



'Don't forget to like, share and subscribe': Digital autpreneurs in a neoliberal world



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ABSTRACT

We seek to move beyond the exalted figure of the heroic entrepreneur that predominates the study of entrepreneurship; to take a less agentic view of entrepreneurship; to tell stories rarely told, and to demonstrate how historical and technocultural forces are as instrumental in directing entrepreneurial activity as individual motivations. We enlist the work of Foucault and others, in conjunction with netnographic fieldwork that focuses on an assemblage of young YouTubers striving to become what we call autpreneurs. We reveal how they internalize a structure of feeling, divined from neoliberal ideology that shapes their everyday affairs. We find that three main wellsprings – the dynamics of competition, the creativity dispositif, and technologies of the self – detrimentally affect the quality of their lives and collectively institute a 'cruel optimism' which promises much but delivers little. We conclude with some thoughts on the ramifications of our work for the study of entrepreneurship.

1. Introduction

Although much criticized (see Armstrong, 2005; Jones & Spicer, 2009; Ogbor, 2000; Tedmanson, Verduijn, Essers, & Gartner, 2012) Schumpeter's (1976) fabled and romantic notion of the heroic entrepreneur remains firmly embedded in entrepreneurial discourse (Anderson & Warren, 2011; Bridge, 2010; Gartner, 1988; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2017; Te Velde, 2004). Hjorth and Steyaert (2004) go so far as to contend that the literary genre that best encapsulates the entire field of entrepreneurship is that of "heroic drama". Successful entrepreneurs, as protagonists in these dramas are invariably portrayed as hardworking, risk-taking, exceptionally talented and entirely praiseworthy. Often hailed as folk heroes who face severe adversity, it is only – as Joseph Campbell (2004, p. 54) eloquently writes in his seminal treatise on heroism – through "titanic effort" that they "succeed in building an empire of renown". One ardent advocate of the "entrepreneur as hero" trope even asserts, with no hint of irony, that entrepreneurs "are every bit as bold and daring as the heroes who fought dragons or overcame evil" (Allen, 2009, p. 38).

Given the enshrined position of entrepreneurs in society, it is hardly surprising that to date, except for a small diffused body of work on entrepreneurial precarity that occurs on the perimeters of the field (see Heidkamp & Kergel, 2017; Monahan & Fisher, 2015), relatively little

research addresses the potential downsides of following an entrepreneurial path. The paucity of research on this topic might simply be blamed on society's general propensity to value winners rather than losers (Sandage, 2005). After all, championing the metaphor of the entrepreneur as an optimistic agent of forward movement and ever-upward growth, does not naturally equate with pessimistic navel-gazing (Boutillier & Uzunidis, 2013). In any case, if captains of industry, corporate shamans, business titans, wealth creators and all the other top-flight fellows are as indomitable as the myth holds, then negativity need never be countenanced. Consequently, studies of entrepreneurship are perennially positive and overtly optimistic (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017). Olaison and Sørensen (2014, p. 208) succinctly summarize the consequence of this tendency, "researchers have failed to understand entrepreneurship as a struggle with failure".

In addressing this gap in the literature, this paper is primarily concerned with the problem of thinking beyond the exalted figure of the fully autonomous, agentic entrepreneur. To do so we break new ground by invoking a Foucauldian theoretical approach that will be fully defined and explained later in the paper. Utilizing this approach allows us to illustrate how the imperatives of the neoliberal world shape and govern how entrepreneurs think and act. This viewpoint stands in contradistinction to extant entrepreneurial theory. Among other thinkers from the critical strand of entrepreneurial studies, we believe that

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current theory over-emphasizes the self-determined motivations and behaviors of individuals and seriously underplays ‘the structure of feeling’ that underpins entrepreneurial activity (Down, 2010; Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004; Nodoushani & Nodoushani, 1999; Ogbor, 2000; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2006).

We also introduce the notion of ‘autopreneurs’ to describe the enterprising YouTubers who form the representative context of this study. This portmanteau of the terms ‘autobiographical’ and ‘entrepreneur’ succinctly conveys their intensely enterprising and confessional tendencies. Always seemingly groomed for a video-shoot or an impromptu selfie, this generation is inherently fascinated by the shifting contours of its own selfhood. Displaying filtered, airbrushed, posed and preening bodies – refracted, reflected and distorted by technology – is commonplace (Rettberg, 2014). Urged on by the neoliberal ethic, these excessively personal, intimate and confessional YouTubers, who ironically often profess to be naturally introverted, seem increasingly compelled to flaunt themselves as monetizable brands (Duffy, 2017).

The paper opens by further elaborating on the, still unfolding, technocultural context of our study and by explaining its sociohistoric importance in the contemporary moment. It continues by articulating both the Foucauldian theoretical framework that we utilize and by detailing our netnographic and ethnographic approach. In the findings proper, we demonstrate how autopreneurs internalize ‘a structure of feeling’, divined from neoliberal ideology, that shapes, directs and governs their everyday affairs. We find that three main wellsprings – the *dynamics of competition*, the *creativity dispositif*, and *technologies of the self* – detrimentally affect the quality of their lives and collectively institute a ‘cruel optimism’ which promises much but delivers little (Berlant, 2011). We conclude with some thoughts on the ramifications of our work for the study of entrepreneurship.

2. Background information

There is no disputing the universality of the entrepreneurial figure as an emblem of contemporary success (Bröckling, 2016; Marttila, 2013). YouTubers are a strident group of autopreneurs, so called for the autobiographical and candid bent of their enterprise. They are particularly indoctrinated in this mindset. As careful curators of the intimate happenings in their lives and recapitulation of this content for public consumption, their self-investment closely encapsulates what scholars variously designate as “an entrepreneurial DIY project” (Kelly, 2013, p. 14), “a company of one” (Lane, 2011, p. 61) and “Me Incorporated” (Bröckling, 2016, p. 20).

