HYPEREXISTENCE

Aalto University
School of Arts, Design and Architecture

Aalto University, P.O. BOX 11000, 00076 AALTO
www.aalto.fi

Master of Arts thesis abstract

Author Sébastien Piquemal		
Title of thesis hyperexistence - a web essay on individualism in late capitalist society		
Department Media Lab		
Degree programme Sound in New Media		
Year **2020**	**Number of pages** **68**	**Language** **English**

Abstract

Environmental destruction, absurd levels of inequality, growing cynicism and a feeling of powerlessness characterize the state of late capitalism we are living in today. These are calling for a deep transformation of our ways of life. In particular, we must question the globalized network culture which is allowing this state of affairs to perpetuate itself.

Individualism is one of the cornerstones of this globalized culture. It is a moral stance which, in its contemporary form, originates from post World War II cultural movements. It emphasizes the agency of the individual, its worth, its goals and aspirations, over those of the social group. As such, it is associated with positive values such as the right to self-fulfillment. But the same ideology of individualism is also justifying pervasive competition, blaming the poor for their failures, and is ultimately atomizing society. This is why we must challenge it.

Individualism has infused the public sphere. It manifests itself through the ubiquity of self-expression, through the careful self-branding of public persona, and through the ruthless instrumentalization of others for the acquisition of reputation. Considering these conditions, any challenge to the ideology of individualism is built on a paradox: to be able to challenge, the critic must have a voice, and to have a voice they must first compete through the very modalities they are trying to criticize : self-expression, self-branding, acquisition of reputation. The arts, the academia, knowledge labor, social media, [...] there is (almost) no public platform that isn't underlied by these modalities. Individualism is a component of the hardware which late capitalism operates on.

This thesis consists of two parts.

(1) A production, which is a website called `hyperexistence`, and is published at https://hyperexistence.me. It consists in (i) a collection of visual documents, videos and images, (ii) a structured bibliography of books and articles, (iii) a series of short textual essays linking together the visual collection and the bibliography. The web essay will continue to evolve, as new texts and documents will be added in the future.

(2) The present manuscript, which is a re-edited compilation of some of the essays written for the hyperexistence website. By no means exhaustive, it attempts to provide an outline of the themes addressed there.

Keywords **individualism**, late capitalism, web essay, politics, network society

Acknowledgements

As any creation, this work was only possible thanks to countless other people, which I want to presently thank from the bottom of my heart.

I want to acknowledge the many generations of scholars this work is based on. I do not want to praise any of them in particular, but rather appreciate the fact that creativity is far more a collective edifice than it is an individual adventure.

I want to give many thanks to Antti Ikonen. He has been incredibly patient, helpful, and always encouraging throughout the thesis work, and throughout my years at Media Lab in general.

I want to declare my limitless love to all my friends (in no particular order): Clément, Aude, Caroline, Gwénolé, Louis, Adèle, Mael, Miki, Rea-Liina, Paju, Havu, Shakti, Riddhi, Rudrah, Kati, Juan, Olaya, Sulo, Cecilia, Maria, Sergio, Edu, Sasha, Mathias, Alisa, … and probably a few more I am forgetting. I haven't been very present lately, but this doesn't mean I am not thinking about you.

Et une seconde tournée d'amour inconditionnel pour ma famille chérie : Elise, Alain, Michelle, Annie, Nicolas, Daniel, Dominique, Carole, Pierre, Philippe.

Finalmente, quiero dar un agradecimiento muy muy especial a Martina Adela, mi corazon, cómplice de la vida y de la cocina. Ella siempre está a mi lado y hace que mi vida sea dulce.

Contents

1 Introduction 2

2 Hegemonic individualism 5

2.1 The need to challenge individualism 5

2.2 The impossibility to challenge individualism 8

3 The ideology of creativity 11

4 Individualist archetype: The prosumer 17

5 Self-branding 22

6 Individualist archetype: The Networked Individual 29

7 Reputation economy 33

8 Individualist archetype: The flexible personality 41

9 The game of visibility 45

10 Conclusion: zooming-out 51

Bibliography 54

1 Introduction

> "who would have suspected that as technology and freedom were worshipped more and more, it would become less and less possible to say anything sensible about the society in which they were applied?" (Barbrook and Cameron 1996)

Environmental destruction, absurd levels of inequality, growing cynicism and a feeling of powerlessness characterize the state of "late capitalism" we are living in today. With structures of power becoming ever so diffuse, there is nowhere to turn to for a solution to the crisis. We are led to believe that both the disease and its cure lie within ourself.

Scapegoating each and every human, or even just a few "evil" specimen is, however, a deception. Individuals and society are mutually constituted, each of these two poles is therefore a lever in bringing about change. But the globalized culture of late capitalism holds an entrenched belief in the omnipotence of the individual, therefore asphyxiating the very possibility of collective action.

Individualism is one of the cornerstones of this globalized culture. It is a moral stance which, in its contemporary form, originates from post World War II cultural movements. It emphasizes the agency of the individual, its worth, its goals and aspirations, over those of the social group. As such, it is associated with positive values such as the right to self-fulfillment. But the same ideology of individualism is also justifying pervasive competition, blaming the poor for their failures, and is ultimately atomizing society. This is why we must challenge it, both as individuals and as a collective.

Individualism is extremely hard to circumscribe and analyse in late capitalism. We are so enmeshed in it that drawing a clear outline of its overarching structure is a difficult task. Nonetheless, it is possible to approach it through a wide range of phenomena such as self-care, identity, labor, social media, celebrity, etc … This essay (or rather a collection of

essays), therefore consists in a collection of short snapshots, which look at the question of individualism from several different angles. Hopefully, assembled together, these snapshots will start to form a pattern and reveal a broader picture of the insidious role that individualism plays in every part of our life.

This thesis consists of two parts.

(1) A production, which is a website called `hyperexistence`, and is published at https://hyperexistence.me. It consists in (i) a collection of visual documents, videos and images, (ii) a structured bibliography of books and articles, (iii) a series of short textual essays linking together the visual collection and the bibliography. The web essay will continue to evolve, as new texts and documents will be added in the future.

(2) The present manuscript, which is a re-edited compilation of some of the essays written for the hyperexistence website. By no means exhaustive, it attempts to provide an outline of the themes addressed there.

The manuscript is organized in loosely connected chapters, each narrating a different social phenomenon underlied by individualism in late capitalist society. These chapters are relatively independent from each other, and can therefore be read in isolation. In addition, we present three "individualist archetypes" which aim at explaining some of the more abstract themes recurring over the essay.

Chapter 2, *Hegemonic Individualism*, gives a short definition of what is individualism, how it is understood by psychology and how it is constituted in contemporary society.

Chapter 3, *The Ideology of Creativity*, talks about the romantic myth of the artist and how it has transformed today into a dogma of heroic creativity.

Chapter 4, *Individualist archetype: The prosumer*, presents the first individualist archetype, “The Prosumer”, characterized by a permanent quest for self-expression and self-actualization.

Chapter 5, *Self-branding*, presents the discourse on self-branding through a series of advice gathered from self-help books.

Chapter 6, *Individualist archetype: The Networked Individual*, presents the second individualist archetype, “The Networked Individual”, illustrating the new ways of establishing and maintaining relationships in the network economy.

Chapter 7, *Reputation Economy*, talks about the new meaning and importance of reputation, scores and online reviews.

Chapter 8, *Individualist archetype: The flexible personality*, presents the third individualist archetype, “The flexible personality”, the individual struggling to keep up with fast-changing conditions in the flexible economy.

Chapter 9, *The game of visibility*, talks about the phenomenon of influencers, online visibility and ranking algorithms.

Finally, in the conclusion, we will zoom-out and forget about individualism for a moment, discussing instead about the planet and our interconnection with it.

2 Hegemonic individualism

2.1 The need to challenge individualism

Individualism is a word originating from 19th century France, and which refers to a moral stance positioning the individual as "the primary unit of reality and the ultimate standard of value" (Soares 2018). This basic proposition was then used and interpreted in various contexts and by various intellectual traditions all across the political spectrum. In the 19th century for example, French socialists used the word "individualism" to criticize the alienating and atomizing tendencies of industrial capitalism, while German romantics on the other hand enthusiastically adopted it as a celebration of human creativity and artistic genius (Lukes 1971). But it is probably in the USA that individualism has acquired its strongest cultural significance, representing "the final stage of human progress in a spontaneously cohesive society of equal individual rights, limited government, laissez-faire, natural justice and equal opportunity" (Lukes 1971). Individualism, as a cultural value, is a cornerstone of Western civilisation.

A first argument generally advanced by proponents of a morality based on individualism is that *individualism is human nature*, therefore we should let it reign. For a start, this argument is fundamentally flawed, as we cannot base morality on the observation of how nature is.[1] But event if we ignore that flaw, the field of social psychology[2] actually shows unequivocally that this is not how human psyche works.

[1]"Individualism is human nature, therefore we ought to let it reign", is a perfect example of what philosopher G.E. Moore called a "naturalistic fallacy". It is a fallacy because we cannot automatically derive what is "good" from what is natural. In fact, we act against nature all the time (for example with medicine), and still we consider many of these "unnatural" actions to be "good".

[2]Social psychology is scientific study of how thoughts and behaviors of an individual are affected by other people.

Historically, much of the theory of social psychology had actually been built on the very same assumption, that "individualism **is** constitutive of human nature". Psychologists assumed in particular that an individual defines its self[3] as an **independent**, self-contained subject, clearly delineated from other people. In this model, most of the actions of an individual can be explained by its intrinsic and selfish goals (Markus and Kitayama 1991) (Markus and Kitayama 2010).

However, perceived differences in behavior, in particular between Western culture and East Asian culture, prompted psychologists to question this assumption. New research demonstrated instead that the traditional model of the individualistic[4] self is not universal, but rather "characteristic of White, middle-class men with a Western European ethnic background" (Markus and Kitayama 1991). In contrast, many other parts of the world including East Asia, South Asia, Africa, South America and Southern Europe, present a different psychological model, whereby the definition of the self tends to focus on relationships of interdependence between the individual and other people. In contrast with an individualistic self, the **interdependent** self's actions are not intrinsic but rather relational. "In many domains of social life, [its] opinions, abilities, and characteristics are assigned only secondary roles—they must instead be constantly controlled and regulated to come to terms with the primary task of interdependence" (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Individualism it seems, is therefore not a universal law of human nature.

[3]This concept is called "self-construal" in psychology : "self-construal refers to the grounds of self-definition, and the extent to which the self is defined independently of others or interdependently with others" ("Self-Construal" n.d.). However, we will stick to "self-definition" in order to avoid technical jargon.

[4]Here again, the technical term for an "individualistic" self-definition (or self-construal) is actually an "independent" self-definition, but we will avoid technical jargon by sticking to "individualistic". Psychology researchers themselves collapse the meanings of both words (Markus and Kitayama 2010) (Komatsu, Rappleye, and Silova 2019).

It rather results from a powerful “cycle of mutual constitution” (Markus and Kitayama 2010) between selves and culture. Different ways to educate, different values and norms, can create selves whose bounds include not only the individual, not only other people, but also other living beings, and nature at large (DeCicco and Stroink 2007).

