform their work and as more professions enter the platform economy, understanding and measuring the impact of technology on workers' agency in performing their work becomes essential for ensuring human rights.

Future Research Directions - Emerging Questions to Consider

While the empirical studies in this dissertation deepen our understanding of the situatedness of autonomy in the absence of a clear collective that demands assimilation, the theoretical models proposed remain the product of engaging with one setting. Although the population studied comprises a variety of professions, the research is still limited to the context of Instagram and its particular technological features. Future research, therefore, is needed to refine and test the models developed in other settings. I would expect the theoretical models to generalize to other work contexts that promise and encourage self-actualization, individuality, passion, and creativity at work — especially if those settings require a high level of self-promotion or 'putting oneself out there', and have a jackpot system of success (Duffy, 2017) in which opportunities for identity enactment are rare and only a small percentage of people 'make it'. For example, consider the highly sought-after and idealized 'good jobs' in academia, the hope required on the road to securing one that might be sustained by the number of citations or other temporary affirmations, and the labor that goes into putting oneself out there without appearing inauthentic, and the idealized autonomy and authenticity after securing tenure. Or consider all the dream jobs in arts, finance, or technology and all the striving artists and aspiring underpaid interns who labor in exchange for hope and visibility.

The theories developed in this dissertation should be considered in light of several limitations and boundary conditions that provide opportunities for future research. First, because the people I interviewed were from heterogenous occupations, I was unable to make comparisons about the degree of resistance to dominant discourses between

different occupational groups. We know from past research, however, that people sometimes draw on resources from their occupational norms to resist the common discourses of independent work (Vallas & Christin, 2017). Future research, therefore, might examine the proposed theoretical models in relation to occupational norms by specifically focusing on two occupations with strong and weak cultural norms.

Another fruitful avenue of research that I did not address in this dissertation is the role of gender and gendered occupations in personal branding on social media. My data points to the possibility that external pressures on workers on social media might be gendered. Some of the women I interviewed talked about how sexualizing themselves in their content on social media helped their metrics grow. "The more I post shirtless, the more money I make, I'm like alright [laughter], sorry I have to do this, I look like a tool, but that's what you guys want and that's what translates [into sales]", said a fitness creator. She continued to explain how her physical attractiveness, rather than her skills and expertise as a trainer, help her business on Instagram:

> And also, like, take care of, like, kind of curate my look to be marketable, which is kind of crazy. But that really helped me this past year. I got like 10 percent hotter and... people just love that. I was like doing the same exact thing. But I got botax, I got my lips done and I bleached my hair and then it went pshew [showing growth with a hand gesture] ... and I was ike God damn it society [laughter] (P2).

The external requests, therefore, went beyond commitment and devotion (Reid, 2015), to include workers' bodies. While people in other professions such as modeling (Mears, 2011) and sex work (Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021) do participate in objectifying

their bodies, the objectification is weaved into the norms of their profession. In my interviews, however, people from different occupations such as professional dance (P15), fashion design (P19), life coaching (P1), and landscape photography (P24), felt pressured to objectify and sexualize themselves. The question is how external pressures for objectifying one's body is experienced, enacted, and resisted in professions that are not marked by the objectification of the body. Are these pressures gendered? If so, how do such gendered pressures contribute to gender inequality at work? Focusing on one profession and exploring how people from different genders experience and navigate the pressure to objectify their bodies could shed light on this question. Additionally, it is important to understand what the long-term consequences of complying with these pressures are. If these pressures are gendered, do they help or hinder the advancement of women in their careers over the long term? Given that the ideal images of professional work are masculine (Reid, 2015), how does making one's gender and sexuality salient affect professional women's career advancement over time? A longitudinal study of people's career trajectories is needed to respond to this question.