Certainly, their efforts to creatively grasp the ever-fleeting zeitgeist of the digital age are frequently lionized as shining examples of radical entrepreneurial endeavor (see Duffy, 2017; Weiss, 2014). According to stories in the press, many of the most successful boast six-figure incomes. Some are signed to talent agencies and are celebrities of some renown (McAlone, 2016). Many others, though, operate much further down the popularity hierarchy. At best, they are ‘micro-celebrities’ (Marwick, 2013), small timers who scrape a living or use their still-meagre earning to supplement a day job from which they long to escape. Many others are still scrambling, still dreaming of acquiring a significant following, of one day having bestowed upon them the coveted title of ‘digital influencer’. Essentially though, YouTubers, of all sorts, embrace the sociotechnical capabilities of the YouTube platform to effectively sell their brand of networked individualism and as such they are – whether they know it or not – the unrivalled manifestations of living, breathing neoliberal idealists.

YouTube is the world's third most popular website. It was started in 2005 to offer a means by which people, increasingly called vloggers, could upload, view and share their user-generated video clips with like-minded followers. In the early days it was a free-for-all with no copyright enforcement and no annoying adverts (Whu, 2016). It quickly garnered traction as the main cultural outpost of online video content, such that even Goliaths like Google could not depose it, hence why they

bought it for \$1.65 billion (Marwick, 2013). Videos of cute cats and dogs, domestic accidents and pranks, amateur and professional singers were common – and to an extent still are – but the site has, in recent years, been slowly transitioning into a fully-fledged network to rival the traditional providers of television entertainment (Ford, 2014). Some uploaders quickly realized that if a video clip garners attention, they could use its currency as a vehicle to promote themselves, and that is precisely what has happened in recent years. There are endless stories of how YouTube, along with other social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, has launched the careers of vlogging autopreneurs. To take one example, Chiara Ferragni, from a small town outside Milan, started her blog, ‘The Blonde Salad’ in 2009. Her coordinated social media drive on all the major social media platforms, which essentially document little more than her looking fabulous (Cochrane, 2016), has enabled her to launch a global brand that now sells everything from suitcases to stilettos and other high-fashion items. At the same time, what is less discussed is that while some YouTubers like Ferragni have been institutionalized and professionalized, Google's commercial reorganization of the platform has, as we will later explore, marginalized and pushed others aside (Burgess, 2013).

While they might revel in, what some would dub, dispiriting consumerism, when they endorse a brand their followers are sure to take note (Gannon & Prothero, 2016). It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the plethora of entrepreneurial activities that occur on YouTube, but it is perhaps worth expanding on the business model that sustains a section of the most prominent autopreneurs. Beauty and fashion vloggers like the quintessential Zoella – who is so famous that she has an officially-sanctioned emoticon by Twitter, not to mention a waxwork effigy in Madame Tussauds – are signed-up to international multi-channel network Style Haul and are managed by the talent agency, Gleam Futures (Woods, 2016). Together they contrive style tutorials and direct-to-camera monologues, all the while variously chatting about their lives, casually introducing products, doing fun collaborations with other YouTubers, and hosting Q&A sessions. Burgess and Green's (2009) excellent study of YouTube, for instance, contends that its ‘affective economy’ is built on participation, ‘parasocial’ interaction, and ‘authentic’ emotion. Certainly, since much of this activity is located in bedrooms, the whole enterprise is lent a certain aura of authenticity and intimacy that appeals to youthful audiences. These successful autopreneurs glean money from YouTube's AdSense campaign which pays \$2 per thousand views. In addition, big bucks are garnered by transferring their talent to television (Dredge, 2016), and by developing direct relationships with brands. This naturally suggests less independence-of-direction than the fans and followers of these channels would expect. To tackle this ambiguity, in 2014, the Advertising Standards Authority ruled that sponsored content in YouTube videos must be clearly marked as such in a video's title or description box. Naturally, most vloggers choose the less obtrusive description box.

3. Foucauldian neoliberal theory

3.1. Background

As we have seen, the entrepreneurial vein, that carries the economy's lifeblood, runs deep. It is underpinned by the ideology of neoliberalism, which has precipitated unprecedented cultural change by appealing to the values of “...individual freedom, creativity and hedonism” (Hewison, 2014, p. 21). The brilliance of capitalism, as Harvey (2010, p.160) notes, “...relies upon the instincts, enterprise and sometimes crazy ideas...of individual entrepreneurs operating in particular places and times.” This spirit of what is called ‘entrepreneurial subjectivity’ has come to constitute the reality of our individual ontological conditions (Peters, 2016; Scharff, 2016). Subjectivity refers to the way in which subjects or people, despite frequent assertions to the contrary, are not entirely free to create and re-create themselves at will

(Hall, 2004); they are always linked to externalities. The self is not, as Mansfield (2000, p. 3) asserts, “a separate and isolated entity, but one that operates at the intersection of general truths and shared principles,” and, we would add, ideologies. The notion of ‘entrepreneurial subjectivity’ derived from Foucault’s (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics* [...], refers to how the self is subject to neoliberal ideals such as: “self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals” (du Gay, 1996, p. 56). As Foucault famously elaborates, the neoliberal subject is “an entrepreneur of himself...being for himself his producer, being for himself his own capital, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.” (Smith, 2015, p. 52).

The term ‘neoliberalism’ was once deemed entirely positive, though its usage today has taken on a rather negative slant such that “virtually no one self-identifies as a neoliberal” (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009, p. 140). In the period between the first and second world wars the Freiberg School of German economists cast neoliberalism as a “moderate” humanistic alternative to the market-orientated philosophy of governance known as “classical [laissez-faire] liberalism” which had preceded it (pp. 139, 145). Currently there is no universally accepted definition of the term. Across the arts and humanities, numerous iterations of neoliberal theory can be discerned. Flew’s (2014) comprehensive audit of the literature suggests several alternative renderings. While warning against adopting the term as simply “an all-purpose denunciatory category”, or as a catchphrase that merely elucidates “the way things are”, he argues that perhaps the most theoretical value can be found in approaches that construe the term as “a dominant ideology of global capitalism” and as “a form of governmentality and hegemony” (p. 49). It is in respect of these latter iterations that we draw sustenance for this project.