A second argument advanced to support a morality based on individualism is that *individualism is good for society.*[5] In some cases that is most certainly true, for example when it prompts people to seek emancipation from an oppressive system. However, social psychology also points to some of the negative aspects that individualism might have for others and for the planet.

In the past couple of decades, there has been a growing body of research seeking to understand how self-definition affects people’s behavior in society. An important finding is that individualism corresponds with a lack of ability to “flip perspectives and get outside [of one’s] own [head]” (Cohen and Hoshino-Browne 2005). Individualists tend to present an “egocentric bias” and project their own feelings and their own wants onto the world around them. This tendency might in turn explain the correlation observed between individualism and unethical behavior (Cojuharenco et al. 2012) or between individualism and a lack of concern for the environment (Arnocky, Stroink, and DeCicco 2007). Astonishingly, there even seems to be a direct correlation between the average level of individualism in a country and the ecological footprint of that country, even when we account for differences in level of economic development (Komatsu, Rappleye, and Silova 2019).

In the face of the climate crisis, the rapid collapse of biodiversity in every ecosystem and the booming social inequalities, the “goodness” of an individualistic morality is therefore hard to sustain. At the same time, under late capitalism the “cycle of mutual constitution” between selves and culture seems to have installed individualism in a hegemonic

[5] Of course there can be no definite answer to that question, considering that there is no absolute definition of what is “good”.

position. Today more than ever, it is therefore crucial to challenge the cultural norms and the technologies which overemphasize an individualistic definition of our self, thus impairing our ability to connect with others and with our environment.

2.2 The impossibility to challenge individualism

During the last half of the twentieth century, on the West Coast of the USA, the synthesis of different individualistic traditions has engendered a new form of capitalism which is acting in full force today. On one hand, an utilitarian individualism inherited from right-wing libertarianism,[6] and which embraces the view that society is best served by rational individuals fulfilling their selfish needs. On the other hand, a romantic individualism inherited from the left-wing bohemianism of the sixties' counterculture,[7] and which emphasizes unfettered self-expression and

[6]Right-wing libertarianism generally supports the precepts of "laissez-faire" capitalism. One of the core tenets of this ideology is that competition is healthy for society, and that the only role of the government should be to ensure the respect of private property and individual freedoms. These views tend to be justified by natural laws, that humans are innately selfish and always act with self-interest deep at heart. Some of the more radical proponents of these ideas include social darwinists, which were highly influential in the late 19th-century, or more recently Ayn Rand (Rand 1961), a novelist and philosopher which had a huge cultural impact thanks to her famous books "Atlas Shrugged" and "the Fountainhead", still ranking among the favorite books in USA today.

[7]The sixties counterculture emerged as a reaction to the industrial era of mass production and rigid bureaucracy. Against this model, they championed Romantic themes of self-realization, radical self-expression and non-conformism. Just like the right-wing libertarians, members of the counterculture had a strong contempt for the idea of organized state. Instead of directly participating in mainstream politics, they set to provide a model for the rest of society by enacting the change they wanted to bring forward. They created non-hierarchical model communes, where they experimented with alternative lifestyles, and placed a great emphasis on "transformation of [their] selves and [their] relations with others" (Turner 2005) (Barbrook and Cameron 1996)

anticonformism (Streeter 2003).

In the crucible of the late 20th century Silicon Valley and the revolution of information technologies, these different traditions have converged on a shared visceral distrust for bureaucracy, a boundless belief in the primacy of the individual and its freedom, and a deep faith in the transformative power of information technologies (Barbrook and Cameron 1996). This union has given birth to a new type of individuality which is archetypal of late capitalism : a self-improving, independent, creative genius, working day and night, to bring freedom to the masses through the wonders of market economy, all the while accumulating a well deserved wealth (Duff 2016) (Streeter 2003) (Turner 2005) (Barbrook and Cameron 1996).

This individual logically believes in meritocracy, in other words the principle that hard work, or "merit" always receive just reward. It believes in flat hierarchies and informal ways of working rather than rigid and bureaucratic management. It develops community, but with utilitarian ends, in order to network, develop a reputation, or find new opportunities. It rejects traditional politics, but participates in the civic life in ways which "underline [its] preoccupation with identity negotiation and maintenance" (Svensson 2011). It is a playful capitalist, part artist, part businessman who pays great attention to maintaining a hip and quirky external image.

While this individual might sound like an absurd stereotype, the mutations that it represents are real. The ubiquity of information technologies and the subsequent boom of immaterial labor,[8] have had far reaching consequences on every aspect of our life (Duff 2016). Furthermore, it is clear that these new practices and technologies embed the very individualistic cultural precepts which are in part responsible for the crisis that is currently wrecking our planet.

[8]Immaterial labor was defined by Maurizio Lazzarato as follow : "immaterial labor, [...] is defined as the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity" (Lazzarato 1996)

These precepts are apparent in the new flexible forms of work, which create a permanent state of competition of everyone against everyone else. They are apparent in the ubiquitous mantra “express yourself”, conditioning our self-fulfillment to purely intrinsic goals. They are apparent finally, in the omnipresence of public selves, instrumentalizing each other on social media, in a fierce competition for everyone else’s scarce attention.

These new modalities have inscribed in our selves the impossibility to exist outside of an individualistic mode of sociality. In turn, we enact these precepts and reproduce the same individualistic culture in an endless, inescapable loop. Any challenge to the ideology of individualism is built on a paradox comically expressed by this Facebook user : “The only real ethical move is to refrain from posting, but then how will others know that i am aware of this ethical move, and thus am ethical, unless i post letting everyone know how ethical i am, thus behaving unethically?” (“The Dilemma of Criticising Individualism” 2018). To be able to challenge, the critic must have a voice, and to have a voice they must first compete through the very modalities they are trying to criticize : self-expression, self-branding, acquisition of reputation. The arts, the academia, knowledge labor, social media, … there is (almost) no public platform that isn’t underlied by these modalities. Individualism is a component of the hardware which late capitalism operates on.

3 The ideology of creativity

"I choose to go to the Moon, with artists" (*Meet Spacex Bfr's First Paying Customer - Yusaku Maezawa* 2018), declared Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa. In 2023, if everything goes as planned, the founder of Japan's largest online fashion store will be the first customer to embark on a lunar flight, organized by aerospace company *SpaceX*.[9] But as he announced during the 2018 press conference at SpaceX headquarters, rather than going alone he decided to buy all the seats available in the spaceship, so that he could bring along "6 to 8 artists" with him. Yusaku Maezawa envisions this trip as an art project he called `#dearMoon`, and of which he will be the curator. Each invited artist will be asked on their return to Earth to produce a unique artwork inspired by what they experienced up there. "What will they see? What will they feel? And what will they create?" (*#DearMoon Project - Special Ver with Mz Announcement* 2018) teases the `#dearMoon` presentation video, accompanied by a piano playing "Clair de Lune" by French composer Claude Debussy. "Their works will certainly become a legacy for humankind" (*#DearMoon Project - Special Ver with Mz Announcement* 2018).

What motivates Yusaku Maezawa to finance what will probably become the most expensive art project ever produced? Nothing less than his lifelong dream, "world peace" which he firmly believes art has the power to promote (*Meet Spacex Bfr's First Paying Customer - Yusaku Maezawa* 2018). `#dearMoon`'s statements expressed in the teaser video and on the project website ("#DearMoon" 2018), seem to profess a heartfelt belief in artists' unique vision and ability to lead humankind towards that goal. This depiction of the artist as a "truth-teller" (Oakley 2009), as an individual with a "gift of grace" (Røyseng, Mangset, and Borgen 2007) is in fact very present in the mainstream discourse. It is a **myth** inherited from the Romantic era,[10] which has been perpetuated

[9] Aerospace company, founded by billionaire Elon Musk

[10] Intellectual movement which originated towards the end of the 18th century and reached its peak between 1800 and 1850.

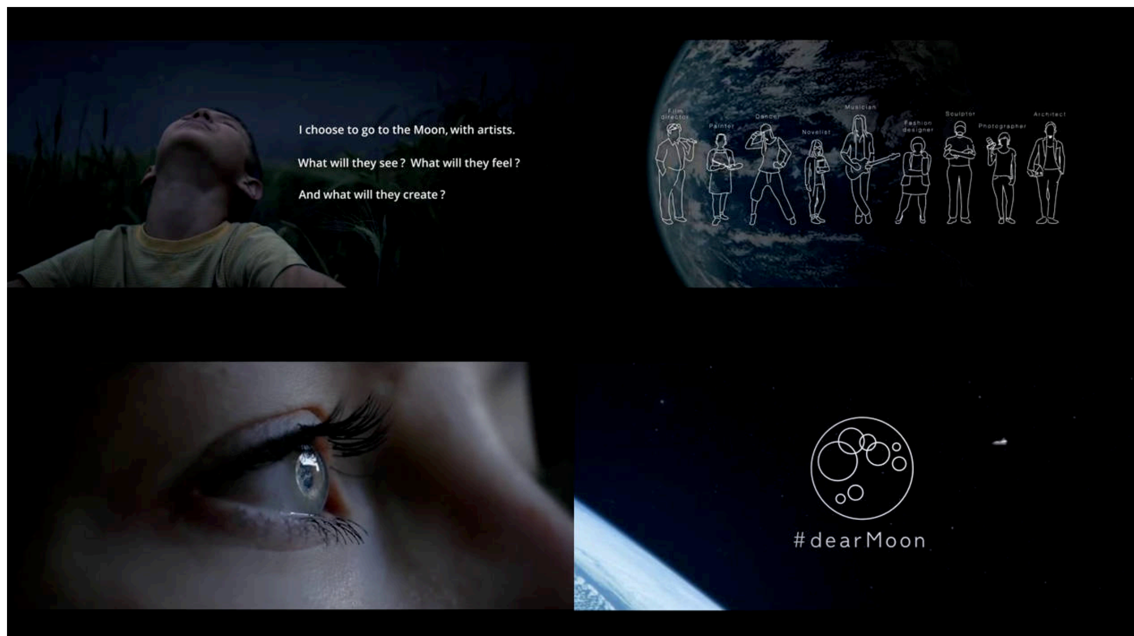

Figure 1: #dearMoon - Stills from the video

and has evolved for centuries, from Balzac's 1831 novel "The Unknown Masterpiece" (Nead 1995), to blues musician Robert Johnson's[11] supposed pact with the devil in exchange for his guitar genius, or recent movies such as Woody Allen's "Vicky Cristina Barcelona". It is also central to artists' identities (Røyseng, Mangset, and Borgen 2007) (Daniel and Johnstone 2015) (Wesner 2018) (Oakley 2009), and constitutive of the art world and its institutions, from universities to international high art events. For example, the 2017 edition of the prestigious Venice Art Biennale[12] was called "Viva Arte Viva", and the statement of the main curator echoes with the communication material of the `#dearMoon` project, though it is phrased a bit more eloquently:

> Art is the ultimate ground for reflection, individual expres-

[11]Born 1911 - Died 1938. Blues musician which had a large influence on later blues and rock music. In spite of his influence, very little is known about Robert Johnson's life.

[12]Founded in 1895, the Venice Art Biennale is the world's most ancient art biennale (an art festival happening every second year). With 500 000 visitors, it is one of the biggest and most prestigious.

