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Social labour: exploring work in consumption

Abstract

This paper develops understanding of consumer work at the primary level of sociality in the context of social networking sites. Drawing on ethnographic interviews and netnography, we reveal these sites as distinctive spaces of consumer-to-consumer work. To explain this work in consumption, we introduce the concept of social labour which we define as the means by which consumers add value to their identities and social relationships through producing and sharing cultural and affective content. This is driven by observational vigilance and conspicuous presence, and is rewarded by social value. This draws attention to the variety of work consumers enact within their social lives, indicating that consumer work is broader than previously acknowledged.

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Introduction

Social media and web 2.0 have created the 'prosumptive internet' (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) by facilitating consumer connections, communications and co-creations of brand meanings and messages. In his recent reconceptualisation of prosumption, Ritzer (2013) highlights the interrelatedness of production and consumption and argues that, although not a new concept, it has become more visible with technological advances. Current literature surrounding social media has broadly focused on two bodies of marketing theory: the community aspect of social networking sites (e.g. Cova and Pace, 2006), and consumer co-creation (e.g. Fisher and Smith, 2011). The value and content created from consumer-to-consumer interactions has prompted marketing theory to characterise consumers as producers, prosumers and co-creators (John, 2012; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). In critique of this terminological diaspora, Cova and Dalli (2009) draw upon post-Marxian theory to conceptualise this new consumer role as the *working consumer,* describing consumers who engage in immaterial labour that creates value to market offerings. Cova and Dalli (2009) highlight consumers work at the primary level of sociality (interpersonal level) where symbolic, knowledge and emotional value is exchanged. Value can then be transferred from the primary to secondary level of sociality (market level) through appropriation by

companies. Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) regard this transition from primary social activity to secondary market activity as the Like economy, whereby through the use of like and share buttons, users' interactions are transformed into numerical data that has economic value to outsider companies as indicators of engagement and traffic. Existent research prioritises the impact of consumers' immaterial labour for companies that extract value from consumers (Andrejevic, 2010; Fuchs, 2010; Cova and Dalli, 2009). Less research considers the consumer perspective and to redress this imbalance, this paper aims to develop a richer understanding of consumer work at the primary level of sociality. The context of this study is social networking sites (specifically Facebook) which we see as spaces of consumer-to-consumer work.

The contribution of this paper is to introduce the concept of *social labour* to add theoretical depth to the understanding of the working consumer. We define *social labour* as *the means by which consumers add value to their identities and social relationships through producing and sharing cultural and affective content. This is driven by observational vigilance and conspicuous presence, and is rewarded by social value.* This draws attention to the variety of work consumers enact within their social lives and we demonstrate that consumer work can be waged through the exchange of social value, visible in acts of social reciprocity.

 We will begin with a theoretical examination of the various post-Marxian conceptualisations of labour (immaterial, emotional, aesthetic, presentational and

digital). We then briefly outline the consumption of social networking sites as the context of our study before presenting the methodology. Our findings are presented around three key themes: Value Production, Drivers of Social Labour and Social Value as Payment. Finally, we conclude with our conceptualisation of social labour and directions for future research.

Theorising contemporary labour

Definitions of work and labour and the distinction between them remain somewhat contested. Weeks (2011) uses work and labour interchangeably and in contrast, Arendt (1958) makes a clear distinction between the two terms; she views labour as essential to survival and work as more focused on satisfying wants. In this paper we follow the distinction offered by Fuchs (2014) in his work on digital labour and transfer Marxian terms to the cultural spheres of social networking sites. Labour is associated with exchange-value and is "a necessarily alienated form of work, in which humans do not control and own the means and results of production." In contrast, work is associated with use-value and "is a process, in which humans make use of technologies for transforming nature and society in such a way that goods and services are created that satisfy human needs" (Fuchs, 2014: p. 26-27). Marx has often been critiqued for economic reductionism but as Desan (2013) has argued, Marx's concept of capital is neither a thing nor is it economic, rather it is a social process that gains form through

production. According to Desan (2013), Marx's concept of capital is doubly social as it entails a social relation of exploitation and also relies upon the totality of social relations to make it possible. This stands in contrast to Bourdieu's fetishization of capital as a thing, as an exploitable object and not as a social relation of exploitation (Desan, 2013). For this reason, it is valuable to return to Marx in developing an understanding of the productive work that goes on in social networking sites.

The changing nature of contemporary production and consumption has increased the prominence of instable, fluid and intangible work activity (Wood and Ball, 2013). The notion of *immaterial labour* was developed to account for the increasing intangibility of service sector work where communication, information networks and knowledge are the main outputs of production (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996). In their seminal piece *Empire,* Hardt and Negri (2000) claimed *immaterial labour* can produce two types of performed work; *cultural content* which acknowledges the production of consumer tastes, social norms and aesthetic values, and *affective content* whereby individuals can work at the emotional level, altering their feelings and affective appearance. As such, immaterial labour uses intangible skills that are considered inseparable from the worker.