3.2. Dynamic of competition

Turning specifically to Foucault (2008) while his work can be intellectually challenging, it does provide relatively perspicuous theoretical takeaways which when read closely, in conjunction with subsequent elaborations by other authors, key principles can be discerned that have relevance to our study. His work has also previously been used to study entrepreneurship, though in a quite different fashion to the one we follow here (see Jones & Spicer, 2005; Ogbor, 2000). The first abiding principle we find useful is the ever-present dynamic of competition. Foucault (2008, p. 147) states that we live in “a society subject to the dynamic of competition. Not a supermarket society, but an enterprise society. The homo economicus sought after is not the man of exchange or man the consumer; he is the man of enterprise and production.” This idea, of course, is fairly ubiquitous. For centuries, ongoing popular rhetoric on the rise of individualism (Perelman, 2005) and the march of meritocracy (Frank, 2016), myths though they undoubtedly are, have collectively espoused “the entrepreneurial ideal” which holds that through hard work and talent any individual can reap enormous rewards (Loeb, 1994, p. 162). Individualism is said to be “an ideology based on self-determination, where free actors are assumed to make choices that have direct consequences for their own unique destiny” (Callero, 2013, p. 15). In the absence of fixed and traditional norms, abiding by its logic puts individuals firmly in charge of producing their own biographies. Similarly, ‘meritocracy’, as McNamee and Miller, 2009, p. 1) state, is the firm belief that, “if you work hard enough and are talented enough, you can overcome any obstacle and achieve success”. Widespread belief in these neoliberal sentiments are said to be what sustains the success of television talent shows such as the X Factor, where participants can become the central protagonists of a romantic ‘rags-to-riches’ success story (Hackley, Brown, & Rungpaka-Hackley, 2013; Stahl, 2004). Then, of course, there is *The Apprentice*, the vehicle which is at least partly responsible for installing Donald Trump in the White House, which “gives the lie that each of us can make it big with the right amount of pluck and entrepreneurial determination” (Taylor, 2013, p. 62).

3.3. Creativity dispositif

Another commonly utilized Foucauldian principle is that of governmentality. It portrays neoliberalism as a form of power that disseminates market values to all spheres of life, to facilitate “the governing of individuals from a distance” (Larner, 2000, p. 6), by shaping their subjectivities. Its genius, of course, is that it makes people think they are entirely autonomous and self-directing when, in reality, their agentic personalities are subject to neoliberal logic. Neoliberalism thus creates people who feel entirely responsible for the conditions in which they live. Specifically, the kind of governmentality that most affects young people trying to build careers for themselves on YouTube or in other spheres of creativity has been identified by McRobbie (2016) as the ‘creativity dispositif’. It is comprised of anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, position, control or protect the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of individuals, and can, itself, derive from other discourses, practices, propositions and institutions. The dispositif itself is the system of relations established between these diffuse elements. Collectively they have the ideological effect of encouraging young people to “bypasses mainstream employment with its trade unions and its tranches of welfare and protection in favour of the challenge and excitement of being a creative entrepreneur” (McRobbie, 2016, p. 11). Thus, all the tales told of teenagers in their bedrooms, “striking it rich with a video camera, youth media created seemingly without industrial intervention, content created by youth for youth” (Woods, 2016, p. 237), become part of the creativity dispositif, which young people subsequently seek to emulate.

3.4. Technologies of the self

Foucault’s well-cited phrase “technologies of the self” refers to how individuals use technologies of production to shape their identity corporeally and cognitively to their own, and society’s, liking (Foucault, 1988). He writes that they are the various “operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being that people make either by themselves or with the help of others in order to transform themselves to reach a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Although coined long before the advent of social media, the term is frequently used as a descriptor of such sites (Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2012). Abbas and Dervin (2009) emphasize that digital technologies of the self have the power to transform people. They present nothing less than a means for people to get actively involved in the constitution of their subjectivity. Consider, for instance, the neoliberal ideal of what constitutes an enviable body. Stereotypically, it is toned, lean and exudes vitality and health; muscularly-tapered to the waist if you are man, or hour-glass-shaped, if you are a woman. Acquiring such a corporeal self, demands a high degree of self-regulation, discipline and exercise. And, often, inspiring men and women to subjectify themselves in this manner (at least in part) one will find curated streams of content on their social media – algorithmically-matched to each viewer’s (computer-ascertained) ‘unique’ preferences. For example, the more pictures of muscle-bound oiled-up fashion models you view, the more your feed will display similar images. Eventually such images become entirely normalised, even though they are unrepresentative outliers in a broad spectrum of body types. Pariser (2012) calls the filtering practices that organize media content for individuals “filter bubbles”. These bubbles prevent users from encountering oppositional viewpoints or different ways of viewing the world and tend to direct individuals to converge towards extremities of taste (Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman, 2017). Thus, a woman may think it is entirely her natural choice ‘to erotically subjectify’ herself, but undoubtedly technologies of the self also play an influential role in the process of subjectification (White, 2015).

Due to the reach ‘technologies of the self’ provide, in terms of disseminating personal information across multiple social platforms, they can enable people to cultivate new selves. As Schulte (2016, p. 250)

puts it, “this is agency, but an ambivalent agency that mixes technological capabilities and human practices within the contexts of late-capitalist, flexible economy and in increasingly competitive attention economies.” Our reading, in this paper, suggests that YouTube will likely be an important tool, alongside other technologies of the self, in creating, performing and fashioning the identity of the ‘autopreneurs’ using it.

4. Method

4.1. Research philosophy

Kozinets (2015), a key progenitor of online ethnography, or netnography as he characterizes it, stops short of prescribing a strict set of procedures and practices that must be followed when researching online socialities. Rather, he urges that researchers should primarily be guided by the fundamental purpose of his method. This he explains is “to explore, reveal and understand human realities and social worlds as they change in a co-evolutionary way with technoculture” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 54). The field of our study, an assemblage of autopreneurs that we interacted with and observed both on YouTube and in the analog world, observing their practices over a 3-year period (2014–2017), coupled with our aim of illustrating how orienting concepts from neoliberal theory shape and govern how they think and act, is deeply attuned with Kozinets’ orientation.