> sion, freedom, and for fundamental questions. Art is the favourite realm for dreams and utopias, a catalyst for human connections that roots us both to nature and the cosmos, that elevates us to a spiritual dimension. Art is the last bastion, a garden to cultivate above and beyond trends and personal interests. […] The role, the voice and the responsibility of the artist are more crucial than ever before within the framework of contemporary debates. It is in and through these individual initiatives that the world of tomorrow takes shape, which though surely uncertain, is often best intuited by artists than others. ("Introduction by Christine Macel Director of the Biennale Arte 2017" n.d.)

Though seldom defined, art is often considered one of the **noblest pursuits of humankind**. Museums, concert halls are designed with a clear connotation of sacred, often with awe-inspiring architecture and large volumes reminiscent of religious temples (Duncan 2005). The way art is staged most often claims a clear separation with the audience: it is usually forbidden to touch works in a museum, and the performers in a concert hall stand on a clearly delineated and elevated stage, establishing the status of **art as an object of worship**. In this liturgy, the artist acts as a spiritual guide and thought leader, a pioneer opening up new ways of looking at life and living in society. Politicians on all sides of the spectrum agree on the **social usefulness of art**, the right praising it for its ability to "start conversations" (Dee 2017), the left for being a powerful counter-power, capable of questioning hegemonies, a "steady background hum of challenge" (Dee 2017) to capitalist society.

At the core of the myth of art lies the **heroic figure of the artist** (Wesner 2018). Artists and their work processes have been abundantly depicted and talked about for centuries, both within high-art and in mainstream culture. The artist is often likened to a **mysterious divine creator figure**, able to **channel the forces of their subjectivity** to bring something new to life (Nead 1995) (Dee 2017). In the 20th century, this is typified by the genius Picasso, which has been

abundantly represented and analysed. For example, documentaries like Clouzot's 1955 "Le Mystère Picasso", or pictures of Brassaï have sought to document and provide insight into the creative process of the master. Clouzot's film "Le Mystère Picasso" eventually stages its own failure in unravelling Picasso's mystery, therefore re-affirming the myth of his genius. Picasso's creative process is ultimately depicted as lacking a "principle or system" (Nead 1995) which could enable the audience to understand it. "Picasso's mystery is in excess of visibility and knowledge; it surpasses any attempt at demystification" (Nead 1995). Famous songwriter Carole King provides another more recent example of the mystery of creation in a 1989 interview where she explains how she wrote the song "You've Got a Friend". Her creative process, it seems, is so magical that it is even beyond her own comprehension: "that song was as close to pure inspiration I've ever experienced. The song wrote itself. It was written by something outside of myself through me" ("The Paul Zollo Blog: Q&A with Carole King" n.d.).

If the artist is presented as a heroic creator, its studio then is the mythical site where the creative process happens: "half temple, half laboratory, where the artist/alchemist transforms the muck and matter of paints, inks, canvas into the gold of high art" (Nead 1995). The studio is constitutive of the artist's identity. It isn't simply an inert room filled with tools and works, but rather an extension of the artist's body and mind, a "second skin" (Nead 1995). In a movie critique of HBO-produced documentary *The Price of Everything*, the journalist praises moments when the film audience is taken inside of the artists' studios: "we're allowed to watch them work in silence, often alone. This is amazing access. To me, an artist working is still one of the more mysterious sights there is to witness, and we see it so rarely" ("How Does the Art World Live with Itself?" n.d.).

Undeniably, in the Romantic era, when the myth of the artist was erected, it held a strong critical potential. It created a role model of an individual that is in every way opposed to the figure of the rationalist bourgeois capitalist of the 19th century. The Romantic artist is free of

the social conventions of bourgeois society, and lives "a life unfettered by conventionality and uncompromisingly committed to the quest for the highest forms of human existence" (Chiapello 2004). Far above anything else, the ideals upheld by the artistic identity are individualistic ideals of **freedom, self-realization and anti-conformism**.

Today, more than ever, this myth exerts an extraordinary cultural pull. In spite of the poor employment prospects that artists generally face, the number of graduates from art universities has been growing fast in Western countries in the last decades (Daniel and Johnstone 2015), and research on what motivates people to pursue a career in the arts demonstrates that the Romantic ideals live on (Røyseng, Mangset, and Borgen 2007) (Daniel and Johnstone 2015) (Wesner 2018) (Oakley 2009). However, we can also see that some aspects of the myth have been re-interpreted in order to align with artist's own socio-economic realities (Røyseng, Mangset, and Borgen 2007) (Daniel and Johnstone 2015) (Wesner 2018) (Oakley 2009). For example, in order to bring more financial stability to their lives, artists increasingly participate in the creative industries in a wide range of jobs such as graphic design, video editing or copywriting. Thus, they have to deal with the contradictions between their belief in the sanctity of art and the crass commercialization of their artistic skills, which they often resolve by simply cordoning off their commercial activities from what they refer to as "their own work" (Wesner 2018) (Oakley 2009) (Røyseng, Mangset, and Borgen 2007) (Oakley 2009).

At the same time, the heroic figure of the artist has become a successful cultural meme.[13] We see emerging many modernized versions of that

[13]Even though most of us today know the word "meme" as "Internet meme", it was originally a term coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *the Selfish Gene*. Wikipedia defines "meme" like so: "A meme is an idea, behavior, or style that spreads by means of imitation from person to person within a culture - often with the aim of conveying a particular phenomenon, theme, or meaning represented by the meme. A meme acts as a unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols, or practices, that can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals, or other imitable phe-

myth, in particular in **creative professions**, whose activities share characteristics with art production. Professions such as academics, designers, entrepreneurs, programmers, activists, journalists … or more generally anyone identifying with the artistic values of self-expression, self-realization, freedom and anti-conformism (Chiapello 2004). After the death of famed tech-entrepreneur Steve Jobs, many were paying their respects to a “Great Artist” (Rothman 2015) (Adams 2011). The tales of his creative genius recounted from the early computers he designed and produced in his garage, to his incredible vision and charismatic aura as CEO of Apple. It is almost as if the word “artist”, which traditionally referred almost exclusively to painters and sculptors, has instead come to mean “someone that lives like an artist”, a maverick, a creator, a free-thinker. The artistic lifestyle and identity have become highly desirable, and are endorsed by many in the gentrifying urban centres of the West.

The critique purported by the artistic myth has been so successful that it has infused its values in every area of life, society and economy (Chiapello 2004) (Deresiewicz 2015). It has created a mainstream discourse that “glorifies exceptionalism as a means to create a more inclusive society.” (Dee 2017). Even capitalism itself has fully integrated the artistic values, providing the masses with flexible and creative freelance jobs, cheap digital cameras and creation platforms such as Instagram, YouTube or TikTok, and lifestyle brands to express their inner-selves. The artist isn’t anymore “the radical outsider. It’s not the hipster cool outsider. It’s everything. It’s conformity.” (Curtis 2017)

nomena with a mimicked theme. Supporters of the concept regard memes as cultural analogues to genes in that they self-replicate, mutate, and respond to selective pressures.”

4 Individualist archetype: The prosumer

- **The prosumer** has an aversion for passive configurations, and takes participation for granted.
- Its environment is characterized by an effacement of boundaries between production and consumption, between life and work, between marketing and authentic content.
- It seeks self-expression and self-actualization in every context of its life, for example through consumption and work.

In the early sixties, the counterculture spread from the United States to become a global movement. Among other political messages, it carried a rejection of mass consumer society and of the conformism which characterized the post-war generation. A group of technophilic hippies, in particular around the Bay Area, rebelled against mass media's unidirectional model of communication, exemplified by the TV and the radio. Instead, they envisioned that a "convergence of media, computing and telecommunications" (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) would lead to the birth of a virtual participatory space, where anyone can express themselves freely. This "electronic agora", would become a place of radical democracy and self-expression in cyberspace,[14] empowering individuals against capitalism and against "big government" (Barbrook and Cameron 1996).

The decades following the sixties have seen the birth of personal computers, the Internet and mobile phones, and therefore the realization of this very utopia by the tech industry of Silicon Valley, where the counterculture activists were particularly influential. As a result of this cultural and technological revolution, every one of us born after the eighties is a digital native,[15] product of an interactive media environment. We are

[14] Virtual public spaces opened up by interactive digital technology such as the Internet.

[15] Term used to describe a person that has grown up in a digital and interactive environment. Sometimes used in opposition to "digital immigrant", which refers to people that have had to adopt these technologies as adults.

entitled to self-expression. We blog, we post, we comment, and therefore knit our own narratives to the media products that we consume (Lasén 2013).

But contrary to what the counterculture activists hoped for, this has not destabilized capitalism, which has simply adapted to cater to the empowered, self-expressive individuals that we have become.[16] One of the shifts that maybe best illustrate this, is the gradual importance taken on by brands in marketing practices. At their core, contemporary brands are all about self-expression. They are symbols which enable us to embody a set of values, and signal these to other people. If you think of Mercedes-Benz, you probably think *luxury, good taste, business-class*; if you think of Nike you probably think of *street culture, diversity, performance*, … The brand enriches the purely "functional" value of a commodity with an "emotional" value. It is designed to enable us to express an identity, a belonging to a community perhaps, a personal story, or a social status through the very act of consumption (Arvidsson 2005).

As digital natives, since we have entered the workforce and acquired a spending power of our own, we have been the target of large marketing efforts. However, we have simultaneously been described by marketers as extremely hard to reach. Indeed, having grown in the participatory environment of the "Web 2.0" and social media, we reject old-school unidirectional advertisement which we deem fake. Therefore, in order to engage us, brands have had to evolve by becoming less conspicuous and "blending in with "authentic" communal flows in the digital space" (Serazio 2013). Instead of fixed and "monolithic" ads broadcasted on mass media, we have seen the mushrooming of "grassroot" campaigns distributed across a multitude of platforms and based on participation. One of the global marketing executives at Levi-Strauss describes the

[16]For a more in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, see the literature on the concept of "affective" and "immaterial" labor, for example writings by Hardt (Hardt 1999), Hardt & Negri (Hardt and Negri 2000) or Maurizio Lazzarato (Lazzarato 1996).

evolution of their branding strategy: "I think we were a company, among others, who probably felt that tight control of the brand and saying what our voice is was crucial […]. We're essentially a brand now that is based on co-creation, self-expression, and originality" (Serazio 2013).

New techniques such as "engagement marketing", "experiential marketing", "participatory marketing" are being used to activate us. Examples of past campaigns include contests such as Starbucks' "#WhiteCupContest", which one could enter by posting decorated Starbucks coffee cups on social media. The winner would then see their design being "printed on a limited edition Starbucks reusable plastic cup" ("Starbucks Invites You to Decorate Its Iconic White Cup" 2014). Other examples of similar contests include a photo competition for iPhone users called the "Shot on iPhone Challenge" ("Share Your Best Photos Shot on iPhone" 2019), or Ford's road-trip vlog[17] competition called the "Fiesta Movement" ("One Epic Social Movement" 2014). The strategy is always the same: giving us a feeling of agency, channelling our urge for self-expression into relaying the brand message to our friends for free. And the result is a fluid, "self-effacing" ad that spreads organically through social networks (Serazio 2013) (Nicholas Ind 2015).