Additionally, missing from this dissertation is the perspective of platform owners and designers. While this thesis strived to attend to the intentions and goals of platform owners and designers by analyzing the material features of the platform and the discursive resources made available to workers by the platform, interviewing the designers and strategists that direct workers through design practices and algorithms could add another layer of richness to our understanding of autonomy and control on

digital platforms. We know from the research on work and technology that technology is co-constructed by workers and designers (Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski, 1992). Having field access and being able to interview the members of the design and strategy teams of the platform, observe the process of evolution of technological features in response to workers' practices, and analyze performance data available to platforms could advance our understanding of the process of co-construction of technological features on platforms and its outcomes for workers and platforms.

While common in academic scholarship on platform work, not having access to the perspective of platform owners and designers is an unfortunate limitation as it prevents possible constructive conversations that could benefit both the workers and platforms. While on the surface, the practices promoted by the material features increased the work time spent on the platform, they did not necessarily help the productivity or creativity of the workers. Thus, it is possible that the design features of the platform do not help the objectives of the platform in a sustainable way. This speculation might especially be worth attention as Instagram increasingly struggles to compete with other social media platforms; earlier this year the platform saw a drop in daily user growth for the first time in its history, resulting in 25% shares fall for the mother company Meta (Rushe & Milmo, 2022). The people I interviewed spent a lot of time and psychological energy on broadcasting their life to establish their authenticity and obsessively monitoring their metrics, taking away from their creative process of content creation. Many succumbed to the allure of the numbers and engaged in creating content that, ironically,

was not authentic to them but garnered higher metrics. This popularity game often included commodification of their private lives and sometimes their body and costed many to give up on their original vision or intention. Is it possible that pushing creators to create popular content is not a sustainable strategy for Instagram in terms of growing the number of content consumers over time? Is it possible that designing a user interface that cultivates mindfulness rather than compulsivity, and grounded-ness rather than hunger for external validation, would help both the creators and the platform? Is the ethos of 'doing well by doing good', documented in organizational work (Wang and Hacket, 2016), applicable in the context of platform work as well? Answering these questions requires coming together of academics and practitioners. Ambitious as it might be, therefore, my sincere hope is that this dissertation sparks a conversation between practice and organizational scholarship on platform work.

In sum, the three essays in this thesis are connected through their concern with seemingly self-imposed constraints despite freedom from control. While Sartre's ideology of not wanting to accept the responsibilities of being 'condemned' to freedom might hold in other contexts, this thesis suggests that the seemingly self-imposed restrictions on freedom in platform work are not totally self-imposed. The said constraints are rooted in the self but are not always reflectively 'chosen' by the self, rather, they are structured within the psychological and biological limitations of the human self. As advanced technologies develop more intelligence to learn and accumulate knowledge about the irrationalities of human behavior, technology owners accumulate power in behavior

direction through technology design. Control, therefore, need not be coercive or normalizing, so long as it is embodied within the choice architecture of material features of technology.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol (version 1)

Part A. Introduction

Introductions, review Consent form.

Part B. Career

1) Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself? How would you refer to your activity on Instagram (or what is your preferred job title)? (e.g., content creator, artist, influencer)

2) Could you walk me through your work history to date, from when you left school (year graduated), to the present?

a) What were your career aspirations when you started your Instagram account?
b) What are your career aspirations now?
c) If they have changed, why?
d) Is there any kind of professional future that you dislike to have?
e) How do you feel about working at a 9-5 job?
f) Why this particular job?
g) Why this particular platform?

3) How did you enter the industry?

a) How did you feel about it then? How do you feel about it now? If changed, why?

4) How typical has your experience been relative to others in your field?

5) Where do you see yourself in 10 years? If not here, why?

6) You mentioned that you are a [their preferred job title]? I would like to know about all the tasks that are involved in this job.

a) How did you learn to do each of these tasks?

Part C. Time Use

7) How do you organize your days and work activities?

a) Do you plan your work in advance? And do your days go according to the plan?
b) Do you have a routine?
c) Do you have a written plan or schedule for your work?