The notion of *emotional labour* developed by Hochschild (1983) accounts for the commodification of worker's emotions for the benefit of the organisation. In critique of Hochschild's conceptualisation, Brook (2009) draws a distinction between emotional labour and work by suggesting that private enactments of emotion are considered as

'emotion work' or 'emotion management' as they have use-value, whereas emotional labour involves exchange-value as employees' feelings go through *transmutation* where the public self is commodified by paying workers to display emotion.

Witz et al. (2003) expand the notion of emotional labour by introducing the concept of *aesthetic labour* to account for organisations increasing tendency to commodify worker's corporal appearance to fit a particular image. Witz et al. (2003) distinguish aesthetic labour from emotional labour on the basis that the prior is animate and embodied. Similar to emotional labour, organisations are seen as moulding workers' aesthetic qualities or 'styles of the flesh' (Butler, 1990) for the benefit of the organisation and to appeal to customers (Warhurst et al., 2000).

In capturing both emotional and aesthetic labour Sheane (2011) introduced the concept of *presentational labour* which suggests employees must assert emotional and aesthetic literacy in order to be a service specialist. Presentational labour is viewed as an acquirable skill that employees perform. Grounded in Goffman's (1959) work on self-presentation, presentational labour is an acquirable skill that employees perform using emotional and aesthetic communicative skills to present the social attributes that are approved by organisations.

In extending labour into the digital environment, Fuchs (2014, p. 4) suggests that digital labour involves the exploitation of human labour-power "in a way that monetary

benefits ICT corporations and has negative impacts on the lives, bodies or minds of workers." Similarly, Briziarelli (2014) suggests that digital labour accounts for new technology media workers that are waged in the ICT industry. King (2010) highlights the discourse of creativity that surrounds digital labour as an expressive form of labour. This calls to mind Thrift's assessment of capitalism as not simply "dead labour haunting the living" but having "a kind of unholy vitality, a kind of double duty, to possess but also to create, to accumulate but also to overflow, to organize but also to improvise" (Thrift, 2005, p.17). This "double duty" is evident within the context of social media and is linked to "playbour" where online digital activity is considered a form of labour (Lund, 2014: p. 735). For Lund (2014), there is a fine line between play and work in the digital environment as it may involve an element of fun as well as the creation of use-value. For example, fan created content is strongly linked to play but is considered to be more "profitable for producers" than for fans (Milner, 2009: p. 506). However, Banks and Humphreys (2008, p. 413) question whether user production is "an example of a new articulation of a cooperative and non-zero sum game whereby different motivations and value regimes co-exist?"

Despite these advances in literature, Wood and Ball (2013: p. 54) continue to critique conceptualisations of immaterial labour for underplaying "what would seem to be the most obvious example of immaterial labour…the work done *in consumption*." Whilst previous work by Fuchs considers the blurring lines between production and

consumption we consider it useful to focus upon consumer-to-consumer interaction and in doing so, we extend previous work on digital labour beyond the ICT industry. It is important to better understand such interactions as they are increasingly used to extract market value. As Banks and Humphreys (2008) suggest, there is a dynamic interrelationship between social networks and market-based enterprise. Indeed, "Rather than non-market, these [social networks] formations can be seen as emerging markets consisting of new collectives that do not fit comfortably with our current understandings of work and labour relations" (Banks and Humphreys, 2008: p. 406). In the following section we consider consumer activity on social networking sites as the context of our study.

Social networking sites and consumer labour

To date, there are 1.4 billion global Facebook users with U.S users spending on average 37 minutes each day on the site (Adler, 2014). Importantly, such sites rely upon a continual feed of consumer created content and they have established a set of social norms that encourage sharing between users. Consumers are motivated to participate within social networking sites for entertainment, escapism, and as a vehicle for self-presentation (Belk, 2013). This is in line with the cultural turn which recognises the role of marketplace resources in identity construction (Thompson, 2014).

Many authors analysing social networking sites draw upon labour theory in focusing upon distinct features of the labour process such as alienation (Rey, 2012) and exploitation (Andrejevic, 2010; Fuchs, 2010). Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) also introduce the concept of digital work which they ground in cognitive, communicative and cooperative processes to create use-value. Fundamentally these distinct perspectives acknowledge productivity has become embedded within everyday sociality (Rey, 2012) as organisations can capitalise upon consumer-generated content as they take ownership over cultural value (Andrejevic, 2010). For Andrejevic (2010, p. 92), the promotional material for social networking sites is reminiscent of Marxist themes to "overcome alienation, revitalize community, and empower citizen-consumers."