These contexts of co-creation which blur the distinction between producer and an empowered consumer have come to define 21st-century capitalism (Ritzer 2015). Beyond the simple realm of commerce and marketing, our entitlement to creative self-expression and self-actualization manifests itself into many other areas of social life. Nowhere, however, is the merging of contexts more evident than in how we have come to relate with our work. The choice of a profession represents the adoption of a lifestyle: a set of values to live by and a community to hang-out with.[18] In this context, "the strict division between production and con-

[17]"video blog", a recurring series of posts shared through video as a medium. Best exemplified by YouTubers.

[18]Of course those who can realize these ideals are only those with the privilege to choose a "lovable" job. Others, less privileged, have to clean floors, or drive Uber cars, … jobs with which it is much harder to create an emotional connection.

sumption tends to disappear [...] as individuals aspire to mix their labor with their leisure." (Holmes 2002). Our work has become "a new form of internalized vocation, a"calling" to creative self-fulfilment" (Holmes 2002).

This notion of work as a "calling" is epitomized by the growth of the creative class[19] which represent the pinnacle of a fulfilled, self-expressive life form. In many creative fields, which suffer from a constant oversupply of workers, the creative work is only practised in theory. The reality is instead a life of precarity, often sustained with financial help from relatives and with temporary employment (Oakley 2009). For example, some will do internship after internship, or take on low-level jobs in the creative industries, such as museum guides or production assistants, activities that involve very little opportunities to actually be creative. Others, less lucky, will not even find a job remotely related to their field, and work as waiters or in sales. Artists, in a curious reversal of the economy of labor, might even pay for the opportunity to work. As funding is scarce, they cover production costs, buy materials, rent spaces, travel, all at their own expense.

The fact that creatives persist despite not actually doing any creative work, or not being paid for it, might seem strange at first glance. One wouldn't imagine a cleaner paying for the opportunity to clean, and taking on a side-hustle to fund their work as cleaners. This points to

[19]The concept of "creative class" was first defined by urbanist and economist Richard Florida in his highly influential book "The Rise of the Creative Class". He defines it like so : "More than 40 million Americans, roughly one-third of all employed people, belong to [the Creative Class]. I define the core of the Creative Class to include people in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music, and entertainment whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and new creative content. Around this core, the Creative Class also includes a broader group of creative professionals in business and finance, law, health care, and related fields. These people engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital." (Florida 2012)

the fact that the reward is elsewhere. It is, among other things, in the possibility to identify as a creative, and live the lifestyle of a creative (Arvidsson, Malossi, and Naro 2010) (Gill and Pratt 2008). It is, here again, about self-actualization and self-expression.

All these examples illustrate the dissolution of a strict separation between on one hand **life** as the site for leisure, self-fulfillment and consumption, and **work** as the site for labor, sustenance and production. The **prosumer**, a combination of the words **pro**ducer and con**sumer**, represents the individual within this fluid context, that pervasively and simultaneously consumes **and** produces goods, values, communities and identities.

5 Self-branding

A quick search on Amazon for "self-branding book" yields a long list of generic titles such as "Digital You: Real Personal Branding in the Virtual Age", "KNOWN: The handbook for building and unleashing your personal brand in the digital age", "Reinventing You: Define Your Brand, Imagine Your Future", etc … The content of these books is as consistent as their titles and often organized in bullet lists of actionable steps. The self-branding gurus who wrote them, tap into a contemporary anxiety about self-presentation online and offline. This anxiety partly comes from the realization that within the network economy, and in a world of flexible work and increased competition, we have to adopt more aggressive career strategies, and be very intentional in how we show ourself to other people (Kang 2013) (D'Alessandro 2008) (Clark 2017) (Schaefer 2017) (Johnson 2019) (Peters 1997) (Castrillon 2019).

Whether social media influencers, rock stars or Fortune 500 CEOs, many of these gurus are highly successful professionals. What they describe are certainly accurate observations of the new world of work, realities which more and more people in the network economy have to deal with (Hearn 2008). Reading their advice closely though, we realize that they are riddled with strange convolutions and contradictions.

The present list of steps is a breakdown of the wisdom transmitted by these books about what is self-branding, and why and how we should do it.

STEP 1: own your personal brand. *"Whether you know it or not, you have a personal brand. When you Google yourself, what pops up?" (Castrillon 2019)*

Brands are ubiquitous, and we supposedly all have a self-brand. Everything we do in public, whether a casual chat with a colleague or posting an online comment, leaves an impression on others and ultimately affects how they perceive us. The self-branding gurus introduce self-branding as an inescapable reality, a physical law of the network economy. They

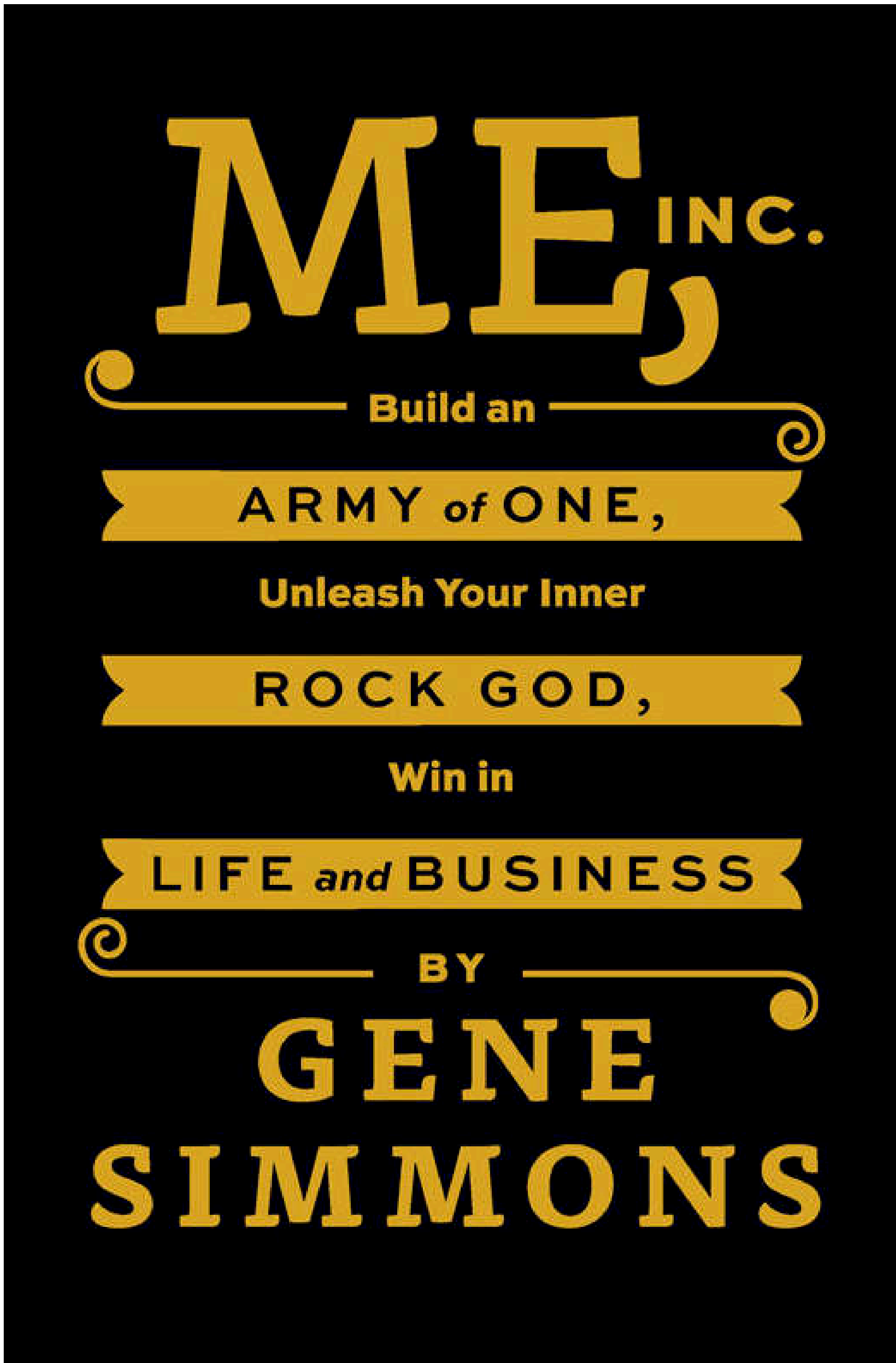

Figure 2: “ME INC.” by Gene Simmons

always start by emphasizing that our self-brand is too precious to let others shape it for us. And taking control of our personal brand is like becoming the master of our own destiny.

STEP 2: understand how others see you. *"Somebody flashes your name. What leaps to mind? Eats peanut butter and liverwurst for lunch? Or has a really unique vision for the business?" (D'Alessandro 2008).*

Discourses around self-branding are suffused with anxiety about peer-recognition, about being accepted and valued. In order to take back control of our brand, the gurus recommend to start by analysing how others see us, so we can start towards changing that perception. Inspired by market research methods, author Dorie Clark, for example, recommends organizing a "focus group where the focus is you" (Clark 2017), inviting our friends and colleagues to participate. "Focus groups" are discussions with an invited panel and a moderator, where the goal is to collect personal views and experiences about a particular topic (Gibbs n.d.). Therefore, in order to conquer our deep insecurities about ourself, the gurus advise to start seeing other people as a market segment to capture, using scientific methods in the process, even if these require the instrumentalization of our friends and colleagues.

STEP 3: understand who you are. *"What is your unique voice?" (Schaefer 2017) "personal branding is about being yourself out loud" (Johnson 2019).*

Personal branding is a journey of self-discovery. Only if we gain clarity about who we are, will we be able to communicate our brand with authenticity. This is where self-branding crosses paths with spirituality and self-realization. Self-branding is about *becoming ourself.* It is curious to think that we would have to interrogate our self in order to become what we already are, but simply didn't know that we already were (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012). Discourses around self-branding operate a "reversal between identity and practice" (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012). They state that our identity is not created by what we do and

how we behave, but rather the other way around: we should first realize what is our identity and then behave accordingly.

STEP 4: devise your branding strategy. *"Starting today you are a brand" (Peters 1997). "The brand statement is your mantra and encapsulates your holistic view" (Johnson 2019). "You are who you say you are" (Johnson 2019).*

The personal brand enables us to find opportunities in a new professional field we are trying to enter. However, how to even start building that personal brand if we have no professional experience to begin with? Self-branding is about solving a "chicken and egg" situation. What should come first? The brand or the person behind the brand? (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012)

To solve this dilemma, the self-branding gurus consistently recommend adopting a "fake it till you make it" ethos. Cynthia Johnson (a.k.a. "the social media girl"), describes how in order to become a social media expert she first had to play the part, changing how she dressed to go to the office, even buying "the largest pair of fake glasses" (Johnson 2019) she could find online.

We need to craft a clear and consistent branded persona and branding message in order to sell our unique value proposition. Defining our brand will then allow us to find an audience, find the platform and the tone to reach that audience, therefore kick-starting the virtuous circle towards success.