Such an approach is also commensurate with ‘historical ontology’, which also underpins our work. Hickenbottom-Brawn (2013, p. 733), like us, drawing on Foucauldian theory, clarify that it is “concerned with revealing the conditions, at a particular time and place, that provide possibilities for being a person”. These conditions, which as we explain earlier, are heavily influenced by the dominance of a neoliberal rationality which, again following Foucault, we assert, indirectly governs the social fabric in which the autopreneurs we are studying operate.

In elaborating the philosophy of our research, we are patently aware that our epistemological assumptions are quite different from those traditionally adopted by entrepreneurial scholars. We, for instance, place much less emphasis on agency and more on socio-historical conditions and ‘the structure of feeling’ that entrepreneurs internalize (Baba, Blomberg, LaBond, & Adams, 2013). Structure of feeling, drawn from Raymond Williams’ theoretical repertoire, encapsulates the lived experience of meaning and values. It is a totality of ideology, feelings, and emotions. It conveys the complexity and contradictory nature of social experience, while maintaining that thoughts and feelings are socially determined. As McGuigan (2016, p. 23) further explains, it refers to “the habitual modes of conduct and routine practices governing everyday life in a largely unexamined and semi-conscious manner.” By dint of this unusual epistemological approach, we believe our work answers this special issue’s call for radical perspectives on entrepreneurship.

4.2. Ethnographic engagement, data collection and analysis

As a preliminary stage of this multilayered research project, following the conventions of online ethnography, during 2014–2016, a period of deep immersion in the field was undertaken. To become closely acquainted with the practices of autopreneurial vloggers on the YouTube site, the first author of this study observed, studied and interacted with them. Typically, an ethnographic investigator actively participates in the setting under study (Brewer, 2005); in this project we did likewise. During this time, our lead researcher actively posted her own videos, and responded to and initiated comments on other YouTube accounts. Her purpose, which also furnished an honest and credible cover story that explained her online presence, was ostensibly to promote her yoga classes, and simply to satisfy her self-confessed fascination with YouTubers. She was drawn to YouTubers that talked

about the food they ate or the fashion they followed, hence the data is somewhat skewed towards YouTubers of this type. At the same time, though, it could be argued that YouTube itself hosts a disproportionate number of such uploaders.

Proceeding in this manner allowed her to engage in the subsequent interaction these posts engendered, make connections and build a network of fellow vloggers, some she could later come to call her friends. ‘Evernote’ – a note-taking/organizing/archiving app – was used to create a record of this ‘participant observation’. As a digital diary and organizer, it also facilitated bookmarking, recording of pertinent discourse, and detailing of data themes. Over time she gained an insider’s perspective of the social activity that typified observed autopreneurial practices. On a fortnightly basis, the other authors were informed about the progress of this immersive period. They were directed to postings of interest and the field notes were digitally shared, such that an ongoing conversation evolved between the researchers about what was interesting, novel and worthy of deeper study in this exploratory phase of research. Eventually, through a process of prolonged osmosis, discussion and wider reading, the outlined focus of this project began to crystallize.

At the same time – to placate any concern that the first author might ‘go native’, a frequent criticism made of ethnographic work (Brewer, 2005; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and lose insight garnered through the retention of an outsider perspective – the experienced members of the project team recommended, drawing on extant research, that a parallel focus on discourse should be adopted (Symon and Cassell, 2012). In this manner, we simultaneously managed to develop rapport and with individual autopreneurs, while still remaining suitably detached.

To further extend the ethnographic engagement, a natural corollary of the project was to identify suitable autopreneurs to interview regarding the ‘structure of feeling’ that underscores their lives. Many of these participants were initially encountered during the online immersive phase of the ethnography, but all interviews took place in physical spaces. They were interviewed at ethnographic field sites such as events hosted by Communities Unite, London Bloggers Meetup and the Bloggers Festival. In total nine face-to-face autobiographical interviews were conducted with vloggers (see Table 1 for interview details). Interviews tended to last between 45 and 90 min. Interviewee’s profiles were characteristic of YouTube’s broad constituency, but commonly they were young, ambitious and articulate. To acquire a rounded view of the phenomenon, we sought to interview supporters, opponents and cynics of YouTubing. To identify such individuals, their attitudes were gleaned via netnographic screening prior to conducting the interviews. We also sought to interview autopreneurs that displayed different metrics of success. In this regard, some of the interviewees had as few as one hundred followers, while others had as many as a half a million. The open-ended questions in these interviews explored the motivations for becoming autopreneurs, and the strategies used to manifest that reality. These audio-recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were adopted to conceal the identity of the autopreneurs.

Table 1
Interview details.

Respondent/Pseudonym	Role	Location
Amelia	Fashion YouTuber	London
David	Comedy YouTuber	Reading
Jason	LGBT Vlogger	London
Diana	Fashion Vlogger	London
Carol	Lifestyle YouTuber	Brighton
Cormac	Lifestyle/Comedy Vlogger	Bristol
Isobel	LGBT Vlogger	London
Ellen	Comedy YouTuber	London
Seamus	Short Film Maker	London

The results of this endeavor generated a 350-page document containing all the interview scripts. All three researchers subsequently analyzed the entire set of interviews to establish lower level codes and emergent themes (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004). Our initial codes sought to bring meaning, order and structure to the gathered data. Analyzing the discourses of these autpreneurs, involved using the commonly accepted iterative, part-to-whole process of hermeneutic data analysis common in discursive approaches to entrepreneurship (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004). While developing the higher-level themes of our inductive analysis, we discovered, fortuitously, that they mirrored the emergent framework derived from our engagement with the literature. This interactive work, so integral to the nature of our analysis, ultimately helped us create the overarching concept of the autpreneur, which seemed to describe the character of those we encountered in our data. Where disagreement emerged, as it occasionally did, in relation to the significance or non-significance of a specific theme or subtheme within the remit of our enabling concepts, we simply discussed the matter until a commonly-accepted resolution was found.

5. Findings

While acknowledging that designating a rigorous theory of neoliberalism is high impossible (Flew, 2014; Zamora & Behrent, 2016), to provide a sense of structure, continuity and flow we present our finding by utilizing the three related concepts of Foucauldian thought discussed in the literature review – *dynamics of competition*, the *creative dispositif*, and *technologies of the self*. Our guide in this strategic endeavor is Foucault (1994, p. 523) himself, who stated that “I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish”.