For Terranova (2000: p. 36) these trends resemble a social factory where "work processes have shifted from the workshop to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine". This has been conceptualised by Illouz (2007) as emotional capitalism, where the rationalisation and masculinisation of work life has caused relationships to be evaluated by economic means. The visibility of the internet facilitates self-branding whereby the online representation of the self becomes disembodied, displayed and subsequently sold to the audience (Illouz, 2007; Shepherd, 2005). This process of commodification is furthered by expectations placed upon consumers to be visible (Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009) and to share aspects of their mundane life (John, 2012; Yau and Schneider, 2009). Andrejevic (2005)

introduce the notion of lateral surveillance or "the work of watching one another" while Trottier and Lyon (2012) speak of social surveillance whereby users invisibly watch, measure and search other users' movements online. Owen and Imre (2013) extend this notion to the micro-level, and question if individuals are becoming self-surveilled by using geo-location applications. The normalisation of such sharing within social networking sites has made it commonplace to relinquish control over personal information (Dubrofsky, 2011).

In an examination of the role neoliberal ideology has in producing digital labour in social media contexts, Brizarelli (2014) suggests digital labour always contains a dialectic between commodification and emancipation, estrangement and reconnection, coercion and consent. Similarly, Fuchs and Sevignani (2013: p. 257) make a similar point and suggest that social networking sites such as Facebook exercise "a social form of coercion that threatens the user with isolation and social disadvantages." The intrusion of digital intermediaries into social relations alienates users from the means of socialisation in the sense that they become reliant on platforms such as Facebook to store data related to our social lives (Andrejevic, 2010). Brizarelli (2014: p. 20) terms the productive activity enacted in social media as a form of "social working" that is grounded in the alienation of unpaid labour where the worker becomes sold as a commodity to the market. However, it is important to note the "double character" of Facebook in that the products created not only satisfy commercial interests but also

users' own needs (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013: p. 260). Facebook usage is therefore argued to be both work and labour at the same time as it creates use-values for individual users alongside commercial exchange-value (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013). In this paper, we acknowledge the "double character" of Facebook but focus on the primary level of sociality and consider the need to go beyond the digital in conceptualising consumers' work and labour through evidencing its broader social dimension.

Methodology

We address the following research questions: At the primary sociality level what types of work do consumers enact? What are the drivers of social labour within social networking sites? What rewards do consumers gain from this work?

Our findings are based on ethnographic interviews and netnographic observations of 15 participant's social networking sites. This dual approach offers understanding of how consumers behave on multiple consumption sites (Fisher and Smith, 2011). Sampling was based upon the first author's extended social network due to the importance of personal community to social networking sites. This approach, coupled with snowball sampling, has been advocated by Shanker, Elliot and Goulding (2001) for building trust in consumption contexts that are highly personal but not overly sensitive in topic.

Informants were aged between 19-26 and all had experience of using multiple types of social networks (see Table 1). This demographic was selected as they are amongst the heaviest users of social network sites (Ellison et al., 2011). The use of friends as informants was particularly relevant to the social networking context of the research as it reduced the power distance between the researcher and informant. This empowered the informant (Tilman-Healy, 2003) as the researcher is perceived as an equal, allowing for a more open discussion to take place. Participants were added to the first author's social network in order to gain visual access to participants' Facebook pages.

Table 1: Participant Details

Informant Name	Age	Occupation	Social Network Usage
Shelley	19	Unemployed	Facebook
Zara	26	Physiotherapist	Facebook, Twitter
Jane	23	Marketing Executive	Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Whatsapp
George	23	Sales Executive	Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Whatsapp
Jack	23	PhD Student	Facebook, MySpace
Jessica	22	Nurse	Facebook, Snapchat, Whatsapp
Kate	23	PhD Student	Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn
Poppy	22	Waitress	Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat
Jamie	22	Factory Operations Manager	Facebook, Snapchat, Whatsapp
Emily	22	Social Media Manager	Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Google+, LinkedIn, Whatsapp
Martin	24	Armed Forces Officer	Facebook
Robert	23	Unemployed	Facebook
Megan	23	Amateur Dramatics Coordinator	Facebook
Sarah	24	Marketing Assistant	Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat , Whatsapp
Wendy	25	Social Worker	Facebook

Ethnographic interviewing seeks to gain richer understanding of consumers' experiences by locating the interview process within the consumption context (Sharman Heyl, 2008; Holt, 1997) by the means of a friendly conversation (Spradley, 1979). This technique allows the emic-etic discourse from both researcher and participant to surface which permits the researcher to probe emic terms to gain a better understanding of the meanings created by the participant and to avoid incorrect etic assumptions. As social networking sites can be consumed anywhere with internet access, the interviews were conducted in participants' homes, public places, restaurants and cafes.

All interviews were audio-recorded, generating over 162 pages of transcript data. During the interviews, informants were asked to display and discuss their own social media pages using a laptop computer, tablet or smartphone device. Following Heisley and Levy's (1991) account of 'autodriving' these pages were used as an elicitation method and projective technique to stimulate underlying responses and help participants convey richer meaning.

Netnographic observations of informants' personal pages allowed the researchers to become immersed within the virtual context of study (Kozinets, 2002). It also provided a deeper understanding of broader consumption patterns and social practices as the researchers shift gaze between micro-practices of consumers and macro cultural patterns that form social trends (Soukup, 2012). Our netnography was conducted both prior to and following ethnographic interviewing and lasted over three months with weekly

observations made on each participant. Specifically, data was collected regarding shared comments, status updates, photographs and interactions. This generated over 123 pages of screenshot data from informants' pages and, following Kozinets (2002), researcher reflective field notes to aid contextualisation.