8) How many hours did you work yesterday? As a guideline, could you talk me through your day, hour by hour, starting with when you woke up?

a) Time woke up
b) First hour
c) … etc., hour by hour.
d) Time went to bed

9) How does your schedule look like on a typical workweek?

a) How many hours?
b) How many days?
c) Do you work on the weekends?
d) How much time do you spend on

10) How much freedom you have in choosing and planning your own schedule and how much you want to work?
a) Can you think of any factors that make restrict this freedom?

11) Do you take breaks from work? If no, why not?
12) How much time/week do you spend on the Instagram app? How do you keep track of that time?

Part D. Perception of Technology
13) If I were someone who never used Instagram, how would you describe the app? When you open it up what is the first thing you do, and what are the steps you follow usually? What do you look at?
14) You've been talking about how you use Instagram and you've mentioned some of the specific features that you use to carry out your work. I'm interested in getting a list of all the different features that Instagram offers on the creator version that are not on offered on the basic account, or at least the ones you used since you started your account. This might take a little time, but I'd like to know all the different features, what you would call them.
a) Are these features fixed across time or do they change often?
b) What are some examples of recent changes?

15) Now I want to ask a slightly different question. I'm going to go through the list of technology features that you and other informants mentioned, and I would like you to give me an explanation of what the feature is, how it is used, and how it helps your work, if at all.
a) Insights
b) Direct message sorting
c) Comment sorting
d) Action Button
e) Shop feature
f) Sharing links
g) Instagram algorithm
h) Hidden likes
i) etc. (Any other feature that they mention)

Part D. Perception of the Industry
16) Imagine that you had chance to talk to Instagram CEO Kevin, what would you tell him?
a) If they told you that they are going to implement five three suggestions you make, what would those suggestions be?

b) If you were given a chance to redesign the platform, would you change anything? How much power do you think you have in changing the design of the platform?

17) What are the things that you like about being a [their job title]? What are the challenges that you face in your day to day work? And how do you overcome them?
18) If you were to give someone advice about how to become successful on Instagram, what would that advice be?

a) Is there a particular person who you look up to or view as very successful? Why is this person successful? Have you ever tried to reach out to them?
b) What makes you feel successful at your job?
c) Is it common in this profession for people to compare themselves with others? Do you compare yourself with others?

19) I've learned from other creators/from reading the online forums that they frequently look at "Insights". Is paying attention to these numbers common among creators?

a) What are the different kinds of insights that Instagram shares with you?
b) How important are they?
c) How do they make you feel?

20) Does this work affect people's mental health in any way?
21) How important your job is to your sense of self?

Part C. Social Aspects of the Work

22) Who are all the people that you communicate with at work? (e.g., audience, other Instagrammers, brands, etc.)

a) What tools do you use to communicate with them? (e.g., email, telephone, DM, etc.)
b) What kind of conversations do you have with them?
c) What are their expectations from you?

23) Do you ever connect with other [Instagrammers/job title]? What is an example of a conversation you recently had with another [Instagrammers/job title]?
24) How do you refer to the people who follow you?

a) Do you ever interact with them?
b) How? How often?
c) How does it make you feel?
d) What kind of direct messages do you usually receive from your [followers/their preferred word]?

25) Have you ever heard of the creators' account or the creators' blog? What are they for? Do you follow them?
26) I came across the word "Instagram community" a lot on the Instagram website. Does being a part of Instagram feel like being a part of a community for you?
27) What are the ways that a creator can use to generate income?

a) How do people who want to work with you contact you? And what do they say?

b) Imagine that you want to work with a brand that you like and you want to reach out to them, how would you start the conversation?

28) How would your life be different/similar to now if you won a $100 million?

29) Demographic Questions
a) How old are you?
b) Which of these income brackets do you fit in: less than $20,000, $20,000 to $40,000, $40,000 to $60,000, $60,000 to $80,000, $80,000 to $100,000, $100,000 or more, or I don't know, or I'd prefer not to answer.
c) What is your gender?
d) What is your ethnicity?
e) What is your relationship status?