5.1. The Dynamics of competition

5.1.1. Fetishizing communicative capitalism

Youtubers, although in the main just young people being creative are, make no mistake, immersed in a fiercely competitive environment. The negligibility of start-up costs intensifies this competition. Since anyone with a Google account can set up a YouTube account in seconds, and since most everyone has reasonable video recording facilities available on their smartphones, the world's entire population is potentially ready to launch themselves as an entrepreneurial filmmaker. While the self-entrepreneur in every consumer-producer will never be summoned regardless of how much neoliberal sentiment they encounter, it is clear than many amateur Youtubers do fetishize fame and fortune. As Diana explains:

There's this idea that you could earn a lot of money, and I think that's just because a select few people at the top are millionaires, most people don't earn hardly anything, but it's that, yeah, oh, get rich quickly off YouTube for doing nothing. And people advertise stuff as well. They are just grabbing for more money and fame.

Scandalously, one might forgive someone in the midst of launching and managing a YouTube channel for selfishly thinking, but of course never uttering, American stand-up comedian, George Carlin's taboo sentiment, *I Kinda Like It When A Lotta People Die*. Less competition, you see. This inability to eradicate your competitors, in conjunction with the neoliberal plea to look out for your own interests could lead Youtubers to imagine that the only way to succeed is through aggressive and narcissistic self-promotion and showmanship. Consequently, in a state of self-absorption, they spend a lot of time, energy, and money cultivating a look that they think will bring them success.

The fetishization of ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean, 2009) championed by anyone with a social media presence where “social worth is measured, in part, by the number of Facebook friends you have, or by the number of re-tweets your last Twitter posting gained”

(Cluley and Brown, 2015, p. 119), inculcates a mind-set among Youtubers where what literally counts are page views and numbers of subscribers. It is not for nothing that a clichéd closing mantra, ever so casually inserted at the end of many vlogging videos is: “Don't forget to like, share and subscribe!” In the earlier days of the platform there was less need or desire to be so metric focused as one interviewee explains:

It's become the norm now when you start YouTube to become famous or to earn money, and before, I remember in 2008 with the community that I was in, asking for people to subscribe was seen as a bit of a taboo thing because, oh, you're trying too hard to make it or something like... And now if you're not asking people to comment, like and subscribe, almost what's wrong with you?

(David)

Today, though, it is such an all-consuming preoccupation that the response of those who witness the exhausting, distasteful and constant scramble of certain vloggers to gain and retain popularity, can be jaded and laced with disdain. One contributor, among many such trolls, posting on a Youtuber's video, left this rather snide, but perhaps understandable, comment:

Wasn't she supposed to be quieter? She wrote that she needed a break from social media and work...the truth is she can't live without posting and posting also about her holidays...go on girl, you must feel great to be followed and to receive lots of likes, without all this you will never be satisfied with your job. You, like all vloggers... what a generation of people who think that sharing is power...is it really? Just go and read a book and become a bit more knowledgeable about serious stuff. Not X-Factor and sweet potatoes.

While some feign not to care about these popularity metrics, or lament like David, a comedy vlogger, that due to the encroachment of commerce, the YouTube scene has become too graspingly competitive, many of the autpreneurs expressed predictable anxiety about the ongoing prospect of remaining relatively undiscovered:

I have 500 and something subscribers, or 532 to be precise. Yeah. I can't remember exactly. I try not to look at it too much, because it just gets depressing and when you just think of numbers, I feel it really stifles you, creatively as well, like trying to make videos but thinking, oh, will people like this.

(Cormac)

Having to post and people not watching it, it's the worst. Oh you'll film something and you'll think oh my god, this is going to be so good, this is the best idea, but because you don't have an audience that's really that big sometimes people just won't watch it. You'll be like I spent all that time on that and nobody cared.

(Ellen)

I'm just like happy to like upload and do other things and then other times I'm like you know what would be really great, if I had a lot more subscribers and I could pay my rent this month, that sort of thing.

(Seamus)

Some even fetishize attention so much, that any is viewed as better than none, even when it is entirely derogatory, as Carol elaborates:

I even get excited about the dislikes because it meant that I was reaching people who weren't usually watching me with the reaction I would have expected myself to have. Like I would have expected to be oh, nobody likes me, but it was actually really refreshing. I was like oh new people are watching, I'm so glad that they hate me, it doesn't matter.

5.1.2. Hope/Despair

The inherent hope that success is still possible is writ large in the discourse of the Youtubers interviewed. This sense of possibility that

underscores the general ‘structure of feeling’ that abounds is humorously alluded to by one YouTuber, who imagines the validation and vindication he will receive if success is ever realized:

My father-in-law hates me. He thinks I'm the biggest loser in the world. I'm not even joking. He's like: “What does this guy even do? What does he do? He's like, makes his silly videos, what a waste of time, what an absolute waste of time!” And for me, yeah, being a small YouTuber...if I can turn around to him and be like “Yeah, I earn this much off it or I got a sponsorship deal with Coke the other day,” he would probably get off my back. But at the moment I am just the lurchy leech that's married to his daughter. That is not entirely inaccurate.

(David)

It is clear that people like David have deeply internalized the promise of neoliberalism and are more than ready to take their place in the roster of social talent at the likes of Gleam Futures (aforementioned talent agency). Others are, even despite having an entrepreneurial mindset and obvious talent, less certain, and prone to bouts of despair. Like pan handlers who turn up too late at the gold rush, they understand that competition is extreme, and that finding success with their video channel will be extremely difficult. They attribute a number of factors as responsible for this state of affairs. Some simply believe that they lack the ruthless egotism and self-confidence to make it big. As Carol explains:

It would be great if it would grow, but I just don't have the self-belief. To be on YouTube you have to have some degree of ego and it's very hard if you don't, because basically you have to promote yourself to other people or they're not going to watch you, and I'm really bad at that.