STEP 5: respect the etiquette, be good to others *"learn which one is the pickle fork" (D'Alessandro 2008). "everything you want to achieve is in the hands of someone else" (Johnson 2019).*

Discourses around self-branding often disguise instrumentalization of others as altruism. We should be good to others, but only in order to gain their trust, expand our network and reap the benefits later. In order to socialize, we are also advised to always have an appropriate behaviour in public, follow the rules of socialization, be likeable. This is

Cake = Your rational value
Functional benefits, expertise

Icing = Your emotional value
Personality, image

CAKE + ICING = STRONG BRAND

- The cake foundation represents the *rational value* for your brand—your expertise, strengths, functional value and experience.
- The icing is your *emotional value*—your personality, your smile and your style. It's how people connect with you emotionally, such as your likability and whether they trust you.

Figure 3: "Branding pays - the five-step system to reinvent your personal brand" by Karen Kang

yet another contradictory injunction in the self-branding discourses, as we have to simultaneously be our authentic self, but also be deliberate about our public behaviour. We have to be unique, but at the same time seek acceptance from our peers (Hearn 2010).

STEP 6: grow your reputation. *"I am a growth hacker. Or, more accurately, I have a friend who is a growth hacker" (Johnson 2019).*

The purpose of self-branding is to acquire a reputation, and therefore, we have to seize any opportunity to get visibility for our work and for ourself. For example, *the social media girl* tells some of the tricks she employed in order to grow her Twitter following. She explains how she traded her brother `@jpeazy10` for the `@Dodgers`.[20] "Dear `@Dodgers` I will unfollow my brother/this dodger hater `@jpeazy10` if you follow me. Thx ;)" (Johnson 2019). She also explains how in order to get the blue verification check-mark on her Twitter account (a symbol of status, only granted to notorious individuals), she "convinced someone at the Twitter office to verify [her account] on Christmas Day. (Yes, the day when no one is paying attention because they are with family and friends.)" (Johnson 2019). In order to grow our reputation, any nasty trick is justified.

STEP 7: it's on, all the time. *"The truth is, no moment is unimportant" (D'Alessandro 2008).*

The self-branding gurus insist over and over again, that self-branding work is constant and pervasive. There is no rest from it. Everything we do, every transaction we take part in, everyone we associate with, whether at work or outside, it supposedly all affects our personal brand. Every one of our actions needs to be deliberate.

STEP ∞: rinse and repeat *"keep monitoring your reputation" (Clark 2017). "You will get bored, the world will change, and so will your audience" (Johnson 2019)*

[20]Los Angeles Dodgers, a famous baseball team.

As we have finally gone through the long process of:

- understanding how we are seen by others
- defining how we want to be seen by other
- devising a branding strategy
- building a network
- acquiring visibility
- watched our every step to maintain a high reputation

we need to rinse and repeat, always evolve, stay relevant. We need to restart the whole loop from scratch as the flexible economy demands it.

In spite of discourses around self-branding as an empowering process, and the purported freedom for anyone to be anything they want, self-branding actually implies a self with very specific characteristics. To begin with, the branded self has to be **flexible**, it has to be **opportunistic** and network at every occasion (Hearn 2008). It also has to be **self-reflexive**, while simultaneously being denied a stable identity. In addition, as "the very intimate experience of finding and crafting the self is necessarily and immediately linked to those to whom this self will be displayed" (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012), the branded self has to know and respect the social codes of the specific communities it is trying to network in. As such, self-branding involves public performance of our attributes "in highly specific ways" (Genz 2014).

Therefore, far from being a universal fact, the concept of self-branding is itself a construction of the dominant political and cultural forces of our time. It is a direct answer to the constraints of the flexible economy, thinly camouflaged by claims of empowerment through self-expression. Moreover, self-branding is a construction that is indeed inescapable as it embeds the impossibility of its own negation: when one writes or speaks against self-branding, they are actually building a personal brand … which is based on the negation of self-branding (Johnson 2019).

6 Individualist archetype: The Networked Individual

- **The networked individual** is free from the traditional communities, but it is on its own.
- Its main survival strategy is to build and maintain a social network it can rely on in times of need.
- It interacts online on social media, which has become simultaneously the main tool and the main driver of social networking.
- It must learn how to navigate the different contexts it evolves in, always communicating in a very deliberate manner, in order to maximize connection.

It has become commonplace to say that virtual interaction on social media estranges us from our friends and family, or that smartphones alienate us from engaging with strangers while we walk in the city. We often hear about a loneliness epidemic in Western societies, and the suffering of isolated individuals is a supposed symptom of the ills of our modern digital lives.

Surely, the twentieth century did see an important shift in how and with who we socialize. Traditional groups such as families and villages have lost importance. They have been slowly replaced by a set of deliberately selected relationships which are not anymore limited to the community we were born in (Rainie and Wellman 2012). We now have greater freedom in choosing who we want to connect and interact with (Rainie and Wellman 2012). We create social bonds with a much greater socio-cultural and geographical diversity of people than older ways of socializing would allow us to. We might feel more alone, but paradoxically we have many more connections than in the past, large social networks of loose relationships which we maintain through digital technology (Rainie and Wellman 2012), "solar system[s] of one to two thousand and more people orbiting around us" (Rainie and Wellman 2012).

Social networks existed long before the Internet was invented. In a 1929 short story called *Chain-links* (Karinthy 1929), Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy famously formulated[21] the theory known today as "six degrees of separation": each of us is connected to any other individual on the planet through no more than five personal connections.[22] Already in the first half of the 20th century, Karinthy recognized that distance was shrinking thanks to new technology such as the airplane or the telephone. He was aware of the growing interconnectedness of humans and sensed the emergence of social networks. However, it is "the triple revolution" of 1) the Internet, 2) mobile devices and 3) social media, which really gave social networks a central place in our lives, and therefore made us acutely aware of their existence (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Thanks to the revolution of digital communication technologies, "each person has become a portal to the rest of the world, providing bridges for their friends to other social circles" (Rainie and Wellman 2012).

On one hand, these new ways of socializing are empowering. They untether us from traditional groups and their hierarchies. They give us potential access to a near-infinite amount of resources, people and information (Rainie and Wellman 2012). If one has a large, diverse network and knows how to **activate** it, they can conjure up a great amount of help to solve a wide range of issues. Help for finding a job, raising funds for a personal project or getting emotional support in times of need (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Social networks are undeniably liberating if we know the right strategies to put them to work.

On the other hand, the very existence of our social network can never be taken for granted and requires constant maintenance. We need to message or "keep in touch" to cultivate our distant ties (Rainie and Wellman 2012) (Miller 2008). Much of the communication on social media platforms happens solely for this purpose and carries almost no information. Think about the ubiquitous "like" or the ability to "tag"

[21]Karinthy only imagined the concept, he didn't give it the name "six degrees of separation" which we use today.

[22]If we count the first person ; add the five links ; we get six people in total.

someone in a post or a picture. They are nothing more than weak pulses sent down the synapses of the network, necessary to keep the distant connections alive. They are messages without content which we use to poke our friends into not forgetting us, as we do not have the time and bandwidth to interact more meaningfully with each one of them. But what's more, social media platforms even automate such communication, by feeding our activity back to our contacts in the form of machine-generated posts or notifications (Munar 2010). Think about quiz results on Facebook, about notifications such as "Jane added to her story" which are automatically posted to our friends. These features are all designed to establish our "connected presence" (Miller 2008) and let "one's network know that one is still 'there' " (Miller 2008).

Maintenance, however, is not enough. We also need to expand. Driven by the fear that our network could die out, we engage in a logic of "endless growth" (Miller 2008). We collect friends, connections, relationships … We recognize that "the larger the network, the more secure the individual" (Miller 2008).

Much of our lives has come to depend on our ability to network successfully, reach the right people in order to obtain what we desire. Here, again, digital communication tools, and in particular social media platforms have become the main gateways to new opportunities (Rainie and Wellman 2012). We find jobs through LinkedIn, where we connect with like-minded professionals, announce a promotion or publish articles about work-related matters. We find love or sex on dating services such as Tinder or OkCupid, where we put up cute pictures and detailed personal profiles about anything from our sexual preferences to our political views. We find community on Reddit or Facebook groups, where we share tips about our favourite hobby, seek advice and support for difficult situations, or simply explore together the pleasures of ASMR[23]

[23]ASMR is short for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, which refers to a tingling sensation in the skull experienced by some people when listening to specific types of sounds. An whole video genre has emerged on YouTube to try to trigger these tingles, as well as a large community around ASMR.

or the shower orange.[24]

A silent expectation of all of these platforms is that we should reveal ourself, and share personal information (Munar 2010). But at the same time, because of the intermediation of relationships, self-presentation happens in deferred rather than live, which means that we are afforded a lot of control on how we want to be presented to others. We have become experts in the management of our online images (Munar 2010), we craft curated versions of our identity which are designed to be desirable and are instrumentally targeted at establishing new connections, or attracting people's attention. This mostly means displaying positive affect: a selfie at the beach, a yummy looking lunch, or a joyful family reunion. But at other times, this also mean crying on YouTube or sharing struggles with mental disease (Berryman and Kavka 2018).

Each online community comes with its complex etiquette about what content is appropriate and in which context. One doesn't put forward the same qualities or expose the same level of personal details on LinkedIn, than they do on Instagram or in a Facebook group about their favourite band. We must be careful about avoiding embarrassment, by sharing too much information or in an inappropriate way. For example, "a selfie when being alone in the presence of strangers can be appropriate if it is a purposeful photograph sent to friends […] or embarrassing if it is a snapshot taken because one has nothing better to do" (Lasén 2015). We have to surf parallel public spaces with each its own set of complex and shifting norms. Each of us is the manager of a "multidimensional virtual identity", which changes shape depending on the audience and the context (Munar 2010).

[24] A subreddit where people post about the pleasure of eating citruses with their bare hands under the shower.

7 Reputation economy

Within the last decades, the emergence of the network economy, based on the rapid spread of information and communication technology, has induced a greater fluidity of social interactions. We increasingly work or hire through the so-called "gig-economy", buy or sell through online peer-to-peer marketplaces, and maintain distant friendships with people across the globe.

These new modes of transactions, punctual, dematerialized, distanciated, have fractured the traditional model of trust, based on loyalty, physicality, and proximity (Botsman 2012). In this new economy, "structured as loose associations of strangers" (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012), reputation has become the central currency (Hearn 2010). It is constructed publicly on digital platforms, and serves as an indicator of trustworthiness, therefore guiding many of our choices. For example, online rating systems (such as the ubiquitous 5 stars) are now consulted by most people to choose for anything from a toaster on Amazon, to a doctor on Google. Information that we used to obtain by word of mouth, directly from close friends or relatives, we now obtain by querying the network (Rainie and Wellman 2012) : which restaurant to dine at, which freelancer to hire, etc … These developments signal the rise of a **reputation economy**, whereby reputation has become one of the most important economic assets, one which translates directly into funding, work or business opportunities (Florida 2012) (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012) (Gandini 2015) (Peters 1997).

"Honor, glory, fame, esteem, recognition, renown, prestige, celebrity […] All of these terms pertain in some sense to a species of reputation, whether living or posthumous, wide or local, bright or dim." (Rodden 2006). Having a "reputation" means being known by someone, near or far, for something, good or bad (Rodden 2006).