All participants received pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Informed consent was established to use excerpts of participants' user profiles. Ethical consideration was also given to the 'friends' of participants whose posts may be visible. To ensure anonymity and privacy, no data was collected from non-participants, and any references to other people made within the interviews were pseudo-anonymised.

A combination of interview text and netnographic data allowed the researchers to understand the complexity of these social spaces. As advocated by Fisher and Smith (2011), the data was analysed by conducting an active comparison between the interview texts and netnographic observations, allowing the researchers to draw comparisons between behaviour and narrative. This is particularly useful for analysing the similarities and differences between virtual behaviour and reported life experience, whereby disparities between interviews were directly contrasted with the informants' online behaviour. This added to the texture of the analysis which was aided by iterative movement back and forth between emergent themes in the data and existing theory. Further, careful attention was taken to preserve the emic voice of the participants by

performing member checks and asking key informants to read and validate our interpretation (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

Findings

In this section we explore the proposed concept of social labour which we define as *the means by which consumers add value to their identities and social relationships through producing and sharing cultural and affective content. This is driven by observational vigilance and conspicuous presence, and is rewarded by social value.* Our findings begin by exploring the types of work participants undertake, followed by an examination of the drivers of social networking participation, and finally an analysis of the value exchange system is discussed.

Value production: producing, sharing and adding value

Consumers' engagement with social media technology has evolved from a novel practice to a facet of everyday life. Our interpretation of the netnography highlighted the scope of content participants share and produce. Firstly, participants produce and share affective materials directed at specific individuals, such as posting congratulations messages or symbolic 'tagging', where individuals' names become linked to specific

notifications. Secondly, participants contribute to cultural trends, such as sharing trending media or producing popular imagery through memes or 'selfies'. This extends Hardt and Negri's (2000) two forms of performed work into the consumption domain; *affective content* acknowledges workers' use of feelings and emotions, whereas *cultural content* acknowledges that workers produce consumer tastes, social norms and aesthetic values. We interpret these activities as an example of consumer work, undertaken to fulfil participants' social needs.

Affective content. Affective content was most visible in emotional comments and sentimental pictures. These postings were often directed to another user and therefore can be understood as a form of emotional gift. This is demonstrated by Wendy, a 25-year-old social worker, who viewed affective posts as equal to physical gifts: "*it's like sending a card in the mail like when you get it, it means something*". Some participants discussed this kind of activity as enjoyable, for example, Jessica states that "*Facebook is a bit more fun [in comparison to other social media sites]. I like it because I can Facebook Jen, "Oh here is a song on Youtube to get you through the studying." It can kind of cheer you up.*" Similar to Wendy, Poppy posted affective messages on Facebook as a symbolic gift to the memory of her recently deceased father. Other examples include a father's day message and accompanying photo (see Figure 1)

> *Poppy: [L]ast week it was my brother's birthday and it was also the anniversary*
> *of my Dad. [...] I was posting a lot of pictures from last week because...I was*

just trying to give it the attention that it kind of deserved. [...] I was more

posting these things to get support almost for him. That was my main reason for

posting things – to show people that we were actually celebrating the memory of

a life.

Figure 1: Exerts from Poppy's Facebook page

For Poppy, it was important to acknowledge her father's passing and to share this emotion with her Facebook connections. The production of affective content for many participants involved a heavy investment in searching for the 'right' words or images that would convey how they felt to other users. This investment is something Wendy

considered every time she posted content to Facebook, as in her words "*when you put something on there it affects everyone else that has seen it*". This highlights how affective content adds value to social relationships by acting as emotional and symbolic gifts between users. Affective content can be distinguished from cultural content for the emotional investment consumers impart in developing affective posts.

Cultural content. Cultural content formed a larger proportion of production and sharing. Whilst participants took careful consideration to find 'right' words for emotional gifts, some participants discussed spending hours to find quality content to share:

> *Megan: I think like if you are posting something on Facebook it should be to inform people on things. I think you should consider if people want to hear this. Is this giving them some kind of information, telling them something interesting? Like even doing something nice.*

Whilst most participants discussed their consideration of 'good' postings, we noticed the quantity of the content was another important factor in the evaluation of approved social media behaviour. Restraint is also requisite in the supply of content production to avoid over-sharing, where a user posts too much personal information online (Labrecque, Makos and Milne, 2011; Belk, 2013). For some, this creates a tension in

their Facebook consumption similar to Brizarelli's (2014) comments on the dialectic character of digital interaction.