Others are reluctant to promote themselves sufficiently, to slavishly seek more subscribers, to conform to what others are doing. Others still, blame the inequality built into neoliberal life, the sense of dissolving meritocracy that dictates that some get it easier than others, as Isobel explains:

Obviously, a big contributing factor is financial circumstances. No disrespect to whatever you've grown up in. Sometimes you might have been born into a wealthy family and you've got all the time in the world and you've got lots of money and not have to pay any rent or anything, then great for you. You can go out there and be creative. It's harder for the rest of us.

On the other hand, success of the neoliberal kind, defined as becoming a monetizable brand, as we soon demonstrate, can be equally despairing.

5.2. The creativity disposition

There is little doubt that the young entrepreneurs in our study – who significantly call themselves ‘creators’ – unquestioningly subscribe to the belief that being an independent creative, in spite of fierce competition, is what sustains their continuous striving. In keeping with neoliberal mythos, they take it as an absolute given that their future success depends on their ability to do things for themselves. They fervently believe there is no alternative but to exercise their energy, ingenuity and passion. Seamus had this to say on the romance of being creative:

Most of the people who create content or are watching YouTube videos of an evening are creatives and a lot of the time creatives are a lot more emotionally driven. I don't know if that's a broad thing but because you have the drive to create – you're very passionate about things. You feel deeply about things. I mean, I've met a lot of sad people, not oh you're sad but you're like unhappy and you're putting this into creating things which is what people often do. Or

you don't feel like you fit in elsewhere so you can go to YouTube and find lots of people who feel the same and you can put your feelings into something — into creating something which I've never been able to do anywhere else.

5.2.1. Contradictory discourses of nonconformity/conformity

One might imagine that the continuous scramble for viewers and subscribers would lead to an endless diversity of original and creative content. Certainly, there are innovative YouTubers who occasionally break the mold. For example, consider the community of users making AMSR videos, which for maximum sensory pleasure should be listened to in a dark room through headphones, and then there is the viral sensation that is the Chicken Connoisseur who, inspired by what he considered to be the easy summation of meals offered by MasterChef judges, realized that there was a gap in the market for similar reviews of high street chicken shops (Usborne, 2016).

The pluralism and diversity of YouTube's vast community creates the perception that it fairly represents the talking heads of subjugated voices, and that success on its platform is perhaps a question of individual talent. This sentiment can plainly be detected in the discourse of YouTubers, who frequently spout platitudes like “YouTube is so freeform, there's no one really telling you what to do.” (Ellen), and “I think part of the beauty of it, like, it's a free environment. You can do and say exactly what you want on there and no one gives a damn” (David). Nonetheless, while they allude to the permissiveness of the YouTube environment and celebrate their complete freedom to produce videos in any style and on any topic, at this same time, they also proffer a contradictory narrative complaining vociferously about the terrible sameness and conformity of the content they encounter:

I am feeling very disillusioned with YouTube and I feel like I am just seeing very generic content from the same group of huge YouTubers, and I find myself asking where are the exciting YouTubers now?

(David)

There's a lot of the same style or kind of content regurgitated by different people with very little originality going into it.

(Isobel)

They further complain, though not in quite so many words, how their subjectivity is being shaped by externalities beyond their control. Consider the comments of one popular YouTuber below, who in one of her uploads candidly hints at ‘the structure of feeling’ that pushes her to behave in a certain way, and when she resists it causes uncertainty and doubt:

But I am now feeling bad that this is my vlog for the day. I put a lot of pressure on myself. I take all your comments into consideration. I just want to make everyone happy. But I know that is impossible. But yeah, I haven't brushed my hair today. Sometimes life gets too much, and on those days, you just need to cope with them. But it's hard to do that when you are, I don't know. I feel like I seem that now I am talking about this that people are going to say I'm ungrateful. I'm not ungrateful. This makes me...it's very overwhelming. It's very overwhelming. It's not something I ever anticipated and it's not something I've had like training for, or that I need therapy for. It's um amazing, but also I don't cope with it very well. Anyway, I don't know but I'm a sensitive soul. Yep. Anyway. Sometimes life is hard. That's all I wanted to say.

Or consider how Amelia – an influential fashion blogger, on the coveted books of a top London agency, and whose YouTube channel is so successful that she gave up a well salaried career to live a rarefied and lavish life in one of London's wealthier postcodes – observes and attempts to counter the gradual ceding of her individuality to bland conformity:

...I think, I always change my fashion-sense anyway, from season to

season, but last season I know it sounds, I was kind of wearing similar things to a few Instagrammers that I know, because they were shopping at the same places, well being sent things from the same place. And I started being like, oh I don't really want to get classified like them. So I completely changed my dress-sense a bit, so that I wouldn't look like them anymore, and I'm glad 'cause I don't anymore. So that's good. I just want to be more individual. Definitely.

(Amelia)

Amelia, though, will only pursue this subtle strategy of differentiation so long as her refreshed image does not alienate her target audience. It's a delicate balance to somehow stand out, while remaining essentially on song with one's target audience. She is effectively employing Freud's 'narcissism of minor differences' to bolster her brand and mobilize envy among her legions of followers who, while solidified in subscriber numbers, are in reality a transient and volatile neotribe of consumers with only limited loyalty to any single YouTuber. Certainly, what she is not going to do anytime soon is forge her own path regardless of the naysayers. In any case, she and other YouTubers like her are necessarily swayed and directed by Gleam Futures, who in turn are beholden to the companies that pay substantial sums to promote their products. As well as the commercial concerns of mainstream YouTubers interfering with their ability to be original, our netnographic analysis shows us that Amelia and others like her very carefully manage their script, look, bedroom mise-en-scene, and carefully select the products they push on a typical 'video haul', such that as little criticism as possible is encountered in the tapestry of comments that invariably appear under each of her thrice weekly posts. A similar sense of straitjacketing recently led to the memorable implosion of one social media maven's career. Her enlightening comments are worth quoting:

Everything I was doing was edited and contrived and to get more views...Everything I did was for views, for likes, for followers...Social media, especially how I used it, isn't real. It's contrived images and edited clips ranked against each other. It's a system based on social approval, likes, validation in views, success in followers. It's perfectly orchestrated self-absorbed judgement...I met people that are far more successful online than I am, and they are just as miserable and lonely and scared and lost. We all are.