One of the most ancient and most widespread theories on reputation-building, is that it follows a "perfect law" (Rodden 2006) whereby the

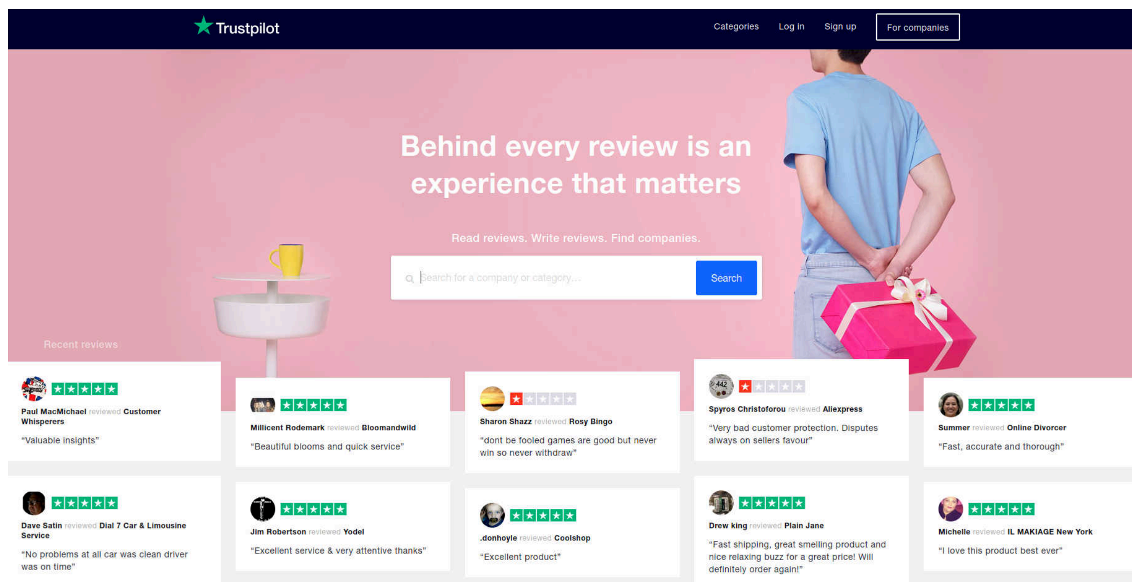

Figure 4: Trustpilot - "The world's most powerful review platform"

world is fair, and merit or skill are always rewarded with reputation, and conversely, reputation always originates from merit. This theory underlies popular myths such as the "self-made entrepreneur" or the "creative genius" which gains recognition thanks to hard work and/or innate abilities. The "perfect law of reputation" also underlies the idea of "meritocracy" - a model of social organization where hierarchical position and rewards are directly correlated with merit. Meritocracy is especially popular in the tech industry, where big companies like Red Hat are trying to breed a fairer work culture "where the best people and ideas win" (Whitehurst n.d.).

The reputation economy is not new. For example in academia, one of the main career drivers has always been recognition from peers. The novelty is that, in the last two decades, the proliferation of data generated by our interactions online has enabled **objective quantification** of reputation and therefore a digitalization of the reputation economy (Botsman 2012) (Gandini 2015). This is certainly true within the academia, with the growth of web sites like academia.edu which places a strong emphasis on reputation metrics such as the "PaperRank" or

the “AuthorRank”[25] (Duffy and Pooley 2017) (“What Are Authorrank and Paperrank?” n.d.). But it is also true of spaces that were not previously subjected to peer evaluation, like on social media platforms, and their ostensible display of “vanity metrics”: “friends”, “follower count”, “plays”, “views”, “likes”, etc…

These conspicuous measures, usually consisting in a single number, are, however, only the tip of the iceberg. Reputation online is also played out in a lot of other ways which are a lot less obvious. Any digital trace that we leave behind (for example a post or a purchase) represents an inscription of our actions, habits, opinions or emotions, and can be recovered and analysed long after we have generated it. Such archives often play a role in evaluating someone’s reputation. For example, while scouting for a new hire, employers frequently review social media accounts of applicants, looking, among other things, for evidence of drug use or discriminatory comments (Hartwell and Campion 2019).

Information about personal behaviour also has an obvious value for companies, like banks and insurances, which base a big part of their business on trust (Botsman 2012). Long before social media, banks for example, had implemented trust measurement systems in order to evaluate the risk of giving out a loan to a particular customer. “Credit bureaus relied in part on gossip culled from people’s landlords, neighbours, and local grocers. Applicants’ race could be counted against them, as could messiness, poor morals, and “effeminate gestures.”” (Hvistendahl 2017). Today, digital interactions capture our personal behaviour with an accuracy that was not possible before, therefore opening up a new market for the algorithmic computation of reputation.

Throughout the 2010s, scores of new startups (Connect.Me, Tru.ly, Legit, TrustCloud, Scaffold, TrustPlus, Confido, Briiefly, Reputate, … among others) have tried to tap into this business by building public reputation aggregators. Data is collected from dozens of different

[25] measures of the influence of a paper and author, calculated on the base of recommendations from academic peers.

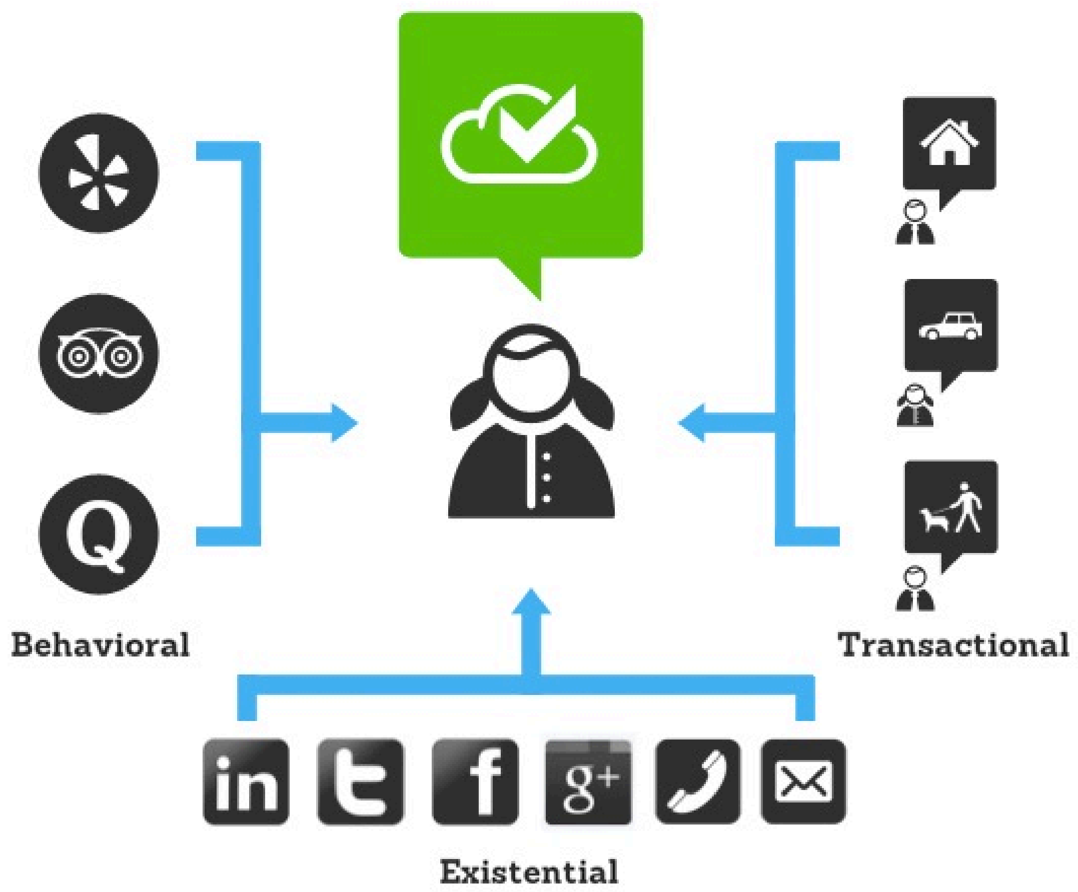

Figure 5: TRUSTCLOUD

sources and a unified trust score is generated for each individual (Botsman 2012). Others like Klout (now closed) or Skorr, focus more on the market of digital influence, in particular on Instagram, Twitter or LinkedIn (Botsman 2012).

But the biggest and by far most extensive experiment in this domain, is the social credit system implemented by the Chinese government in collaboration with several Chinese tech giants such as "Alipay" and its "Zhima Credit" app (Hvistendahl 2017). Not much information is filtering outside of China about the exact workings of this program, and therefore one of the best accounts available today is still a 2017 piece from WIRED magazine.[26] In this article, the journalist describes her first-hand experience in using the app, as well as discussions with other users about how it was affecting social interactions. It is explained that the Zhima Credit is represented by a single number ostensibly displayed on the app home page. It is calculated by aggregating a very broad range of information about the user, such as purchase history (apparently buying diapers gave positive points), criminal record, loans, fines, donations to charities and much more. But one of the most important factors was peer reputation, so someone that had many friends with high scores would get rated higher themselves. The app then rewarded users with access to a range of advantages provided by hundreds of Zhima partners, high scores could, for example, rent cars without leaving a deposit, or even bypass the security check at Beijing airport (Hvistendahl 2017).

Zhima Credit instantly brings to mind the episode "Nosedive" from the Black Mirror TV series (*Black Mirror (S3e1), Nosedive* 2016), where the whole society is powered by a digital peer-to-peer scoring system. Within this all-encompassing reputation economy, every interaction and emotion is instrumentalized towards crafting a desirable persona, with the help of specialized PR consultants and neat reputation charts. Lacie,

[26] Apparently some of the information in the WIRED article might be outdated by now, but that doesn't invalidate the underlying social mechanisms described.

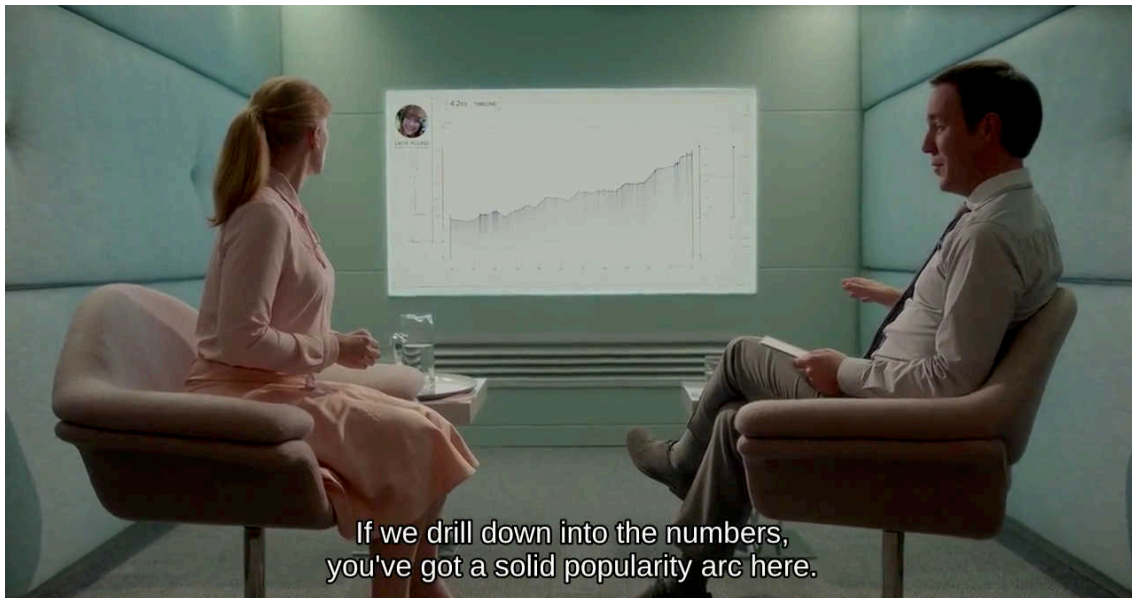

Figure 6: Black Mirror (s3e1), Nosedive - The Reputation Consultant

a middle-class young woman with a middle-high score of `4.2` engages in a race to reach `4.5` which would enable her to buy her dream house. To increase her reputation, she needs to create new social connections with "high-score people", and therefore decides to reconnect with a long-lost school friend which has a high `4.8` score herself.