> *Wendy: It's like a love/hate relationship. I love that I can talk to my friends that are like hundreds of miles away… But it is just frazzles my brain sometimes. It is just so full of rubbish. Like people update such stupid things that are totally pointless.*

Content loses value when it is supplied in excess. Jessica, a 22-year-old nurse, talks about those who contravene social media norms:

> *Jessica: One of the things about Facebook that really annoys me are the people that just post five times every day and it really irritates the life out of me because I think it is so pointless. Like you are just updating me about having a shower and what you'll have for lunch.*

Content production must be continuous, yet as Jessica's account demonstrates, it must add value to the communal newsfeed. Lanham (2006) spoke of the attention economy whereby the commodity in short supply is human attention. This concept is readily transferable to the social media context where there is evidence of extreme "affirmation seeking" (Belk, 2013). Respondents suggest that there is a need to balance between posting valuable content that maintains a positive self-image and holds attention but without over-exposure.

Building on Shepherd's (2005) discussion of personal branding, over-sharing was viewed as narcissistic and a form of "*personal marketing*" (Megan) or "*self-promotion*" (Jack). Our netnographic analysis highlighted that shared posts were mainly visual, including viral videos, trending news images, and 'selfies'. Some participants would upload photographs every day and change their profile picture every week. Participants felt the public nature of Facebook had created an aesthetic demand to upload visually pleasing images of the self. Poppy was a self-proclaimed 'selfie' addict, sharing between 2-3 photographs everyday and posting selfies approximately every 3 days (see Figure 2). Poppy's discussion of how she uses Instagram, an image-editing application, demonstrates her concerns to conform to a specific aesthetic value:

> *Poppy: It is so childish but I think that is why so many people put up a nice picture of themselves because they want other people to think they look nice in it. People kinda use it [Instagram] to just upload a better version of their own photos because you can enhance it. [...] I literately just upload a picture, edit it to a way that I would like it to look and then just instantly upload it to Facebook. That is really only the reason that I would use that. Kind of like "look what I am doing now". Snap. Send.*
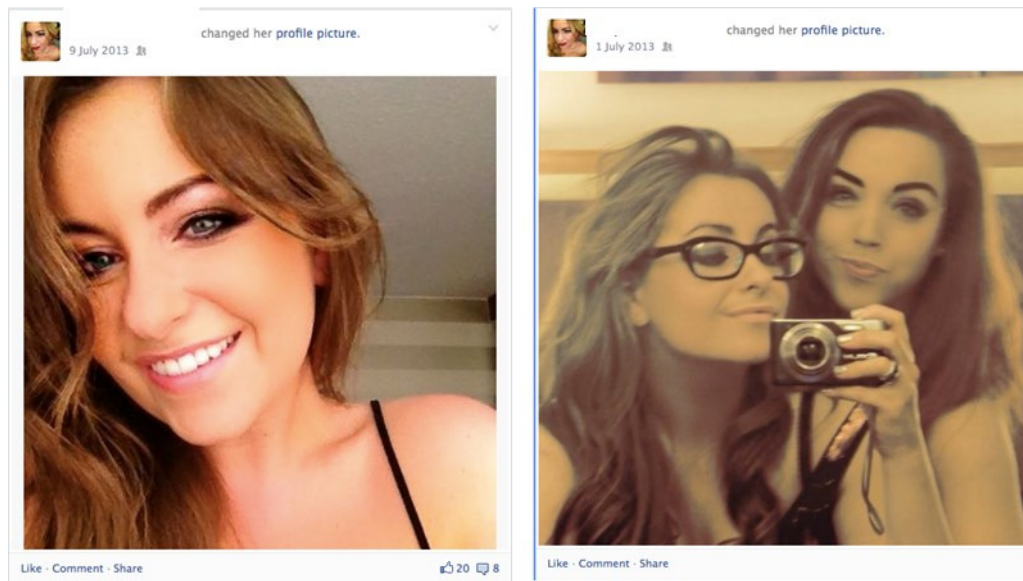
Figure 2: Poppy's selfies

Aware of this need to post the 'correct' amount of images, Poppy claimed to update her profile picture late at night to prevent others from seeing the upload immediately in fear of being judged as narcissistic. This further highlights the calculated nature of individual's identity management and self-surveillance (Owen and Imre, 2013) whereby consumers add value to their identities by projecting the correct public-image through quality production and quantity management.

From our analysis we recognise that cultural and affective content production adds use-value to consumer identity by allowing the expression of aesthetic and cultural idealised selves, and adds exchange-value to their social relationships by facilitating interaction. Our analysis advances Sheane's (2011) conceptualisation of presentational labour into

the social networking context. She suggests an individual utilises emotional and aesthetic literacy to be successful. Our data shows this literacy to be visible through consumers' calculation and manipulation of the quality, quantity, and level of aestheticisation in the content produced. We view these activities as examples of consumer work whereby activities are perceived as voluntary, yet involve a level of productivity to create added value.

Drivers of social labour: observational vigilance and conspicuous presence

In an examination of technology consumption, Mick and Fournier (1998) found consumers felt an obligation to consume technology due to its ubiquity in the marketplace. This created a philosophical paradox between enjoying the freedoms technology provides and loathing the enslaving compulsion to use technology. For some consumers social media is a source of freedom, for example, as a frequent traveller, Zara, a 25-year-old physiotherapist, uses Facebook to keep in touch with friends abroad. Similarly, Emily, a 22-year-old graduate, uses social media to be "*nosey*" and keep track of her school friends' lives. Twenty-three-year-old Kate is immersed in social media and active on many popular variants. Kate feels a freedom in these digital contexts that is absent in her 'real' life.