Part G. Wrap up
30) if you were conducting this study, is there anything you would ask that I haven't?
31) Would you mind if I contacted you again for a quick follow-up?
32) We are looking for more people to participate in the study. If you know of anyone who might be interested in participating would you be willing to pass along my name and contact information, and the email invitation you received from me? Could you also share their public Instagram ID with me? Please note that there is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information.

Interview Protocol (Version 2)

Part A. Introduction
Introductions, review Consent form.
Part B. Career
1) Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself?
2) Could you walk me through your work history to date, from when you left school (year graduated), to the present?
a) What were your career aspirations when you started your Instagram account?
b) What are your career aspirations now?
c) If they have changed, why?
d) Is there any kind of professional future that you dislike to have?
e) How do you feel about working at a 9-5 job?
f) Why this particular job?
g) Why this particular platform?
5) Where do you see yourself in 10 years? If not here, why?
6) You mentioned that you are a [their preferred job title]? I would like to know about all the tasks that are involved in this job.
a) How did you learn to do each of these tasks?
7) In my previous interviews, some people talked about personal branding. Does that word mean anything to you?

Part C. Time Use

8) How do you organize your days and work activities?

a) Do you plan your work in advance? And do your days go according to the plan?

b) Do you have a routine?

c) Do you have a written plan or schedule for your work?

9) How many hours did you work yesterday? As a guideline, could you talk me through your day, hour by hour, starting with when you woke up?

a) Time woke up

b) First hour

c) … etc., hour by hour.

d) Time went to bed

10) How much freedom you have in choosing and planning your own schedule and how much you want to work?

a) Can you think of any factors that make restrict this freedom?

11) Do you take breaks from work? If no, why not?

12) How much time/week do you spend on the Instagram app? How do you keep track of that time?

Part D. Perception of Technology

13) If I were someone who never used Instagram, how would you describe the app? When you open it up what is the first thing you do, and what are the steps you follow usually? What do you look at?

Part D. Perception of the Industry

14) Imagine that you had chance to talk to Instagram CEO Kevin, what would you tell him?

a) If they told you that they are going to implement five three suggestions you make, what would those suggestions be?

b) If you were given a chance to redesign the platform, would you change anything? How much power do you think you have in changing the design of the platform?

16) What are the things that you like about being a [their job title]? What are the challenges that you face in your day to day work? And how do you overcome them?

17) If you were to give someone advice about how to become successful on Instagram, what would that advice be?

a) Is there a particular person who you look up to or view as very successful? Why is this person successful? Have you ever tried to reach out to them?

b) What makes you feel successful at your job?

c) Is it common in this profession for people to compare themselves with others? Do you compare yourself with others?

18) I've learned from other creators/from reading the online forums that they frequently look at "Insights". Is paying attention to these numbers common among creators?

a) What are the different kinds of insights that Instagram shares with you?

b) How important are they?

c) How do they make you feel?

19) Does this work affect people's mental health in any way?

20) How important your job is to your sense of self?

Part C. Social Aspects of the Work

21) Who are all the people that you communicate with at work? (e.g., audience, other Instagrammers, brands, etc.)

a) What tools do you use to communicate with them? (e.g., email, telephone, DM, etc.)

b) What kind of conversations do you have with them?

c) What are their expectations from you?

22) Do you ever connect with other [Instagrammers/job title]? What is an example of a conversation you recently had with another [Instagrammers/job title]?

23) How do you refer to the people who follow you?

a) Do you ever interact with them?

b) How? How often?

c) How does it make you feel?

d) What kind of direct messages do you usually receive from your [followers/their preferred word]?

24) Have you ever heard of the creators' account or the creators' blog? What are they for? Do you follow them?

25) How would your life be different/similar to now if you won a $100 million?