In an unsettling parallel with Lacie's journey, some Zhima Credit users were also trying to game the reputation system through carefully selecting who they accepted as friends on the app. They would, for example, refuse friendship requests from people who they believed might have a low score, even if they knew these people in real life. Conversely, some were joining chat rooms where they met and connected with high-score strangers in order to boost each other's ratings (Hvistendahl 2017).

These stories point to the fact that digital scoring systems showcase a reputation that is **mostly relational** and that **reproduces itself**. People with high scores are placed in a position of gatekeepers, deciding on who else gets a high score through connecting with them. Reputation then represents little more than the ability to craft a public persona that

is optimized for establishing connections, and successfully navigating the reputation game (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012) (Gandini 2015). Moreover, these systems do not always assess what they originally intend to. When the stakes are high, and when the opportunity presents itself, people will naturally take shortcuts. The measure has the perverse effect of displacing the original incentive from "performing well" to simply "maximizing a number".

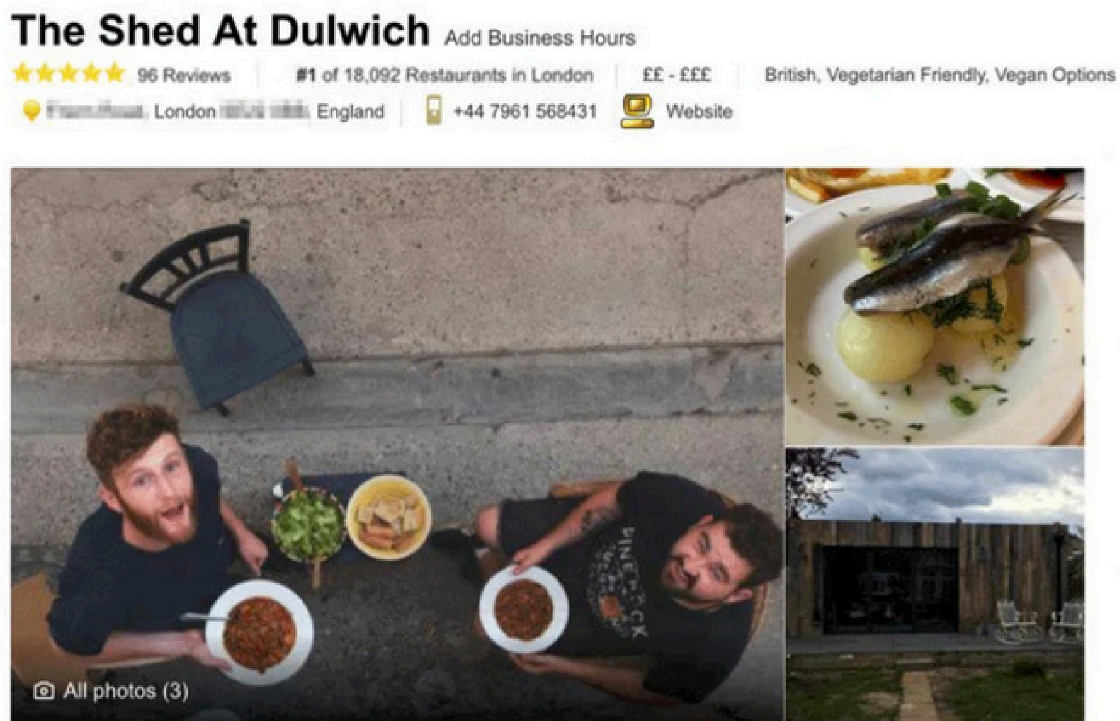

Figure 7: The Shed At Dulwich - Tripadvisor review

As it seems, some of these online platforms are in fact easy to abuse. In 2017, a writer from VICE magazine decided to try tricking the online reviews site Tripadvisor by creating a page for an entirely fake restaurant called "The Shed At Dulwich". He enlisted some of his friends to write fake 5-star reviews about the non-existent place, and the reputation of

the restaurant slowly grew. A few months into the project, his phone was constantly ringing, customers were desperately trying to book a table. A PR agency even called him, trying to get hired to represent the successful young restaurant. Sure enough, after 6 months the Shed was ranked #1 on Tripadvisor in the whole of London (2018).

The story of "The Shed" shows, again, how in the digital reputation economy, perception has taken precedence over reality. With careful image management, it was possible to create lasting hype for a restaurant that never existed, never served a single plate and that technically didn't even have a physical venue.

Personal and business development discourses are rife with reputation management techniques such as self-branding, which aim at generating an image of trustworthiness and at expanding one's network and connections. And whether online or offline, it is easy to see that reputation, in reality, has little to do with merit. Rather, it emerges from "a complex of factors, both historical and social" (Rodden 2006). It is a matter of connectedness (one's social network) (Gandini 2015), of positioning (one's brand image) (Rodden 2006) and above all of strategizing. But against all evidence, the individualistic myth of the "perfect law of reputation" endures. And according to polling data, many people not only believe in meritocracy, but they also believe that they are living in one (Isaacs 2008).

8 Individualist archetype: The flexible personality

- **The flexible personality** must survive in an environment that fears stability, where everything is based on the short term.
- It is a cynic, always on the lookout for opportunities, and will adapt to whatever comes its way.
- It is a member of the flexible labor force: a temporary worker or a freelancer. It experiences job insecurity.
- It is permanently uprooted and suffers from fragmentation of its identity, a difficulty to construct a coherent narrative about its life.

Today, political leaders around the world try to emulate the "economic miracle" of the UK and the US, which have reached what economists call a state of "full-employment."[27] They believe the magic recipe to be a mix of reforms which aim at reducing government regulation of the labor market. This means among other things allowing companies to hire and fire more easily, and allowing employees and employers to negotiate their own terms more freely: working schedule, contract duration, salary, social protections, etc … (Rubery, Keizer, and Grimshaw 2016)

Indeed, in our highly dynamic global economy, companies need to be able to respond fast to the changes of the market. While the **pyramid** organization is often used as an image to describe the outdated structure of big manufacturing companies from the Fordist era,[28] the metaphor of a **network** is best suited to describe contemporary companies. In the

[27] "Full-employment" doesn't mean that everyone has a job, it is the lowest possible rate of unemployment that won't cause an economic inflation. In the US and the UK, it this rate is believed to be between 4% and 5% of unemployment of the active population.

[28] "Fordism" relates to the methods of mass production that were predominant especially during the first half of the twentieth century. It refers to a production in huge factories of uniformized products, by mechanized tools, and low-skill workers.

pyramid, the whole production chain was handled internally, and organized top-down in a rigid manner. In contrast, the network is loosely integrated, and optimized for collaboration with external partners. This style of organization grants a greater resilience against change, as production can be reconfigured on demand without destabilizing the whole edifice. (Kashefi 2007)

This new way of organizing business explains the push for more lenient labor laws. The ability to scale up production rapidly by using temporary workers or hiring external contractors for a specific task is paramount for companies to compete in the fast-changing market. Cycles of innovation, design and production are shortened to cope with a demand that is in constant flux. In order for the company to remain agile, everything needs to stay within a short temporality, and therefore "almost all work [...] is organized into bite-sized packets called projects." (Peters 1997). A project relates to a bundle of tasks and goals which must be achieved within a set timeline and budget. It is bounded in time and in scope. A team can be assembled on an ad-hoc basis to realize it, and be disbanded once it is over.

In the project world, our careers have become a series of discontinuous experiences. We jump around from task to task, role to role, with different collaborators. Aptitude for teamwork, and communication in general, are fundamental to keep up and adapt, hence the hype around "soft-skills" in the business literature. (Fisher 2009) (Sennett 1998) (Peters 1997)

This environment of radical fluidity also has a fetish for youth. Older people are seen as "deadwood", unable to breathe energy into the organization, and unable to follow the fast pace of change (Sennett 1998). Besides, striving in the flexible economy requires particular traits of personality. We need to be ready to change affiliations at any time, have a certain spinelessness to conform "to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment" (Fisher 2009). We need a self-confidence strong enough to allow us to "dwell in disorder" (Sennett

1998). And we need a cunning mind which will allow us to strategize our next move (Brown 2009).

The push for flexibility however doesn't only come from the economy. It also corresponds with aspirations to a more fulfilling work-life, inherited from the counterculture of the sixties. Labor movements and activists back then "enacted a collective migration out from the regime of the factory" (Virno 1996), asserting the right for everyone to a life outside of work.

True to this tradition, flexibility is associated with a set of highly positive traits and aptitudes: "spontaneity, creativity, cooperativity, mobility, peer relations, appreciation of difference, openness to present experience" (Holmes 2002). The romanticized figure of the flexible worker is well represented by the **digital nomad**, a freelancer who travels the world with its laptop, working from exotic locations equipped with WiFi. Starting over and changing every time is welcomed as a rejuvenating experience, while stability is associated with routine, stagnation, "almost a living death" (Sennett 1998).

For those of us with "cool professions" (engineers, creatives, …) in the upper tier of the labor market, the regime of flexibility can indeed be synonymous with freedom, or with a better "work-life balance". We negotiate contracts which include remote working, flexitime[29] or compressed workweeks.[30] More and more also embrace freelancing as the ultimate form of work flexibility. This choice reflects aspirations to work on one's own terms, choosing the schedule, choosing the location, and even choosing the projects and customers ("Freelancing in America 2019" n.d.).

[29]Work schedule which allows employees some flexibility in the time they arrive or leave from work. This is in contrast to the traditional "9 to 5 jobs", where the work schedule is rigid.

[30]Workweek that is shorter, but more condensed, than the traditional 5-days week. In exchange for the free days, employees work longer hours on their working days.

However, as companies are moving towards temporary arrangements, permanent jobs are becoming rarer anyways, and the regime of flexibility is increasingly becoming a non-choice. Many workers experience insecurity about the near future. Surveys show for example that a high percentage of freelancers are worried about the unpredictability of their activity, or about the competition from other businesses ("Freelancing in America 2019" n.d.). These concerns are amplified for those in the lower tier of the labor market. Workers in the gig economy such as Uber drivers, Amazon couriers, or workers in the care industry on zero-hour contracts, constitute a new disposable workforce, exposed to rising levels of precarity.

While the political discourse on flexibility promises that everyone could have their individual needs acknowledged, the reality of the new labor market stresses that we are all interchangeable. With its fluidity and its fixation on the short term, "the system radiates indifference" (Sennett 1998). It demonstrates the equivalence of everything and everyone, therefore generating cynicism and opportunism. Disillusioned, "we recognize that work is a game and that its rules do not require respect, but only adaptation" (Hearn 2010) (Virno 1996).