> *Kate: Maybe people come out of their shell through social media. I think social media does give you a bit more confidence to say things and post things that you wouldn't have in real life.*

For Kate, social media has a liberatory and transformative dimension that allows her real self greater scope to emerge. However, Kate's experience of social media was rare amongst informants. More commonly, the consumption of these sites has become a demanding task that hinders their daily activities. Megan, a 23-year-old amateur dramatics co-ordinator, spends two hours each evening attending to her Facebook and Pinterest accounts. She describes both her obligation to check and maintain her online visibility.

> *Megan: Now you have this kind of compulsion to go and check Facebook. Like every day. Or you carry around with you. And it is kind of constantly nagging at you. […] Yeah it's like an addiction. I think it is an addiction. You are drawn to do it at regular intervals. You could run your Facebook like a part-time job quite easily.*

This obligation to continually check social media for updates was one of the most recurrent themes discussed by all participants. Kate admitted checking Facebook at least 20 times per day. Similarly, as office workers, Emily, Jane and Jack disclosed they would leave social media windows "*open in the background*" (Jack) whilst they worked

as this allowed them to constantly check their pages. We define this obligation as *observational vigilance* where consumers feel compelled to keep constant check of social media for updates. We notice informants regard this behaviour as "*addictive*" (Emily, 22), "*habitual*" (Poppy, 22), or in some cases pathological - becoming a "*Facebook junkie*" (Shelley, 19). While Andrejevic (2005) suggests that lateral surveillance is largely driven by scepticism and mistrust, we suggest that observational vigilance to social networking sites is driven by a Fear-Of-Missing-Out (FOMO) on the latest posts or being isolated from the social media zeitgeist.

Along with vigilance to check social media, informants discussed the obligation to sustain a level of activity and visibility on their pages. Based on our informants' discussions, we conceive two forms of *conspicuous presence*. Firstly, we identify reactive conspicuous presence whereby consumers work to manage their online interactions. For example, replying to comments and posting on trending threads. Secondly, we identify proactive conspicuous presence whereby consumers actively search and share material online. In this second form, consumer work is more pronounced as consumers often produce material themselves or contribute to sharing others' material. From George, a 23-year-old car sales executive, we see the importance of reactive conspicuous presence to keep on top of social media tasks.

> *George: You are constantly trying to maintain your virtual lifestyle so that you are like updating your Facebook status, checking your Twitter, checking how*

many people 'liked' your status, texting people, Whatsapping people. There is so much noise so it is hard to kind of like keep it under control.

George feels he has to be conspicuous within many different communication channels in order to be visible within his friendship group. George's conspicuous presence is largely reactive in response to other users' posts. His experience suggests his social media consumption has transformed into an exercise in time management and task organisation. Caused by demands for content production (John, 2012) and social surveillance (Trottier and Lyon, 2012), George's account demonstrates the connection between observational vigilance and conspicuous presence as forms of enforced consumer work. This is akin to the social coercion identified by Fuchs and Sevignani (2013).

Jack, a 24-year-old student, also discussed the pressure to maintain constant activity within online social networks. For Jack his presence within social networks was comparable to a machine that continually required maintenance, ranging from profile picture updates, sharing media and commenting to friends. His productive work was much more proactive than in George's account.

Jack: I think that a lot of people would like to see their Facebook page busy. People like activity, it's like repaving your back garden. It's not something you particularly want to do but you just have to do it every so often, so people will

engage. Either way it's a sustaining thing. If your wall was full of things that were posted 500 days ago you would just look like this...seemingly you are dead. Or you don't exist. Or you are not doing anything. It is as if you are frozen until someone engages with you again. But on Facebook because it is moving, you have to be seen to be moving.

Conspicuous presence, as Jack suggests, involves keeping one's social media page busy or "*ticking over*" as a form of social survival. George and Jack show different forms of the work of conspicuous presence: the reactive form that occurs in response to observational vigilance, and the proactive form that emerges in an effort to demonstrate sociability.

Whilst participation on social networking sites is perceived as voluntary and not coerced via economic exchange (Rey, 2012), the societal norms of sharing (John, 2012) have created 'compulsory sociality' (Gregg, 2008), a pressure to maintain presence and activity. This has become manifest as labour as consumers feel socially coerced and obligated to continually check and maintain their social media activity. The continual movement of social media forces participants to be "*seen to be moving*" (Jack), comparable with Trottier and Lyon's (2012) notion of social surveillance that exerts the pressure to be visible and active. Maintaining personal profiles is a task consumers feel obligated to do on a daily basis.

Social value as payment

In order for an activity to be considered as a form of labour it must have exchange-value and therefore receive some form of payment (Rey, 2012). For Marx (1952, p.18), wages are "a special name for the price of labour power." Benaria (1999) argues that the recompense for informal and unwaged work is little understood.