26) Demographic Questions

a) Which of these age brackets do you fit into? 18-25, 25-35, 35-45, 45-55, 55-65, 65 and above.

b) Which of these income brackets do you fit in: less than $20,000, $20,000 to $40,000, $40,000 to $60,000, $60,000 to $80,000, $80,000 to $100,000, $100,000 or more, or I don't know, or I'd prefer not to answer.

c) What gender do you identify with?

d) What ethnicity do you identify with?

e) What is your relationship status?

Part G. Wrap up

27) if you were conducting this study, is there anything you would ask that I haven't?

28) Would you mind if I contacted you again for a quick follow-up?

29) We are looking for more people to participate in the study. If you know of anyone who might be interested in participating would you be willing to pass along my name and contact information, and the email invitation you received from me? Could you also share their public Instagram ID with me? Please note that there is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information.

Interview Protocol (Version 3)

Introduction

Introductions, review Consent form.

1. Could you tell me a little bit about you, your work history, and your activity on Instagram?

2. What were your aspirations when you started out on Instagram?
3. What's your dream for your Instagram now?
4. How would you refer to yourself on your Instagram? Do you prefer the word influencer, content creator, or something else?
5. What are the things that you like about being an Instagram content creator (or their preferred label), and what are the things that you don't like?

Metrics

6. How do you evaluate your success on Instagram?
7. What do you do after you share a post?
8. How important are numbers (likes, comments) for you?
9. What was a post that had the highest number of reach?
    a. How did it make you feel?
10. Now could you tell me about a time that a post didn't do so well?
    a. How did it make you feel?
11. How many times do you check the insights after you share a post?

Personal Branding

12. Does personal branding mean anything to you?
    a. What's your personal brand?
    b. What's your advice about creating a personal brand for someone who's just starting out?
    c. How did you first learn about personal branding?
    d. Do you need to share your personal life to create a personal brand?

Time Use

13. In a given week, on average, how much time do you spend working on Instagram?
    a. Is it intentional or compulsive?
    b. Do you work on the weekends?
    c. Do you ever take breaks from Instagram (e.g., weekends, vacations)?
14. How do you organize your days and work activities?
    a. Do you plan your work in advance? And do your days go according to the plan?
    b. Do you have a routine?

Identity

15. Has your work on Instagram connected you in any way to a community that you belong to, that you would have otherwise wouldn't have access to?
16. What's your ideal professional future?
    a. Is there any kind of professional future that you do not wish to have?
    b. How do you feel about having a 9-5 job?
17. How different or similar are you to the image that your audience see on your Instagram?
18. Do you have a persona or do you show your authentic self on Instagram?
19. How important is your work on Instagram to your sense of self?
20. Would you still continue your work on Instagram if you won a $100 million?
    a. What would you would and wouldn't change about it?
    b. Would you hire people if you had the financial means to do so?

Social Aspects of Work

21. Are you in contact with other creators on a regular basis?

    a. What kind of conversations do you have?
22. Has your work on Instagram affected your personal relationships/social life in anyway?
23. Do you follow other creators?
    a. Do you ever compare yourself with them?
24. Do you follow Instagram Creators account?

Technology

25. What are the features of Instagram that you like/dislike. Why?
26. What's the difference between reels, posts, stories, and lives?
27. What would you change about Instagram?
    a. What do you think about its algorithm?

Demographic Questions

28. Which of these age brackets do you fit into? 18-25, 25-35, 35-45, 45-55, 55-65, 65 and above.

29. Which of these income brackets do you fit in: less than $20,000, $20,000 to $40,000, $40,000 to $60,000, $60,000 to $80,000, $80,000 to $100,000, $100,000 or more, or I don't know, or I'd prefer not to answer.

30. What gender do you identify with?
31. What ethnicity do you identify with?
32. Where do you live (city, country)?

Wrap up

33. If you were conducting this study, is there anything you would ask that I haven't?
34. We are looking for more people to participate in the study. If you know of anyone who might be interested in participating would you be willing to pass along my name and contact information, and the email invitation you received from me? Could you also share their public Instagram ID with me? Please note that there is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information.