(Essena O'Neill cited in [Whu, 2016](#))

Perhaps, as our research suggests, the autpreneurs – not to diminish their photogenic talents and undoubted ability to speak to the coveted and illusive millennial audience – are merely akin to attractive mannequin models in a shop window that are posed, controlled and dressed as others would like. By this token, their eagerness to become involved in the latest fad 'The Mannequin Challenge', is maybe an unconscious cry for help, since it genuinely constitutes the reality of their lives. The real locus of power in this relatively new industry is wielded by agent intermediaries who work on behalf of vloggers, presenting, cultivating and packaging their clients for the big brand advertisers. These intermediaries who we label *inter-preneurs* manage, govern and control the most marketable of the young YouTubers.

5.3. Technologies of the self

Bearing in mind that fashion, accessories, hairdos, and cosmetics are among the 'technologies of self' that vloggers use to present their personal style, little better illustration of Foucault's prescient idea can be found than the profiles of successful YouTube autpreneurs. Visit the homepage of Gleam Futures – as we did as part of our netnography – which showcases many of the autpreneurs they manage. One might think one had just glimpsed a dystopian future full of perfectly similar individuals. All conform to a common criterion of beauty with only subtle deviations, a requisite tattoo here, a piercing there, all thrown into the mix as a nod to individuality. On this theme, [Cremin \(2015, p. 237\)](#) notes that social-media-enthusiasts tend to be "so generic that the

experience they represent could be exchanged without the slightest narrative impact on either individual."

Amelia's hair, for instance, which is basically blonde, is described on her site as "bleached at the roots and toned to a platinum". These abiding beauty prerogatives – born of good genetics, clever camera work, careful selection, and considerable care of the self – suggest a YouTube world where a disproportionate share of wealth is allocated to the maintenance of a certain type of individual at the expense of genuine diversity and community. Some of the autpreneurs express annoyance at this situation:

I guess also there's aspects of it that irritate no end. Like, if you are a, like, a straight white male with a good jaw line, then you're guaranteed to get a good response to your content, just things like that, kind of, little intricacies that, I don't know, that annoy me.

(Cormac)

It's because of our society in general, isn't it? Like, do the beautiful people get places because they are beautiful and attractive? Yes, they do. It's not really down to what people are actually saying. Basically, I think when you're conventionally very attractive and also are saying reasonably good things, that's probably the key to, I guess, fame on YouTube. It stinks.

(Diana)

Clearly, the message is that those who adopt the subjectivities on display by the mainstream vloggers, those who heed the shaping discourse that channels the identity and lifestyle of these autpreneurs in a specifically neoliberal ideological direction, will reap great rewards. Pressure is thus directed on individuals to see themselves and their career as the outcome of a range of technological investments. So they buy Red Epic cameras and three-point lighting systems, they embark on strict diets, and rigorous programs of self-maintenance.

Those who resist these power structures that shape their online participation will likely find success a very distant chimera. Jason and Ellen, both LGBT vloggers, for instance, have always tried to do things their own way, and consequently not only are they set to remain very niche, but they also receive considerable abuse:

If someone is calling you a fag and telling you to die, I am like; I'm numb to it now, because I've been doing this for so long. I've been putting stuff on YouTube for nearly ten years and I know that nothing is going to come of it. But it still hurts.

(Jason)

Even if you try your best, you know, cure with kindness as they say, it can get worse. Like you get comments that...it just becomes more and more extreme and it actually becomes upsetting and it can make you feel that you're in danger. I don't think...I think maybe in some positions, I mean I don't have a big Internet presence and I think the fact that I'm quite small makes me quite vulnerable.

(Ellen)

Opening your 'self' to the multitude of strangers that may encounter your video can, in some instances, be a painful experience. People who would not behave in an offensive manner offline, sometimes go out of their way to create an anonymous account just so they can publicly bombard YouTubers with spiteful messages. On a similar theme, a somewhat playful sentiment, which echoes Foucault's original definition of 'technologies of the self' keeps recurring in our data set, namely, the desire among autpreneurs, perhaps not to grandiosely seek immortality, but more realistically, not to die just yet:

That we don't want to die as a consequence of all of this, is a bit of a running joke. It's more in the realm that a lot of people on YouTube suffer depression, anxiety and so it's very common that creators have that dark sense of humour. A lot of jokes are centred around the whole existential crisis deal or even just mid-life type crises since it's very hard to do well on YouTube, so we're always a bit unsure about

ourselves no matter what we make because of the lack of interest that can come of it.

6. Discussion

This paper questions the assumptions underlying the standard approach to entrepreneurial scholarship which privileges the all-conquering agentic entrepreneur. Such an outlook requires researchers to uncritically accept the unspoken, but nonetheless ever-present notion, that being entrepreneurial is inherently a noble and worthwhile pursuit. By employing a Foucault-informed, neoliberal frame-of-reference, we illustrate an alternative and less celebratory view of entrepreneurship, one that is paradoxically less individualistic, but more humane. Similarly, Garcia-Lorenzo, Sell-Trujillo, and Donnelly, 2015, p. 162) recommend that future research should be less hero-centric and instead present a “nuanced view of both entrepreneurs and the entrepreneurial process”. The non-heroic, all too human side of entrepreneurship for instance, replete with struggle, uncertainty and hardship, remains seriously neglected (Boyle, 2008; Nandram & Samsom, 2008; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017). Our paper constitutes one small step towards addressing this shortfall.

In it we demonstrate how the life choices of autpreneurial YouTubers, through what we call ‘the structure of feeling’ that underpins their lives, is strongly influenced by the incursion of neoliberal ideology and technoculture. In this manner, we present a more nuanced view of entrepreneurial behavior, one that details not only the determinants of success, but also the quiet desperation, the self-doubt, the waning ambition that can also constitute part of the entrepreneurial journey. In this vein, it is our hope that future studies of entrepreneurship will attend to those that Sandage (2005, p. 6) calls the “bankrupts, deadbeats, broken men, down-and-outers, bad risks, good-for-nothings, no-accounts, third-raters, flunkies, little men, loafers, small fries, small potatoes, old fogies, goners, flops, has-beens, ne'er-dowells, nobodies, forgotten men”.