Our findings reveal that themes of reciprocity and exchange were common in our participants' discussions of their interactions in social networking sites. Reflecting the economic evaluation of emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007), participants considered the amount of activity on their pages, number of 'likes' and 'followers' as important indicators to the value of their public self. This extends Gerlitz and Helmond's (2013) conceptualisation of the Like economy into the primary level of sociality. Not only does the like button transform user activity into commercial numerical metrics, it also has social value within consumer-to-consumer interactions. The most telling expression of this was revealed by participants who claim to only post items which are guaranteed to receive reciprocal tokens.

> *Poppy: I don't mean that to sound big headed in any way but I tend to only put up things that are probably going to get a 'like'. [...] Or I'll upload something that other people agree with. Just because I think that is the whole point of it.*

You upload things because you want other people to see them. You want approval or you want someone to say something is nice. I know it sounds so sad when you actually say it out loud. But that is literally why everyone does it.

For Poppy the purpose of social networking sites is to produce materials that will be well received by the audience. Further, some participants discussed their strategic planning of posts to coincide with days and times when they expected social networking sites to be busiest to increase the number of responses generated. Indeed some had certain standards in terms of the number of responses they sought: "*5 'likes' is fair enough*" (George).

When the desired level of acknowledgement from others is not met, many participants discussed feelings of rejection, such as being "*abandoned and unwanted*" (Emily) and "*I would feel like people wouldn't like me. Like, no one cares about what I have to say*" (George). Shared materials or products of their social labour which remained 'unliked' or unacknowledged often were later removed by participants for fear of public humiliation. In particular, Jessica viewed unacknowledged updates as similar to being stood up on a date.

Jessica: There is almost like humiliation on Facebook because it is so public. Like obviously it is the same sort of concept as when you go out on a date and

you get stood up and everyone is there and they are just like "Oh my God she is

by herself." You feel that same embarrassment.

Jessica's metaphor reveals the vulnerability she feels towards posting online. Whilst participation gives Jessica enjoyment it simultaneously creates feelings of vulnerability and alienation if posts are left unacknowledged. Her fear of humiliation often left her second-guessing her posts, later returning to take them down if no one had responded to them. This suggests that postings are not simply about producing valued content but are often highly calculated to increase social status within their friend-group.

Following Desan's (2013) call for research to extend Marxism beyond the economic sphere, we draw on such understanding of labour as a social process to evidence the continual cycle of social currency within social networking sites. The "payment" consumers receive from participation can be understood as social value that is derived from consumer exchanges. Respondents recounted many instances when they felt a responsibility to offer "payment" to others in their networks, as Jack commented, "*It is all back scratching.*" These instances of what Belk (2013) would term "reciprocal smiling" include examples such as "liking" photographs, particularly if posted by family or close friends, and responding to questions. These digital gifts (Schwarz, 2010) ensure the continuation of friendship both within online and offline worlds:

Sarah: It's nice to think that people are thinking of you. Maybe it reinforces that connection when people respond. By them responding to me or liking statuses or sending you a message, it reinforces a friendship in a way… it's a way of maintaining strong links.
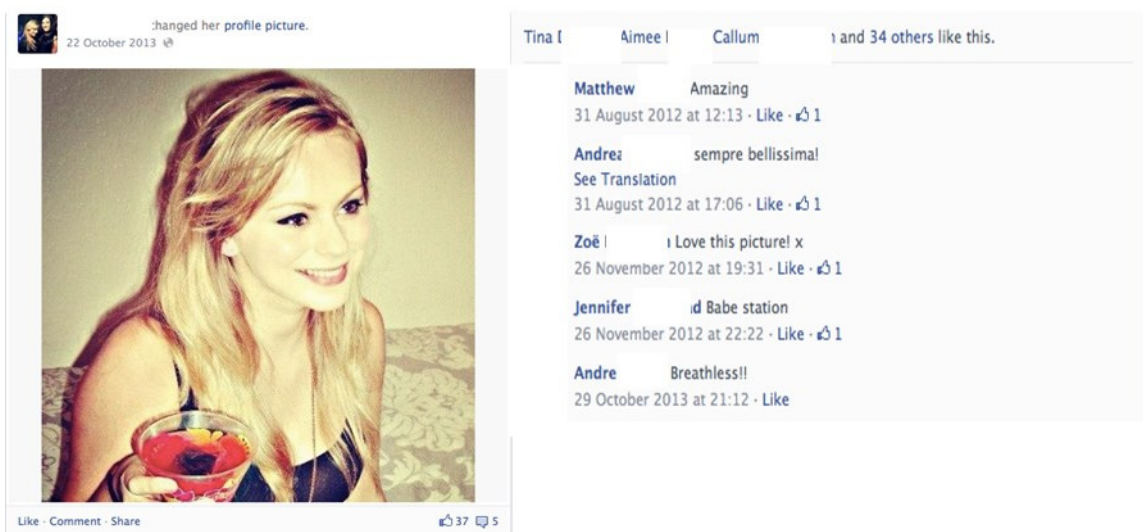

Figure 3: Exerts from Sarah's Facebook page

Similar to emotional gifts discussed earlier, using 'likes' and postings creates exchange-value for social relationships. This is visible in the above exert, where Sarah's profile picture received 37 likes and 5 comments complimenting her photograph (see Figure 3). The social value received acts as a form of payment for social labourers as consumers are rewarded for their productive work and further confirms the embeddedness of social norms and encourages quality content production.

Conclusion

Although consumer work occurs at the primary level of sociality (Cova and Dalli, 2009), the majority of research focuses on the secondary level and emphasises how consumers' immaterial labour can be transformed into value for the organisation. In this paper, we respond to Wood and Ball's (2013: p. 54) critique of the neglect of "the work done *in consumption*." Drawing on research that focused on consumer-to-consumer interaction at the primary level of sociality, we introduce the concept of social labour which we have defined as follows:

The means by which consumers add value to their identities and social relationships through producing and sharing cultural and affective content. This is driven by observational vigilance and conspicuous presence, and is rewarded by social value.

We recognise that Marx (1959) characterises all labour as a social process and identifies co-operation as central to capitalist production. However, his focus is on efficiencies and the exploitation of collective workers to the greatest effect. In contrast, we propose a different form of labour that focuses on the primary level of sociality and consumers' social needs. We recognise that their work may lead to commercial gain but this is not the motivation behind consumer engagement in social labour. We position social labour as a form of immaterial labour sharing commonalities with emotional labour (through

affective gift giving), aesthetic labour (through manipulation of selfies) and presentational labour (management of quality content).

We distinguish social labour from digital labour. Digital labour is broad in scope and relates to all forms of labour associated with the ICT industry, including those that are more obviously geared towards corporate success (Fuchs, 2014). As above, our definition of social labour has a narrower focus, and adds value to identity and social relations. Whilst previous research has considered labour in social networking sites (Andrejevic, 2010), and digital contexts (Fuchs, 2014), we question the emphasis on the digital and argue that consumer participation in social media is more social than digital as it is characterised by sharing. This obligation to share is driven by observational vigilance and conspicuous presence, thus making the practice of social networking a form of social labour.

Social labour differs from other labours in that it is essentially voluntary in nature and not primarily driven by commercial interests. However, we recognise that consumers experience a social obligation to actively participate. Our conceptualisation of social labour encompasses a process of drivers, activities and reward. There are two drivers that fuel the continuous cycle of social media that we term *observational vigilance* and *conspicuous presence*. Observational vigilance accounts for the obligation to monitor for new social media posts. This differs from Andrejevic's (2005) concept of lateral surveillance whereby consumers use DIY surveillance technology to enable covert

monitoring of others. In contrast, our notion of observational vigilance is enacted in order to keep up-to-date with social happenings and ensure social inclusion. Conspicuous presence accounts for the normative pressure to maintain social activity and visibility within social media. Both these drivers operate in conjunction as ongoing processes that require daily attention and maintenance and shape the core activities of social labour.

Social labourers produce and share affective and cultural content. This develops Hardt and Negri's (2000) forms of performed work into the consumption domain. Within our context, affective content can be understood in the form of emotional gifts, and cultural content allows consumers to display a sense of self through producing and sharing visual and textual artefacts. Both types of content operate within the attention economy (Lanham, 2005) and thus require careful consideration to ensure relevance and interest.

Many forms of labour are rewarded through economic capital (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Witz et al., 2003; Sheane, 2011). Consumer work differs because it does not receive any economic recompense and indeed, Zwick et al. (2008: p. 180) label this as 'double exploitation' since working consumers are not paid for their efforts and typically pay a price premium for their outputs. Brizarelli's (2014: p. 20) focus on "social working" prioritises this type of alienation of the worker as market commodity. Whilst previous theory has considered consumer work as unpaid, we suggest that within social labour, there is recompense for consumers in the form of

social value. Thus, consumer-to-consumer interactions become a market in their own right (Banks and Humphreys, 2008) and carry exchange-value (Illouz, 2007) at the primary level of sociality. Reciprocity in this publicly visible context enables consumers to gain recognition and approval for their productive contribution. Thus, we extend Gerlitz and Helmond's (2013) Like economy by demonstrating that consumer exchanges not only have value to commercial organisation but also become social metrics that consumers find valuable. To summarise, our concept of social labour follows the Marxian definition of labour as a social process. Similar to Desan (2013), we consider that Marx is useful beyond the economic sphere and has cultural application. We have demonstrated that social labour is a process that produces social value for consumers and therefore extends our understanding of the working consumer.

Future research should explore how this conceptualisation of social labour may be extended beyond virtual consumption into other contexts where sociality is a key component, for example, consumer interest or community groups. This would further enrich social labour by extending the range of consumer activity that may produce affective and cultural content. Future research could also consider whether social labour extends to a broader demographic group who are less immersed in online social networks.

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