If scholars of entrepreneurship address their discipline's failure to study failure, the fate of the less lucky, those that will never make it big, the ‘get rich, die trying’ hopefuls, is undoubtedly an important plank of research. Having said this, our study also highlights an important finding, one that is also rarely mentioned, namely that even successful entrepreneurs, who are as unwittingly influenced by neoliberal ideals as the next person, are still plagued by psychological and emotional angst. Just as Clack (2016, p.133) argues that there is a “shadow that haunts neoliberal success.”, so too would we argue that this same shadow haunts entrepreneurial success, for we believe they are one and the same.

This ethnography of autpreneurials' behavior details that although they may view themselves as subjects who have the experience of choosing freely, the impact of their entrepreneurial activity has three pernicious effects on the quality of their lives. First, they are obsessed with their marketability and the performance of their quantifiable selves — especially when compared to their closest rivals. They know that to succeed they must indulge in an unseemly bout of narcissistic self-display and be ruthlessly competitive. Second, their creativity is constrained by the conformism that the neoliberal logic of hyper-normality tends to promulgate. Content is thus driven by the logic of what Hogan (2010, pp. 383 ff.) calls the “lowest common denominator”. Since a cache of literal-/social-currency can accrue through each YouTuber's cluster of “salient”/well-connected Internet associates – those specifically target *and* those not intentionally sought-out – this can influence YouTubers to post bland ‘lowest common denominator’ fare. Third, since YouTube, as a significant technology of the self, is engineered to promote certain users and content over others, success-seeking autpreneurs must comply with prescribed norms. YouTube's organizational algorithms ensure that those celebrating diversity, deviance and difference will never ascend beyond the foothills of fame

(Dijck, 2013). We are not alone in derailing the celebration of YouTube as a site of liberty and unfettered creativity. Most recently [Whu \(2016, p. 167\)](#) in his impressive analysis of the epic scramble to get inside our heads dismissed the entire totality of social media as suffering from “an aggressive egotism and neurasthenic passivity.” If YouTube truly wish to do no evil, as their mission implies, then they should look for ways of showcasing content from the lesser-known, uniquely talented, YouTubers, who currently are undersold.

The concept of the autpreneur has also been a useful construct to convey an entrepreneur's strong sense of self. Our findings illustrate that being an autpreneur can result in a considerable bout of neurotic soul-searching, and self-examination both publicly in their uploaded videos, and privately, as detailed in the quotes from our in-depth interviews. They obsess about the stuff of life, death, sex, appearance, and themselves — especially how they look and how they are perceived. One can only speculate as to why this should occur. Perhaps their championing of that which is intimate and confessional is an unconscious attempt to regain the lost agency, to make controllable again that which neoliberal ideology has taken from them. Given that the spread of neoliberal values is global, it would be interesting to see if these autpreneurial tendencies are present in other kinds of entrepreneur. Certainly, the existing literature is relatively silent about such matters. One thing is certain, our critique of the neoliberal project will hardly make a difference to the endless stream of “upstart” startups on YouTube, who have stardom in their sights and hopeful designs to use their autpreneurial brands to disrupt, disrupt, disrupt ([Fenn, 2010](#)). Goethe's maxim, “None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free”, comes to mind.

6.1. Limitations

The emphatic nature of our pronouncements should be tempered with a note of caution about the generalizability of our findings. While we have attempted to select a varied range of examples and data in our netnography, the analysis is presented mainly from a UK perspective, thus its applicability to other countries depends on the extent to which similar neoliberal ideals are present therein. However, we usher our readers towards viewing such sentiments as quite delocalized and universal. We would also stress that our relatively small sample size could potentially be unrepresentative of another population of similar participants. In addition, it has been argued by Karl [Popper \(1994\)](#) that scholars should avoid falling for the myth of the framework, the employment of which could potentially inhibit free thinking and theorizing. In this instance though, we are convinced that our triad of enabling concepts was of considerable utility in respect of organizing both our unruly data and nebulous neoliberal theory.

7. Conclusion

By fusing a Foucauldian perspective and a critical-of-neoliberalism orientation, we have sought to demonstrate how a less agentic study – one more attentive to historical and social contexts – can prove fruitful. First and foremost, we encourage scholars of entrepreneurship, those within the critical faction at least, to further explore the interface between neoliberalism and entrepreneurship.

By taking seriously Foucault's vision that a neoliberal society encroaches on people's understanding of who they are, we found a world quite different from the upbeat optimism of most literature on entrepreneurial capitalism. While the, probably unwitting, circulation of neoliberal ideals among participants in the ethnography has certainly been effective at making them more entrepreneurial, the impact on their personal lives is altogether less sanguine. Their everyday struggle to succeed is very real; both for autpreneurs who do not make-it commercially and paradoxically even for those who do become monetized brands. The latter typically become so encumbered by their lack of freedom and heavy workload that even success often feels a lot like

failure. The mimetic practices neoliberalism fosters upon all autpreneurs - through the three mechanisms we detailed - encourages what Berlant (2011) calls a 'cruel optimism'. In the context of autpreneurship, what appears cruel about the endeavor of the YouTubers we studied is that their work links so tightly to their self-esteem – since it derives from doing something they deeply desire – yet the gains evidently manifest quite precariously. The optimistic attachments they have to neoliberal ideals such as the promise of meritocracy and individualism are unlikely to come to pass in their lives.

It also strikes us as clear that certain types of entrepreneurial endeavor, especially that performed by YouTubers, encourages a self-centered subjectivity where individuals pursue their own self-interest by seeking popularity at all costs. It is depressing and difficult to disagree with Mason (2015, p. 22) who might well be summing up the entrepreneurial credo in saying “that the natural state of humankind is to be a bunch of ruthless individuals, competing with each other.” This then is a cautionary tale about the perils and precarity of entrepreneurship. Our analysis suggests that its universal celebration is somewhat misguided. Frank (2000, p. 344) says it well, “The market will give you a voice, empower you to do whatever you want to do — and if you have any doubts about that, then the market will crush you and everything you've ever known.”

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