As we are faced with a resurgence of nationalism and a general tendency to seek grounding within simplistic narratives of identity or race, the instability imposed by the flexible regime of work has a particular resonance. Indeed, "narratives are more than simple chronicles of events; they give shape to the forward movement of time, suggesting reasons why things happen, showing their consequences" (Sennett 1998). The flexible economy, on the other hand, begets a succession of disconnected experiences, the waning of long-term commitments, the permanent scramble to stay relevant to the market, which all concur to "a profound sense of belonging to a temporal spatiality deprived of definite direction" (Virno 1996).

9 The game of visibility

From Kylie Jenner's $1m per Instagram post ("Kylie Jenner and David Beckham Make Instagram Rich List" 2018), to Logan Paul sharing a video of a man hanged by the neck in Japan's "suicide forest" (*We Found a Dead Body in the Japanese Suicide Forest - Deleted Logan Paul Vlog* 2017), social media influencers are most renowned for the scandal surrounding them. They supposedly represent the archetype of the millennial, bringing about the end of the world in a flood of selfies and entitlement. However, a 2018 Netflix documentary called The American Meme (Marcus 2018) filming the life of several influencers, shows that there is more to the picture. We can see, yes, narcissism, entitlement and selfies, but also successful entrepreneurs that have acquired a unique savviness about social media and community building. And thanks to these skills, they have built a dedicated online following, which they sell to brands for a lot of money.

Today, anyone that has anything to promote, that is running a small business or working as an independent, is incited to have a social media strategy ("BUILD Your Brand - Turn What You Love Doing into a Career" n.d.) (Baym 2013) ("Social Media for Business" n.d.). Countless websites have emerged to provide much-needed guidance to confused beginners: "Social Media Marketing for Restaurants", "Getting More Fans: The Artist Guide for Social Media", and many more. Advices are often based on exhaustive audience engagement[31] data, which can make them seem oddly specific. For example, according to Hootsuite,[32] posting about technology on Instagram is better done on Mondays or Tuesdays at 14h, while posting about media and entertainment is better done on Tuesdays or Thursdays between 12h and 15h ("The Best

[31] Interaction that a post generates. For example, if a post is being liked, commented on, etc … it is receiving "engagement". ("The Ultimate List of Social Media Definitions You Need to Know in 2019" n.d.)

[32] A social media management app. The company also has a business blog on which they post a lot of articles about social media marketing.

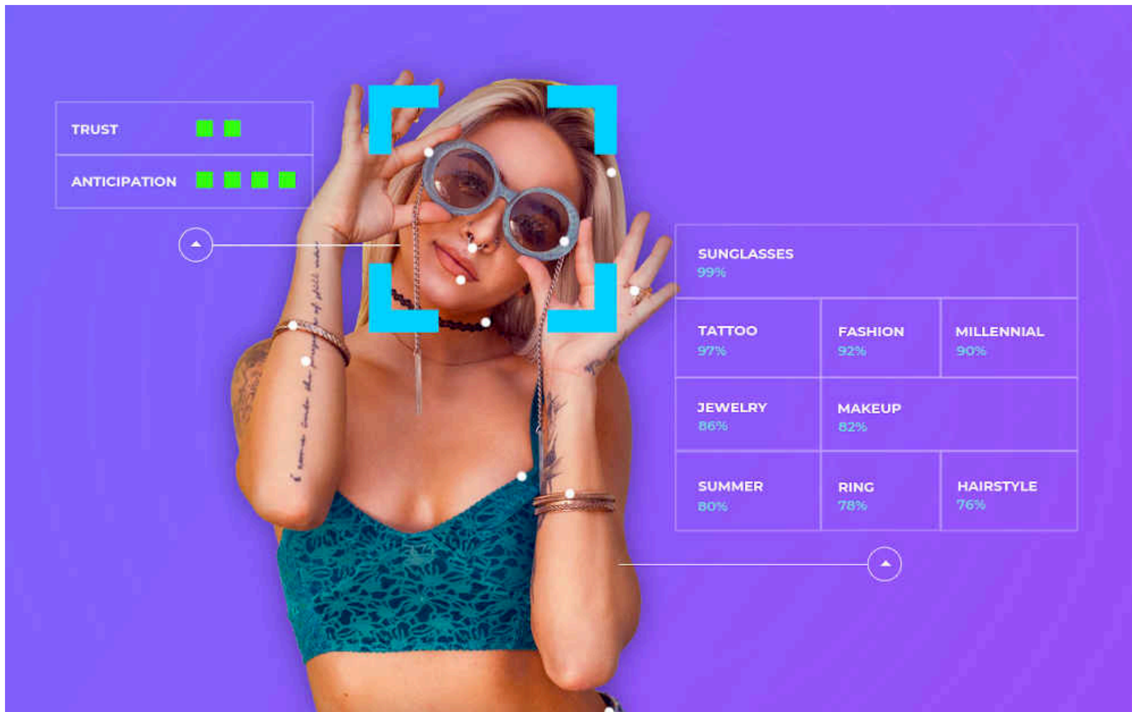

Figure 8: Captiv8 - Influencer Marketplace

Time to Post on Instagram in 2019 (and the Worst)" 2019). The task of efficiently managing one's presence on social media is complex and technical ("19 Social Media Metrics That Really Matter—and How to Track Them" n.d.).

Surely, social media platforms have operated a re-distribution of the power of being seen. From the highly institutionalized model of mass media and celebrity, we have moved over towards a more fragmented model of ubiquitous publicity. On social media, everyone sees and is seen. At first sight, this makes social media appear more democratic and empowering. However, visibility is not allocated equally to everyone. Instead, the ranking algorithms which power these platforms decide what content gets pushed to the top of the feeds, and what content sinks into darkness (Bucher 2012).

Within this game of visibility, influencers have emerged as professional

players, working to reverse engineer[33] the algorithms in order to cash-in engagement and followers (Cotter 2018). They conduct extensive research to figure out how to maximize visibility, making use of all the metrics available (reach, audience gender, location, etc …) (Cotter 2018). They use techniques such as A/B testing (Cotter 2018), which consist in posting several small variations of the same content in order to see which variant receives the most engagement. An example of A/B testing would be to create the exact same post but with slightly different attachments: a picture, a long video, a short video, etc… and study the resulting analytics to understand which type of content performs best ("A/B Testing on Social Media: How to Do It with Tools You Already Have" n.d.).

Visibility on social media tends to have an effect of amplification. Instagram influencers know well the "cyclical relationship between engagement and follower counts" (Cotter 2018):

- Ranking algorithms will make more visible posts that (already) receive a lot of engagement.
- The user who created this post will then receive more exposure, which will increase their chance of gaining followers.
- More followers means more potential visibility, and therefore a higher chance at getting engagement in the future, sustaining a cycle of growth:

```
more engagement  -> more visibility  -> more followers
```

Social media platforms, therefore, have a tendency to perpetuate a loop of self-reproduction of the same behaviours and the same tried and proven content (Marwick 2015) (Baym 2013).

[33] Reverse engineering is the process of trying to understand how an object (or in this case an algorithm) has been designed, by conducting scientific experiments on that object.

As it seems to be one of the keys to the game of visibility, influencers are even "faking" engagement, in an attempt to fool the algorithms and kickstart the cycle of growth. For example, one of the latest tricks is to join Facebook or Telegram[34] groups where members coordinate in order to mutually like and comment on each other's social media posts (Cotter 2018). These groups called "reciprocal engagement pods" can be very exclusive (many of them are invite-only). Many pods are partly automated, a computer program assisting the admins in making sure that everyone is reciprocating the engagement they receive from others, otherwise kicking them out ("Do Instagram Pods Work? The Truth Behind Instagram's Latest Engagement Hack" n.d.). As a result, pods do generate engagement. But the likes and comments are generally not "real", in the sense that they are not from people genuinely interested in the content posted. They are rather a purely numerical optimization (Cotter 2018) ("Do Instagram Pods Work? The Truth Behind Instagram's Latest Engagement Hack" n.d.).

Another widely used technique is to directly buy engagement from online companies which use bots. And because it is very easy and cheap (as low as 10$ for 1000 YouTube likes) ("Buy Social Traffic" n.d.), a lot of people do it, not just influencers. In 2018, the New York Times released a long piece called "The Follower Factory" (Confessore et al. 2018), investigating the market of fake followers and the story of Devumi, a shady online reseller that has supposedly provided millions of bots to Hollywood celebrities, politicians, athletes, etc… ""Everyone does it," said the actress Deirdre Lovejoy" (Confessore et al. 2018). Another article in The Cut called "I'm a Normal Person and I Buy My Instagram Followers" (Anonymous 2019), relates the story of a 35-year-old woman which bought fake Instagram followers for a new account that she created featuring her pug. Following a "fake-it-till-you-make-it" logic, users buying these services often hope that by artificially boosting their public numbers, they will give a sense of reputability to their account, and therefore

[34] An encrypted messaging app, which allows to create public and private discussion groups.

Figure 9: Devumi - Buy Twitter Engagement

attract engagement from real people (Elaridi 2013) (Baym 2013). There are hundreds of companies providing these services: buysocialtraffic.net, www.qqtube.com, instaboostgram.com , etc… and it is possible to buy anything: SoundCloud or YouTube plays, Instagram or Twitter followers, LinkedIn endorsements, Reddit traffic and even YouTube "dislikes" ("Devumi Social Media Marketing Services" n.d.) ("Buy Social Traffic" n.d.).

All these social media strategy hacks demonstrate a certain brutality in the competition for being seen. Visibility and its associated metrics - engagement and follower count - have taken a life of their own, they have become an asset in themselves and are being sought for themselves (Marwick 2015). When a minor influencer called Jesse Taylor got her Instagram account inexplicably closed down in 2019, she posted a dramatic video where she appears in tears, screaming hysterically "I am nothing without my following !!! […] before I had a hundred thousand followers, I was a fucking loser, like … working at Mc Donald's […] I could never work a normal job. I am worthless. I bring nothing to the table! ZERO" (*STOP Reporting My Instagram Account* 2019). Jesse expresses the fact her visibility does not rest on any particular talent, any achievement that would have made her otherwise recognized. The count of 100k followers **is** the achievement.

These stories about how the game of visibility is played are in stark contrast with narratives of social media as empowering and democratic public spaces (Rogers 2018). Engineers who programmed the algorithms, inscribed within them a set of assumptions of what content should be most visible. These decisions, of course, reflect business imperatives of the social media platforms. But more insidiously, they work in circumscribing how people interact with each other and with the platform, through distributing visibility as a reward for good behaviour (Bucher 2012). As such, social media platforms encourage certain types of personalities and behaviours to emerge, for anyone else to see and reproduce: incontinent posters, cheaters, engagement whores, …

Figure 10: Jesse Taylor - STOP REPORTING MY INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT

10 Conclusion: zooming-out

In spite of all the telltales : the coronavirus pandemic, Australia's bushfires ("More Than One Billion Animals Killed in Australian Bushfires" n.d.), the deadly civil war in Syria fueled by drought (Kelley et al. 2015), we still fail to come to terms with the need for a deep social transformation. We fail to grasp a fact that has long been known to indigenous communities around the globe : "well-being" for human societies is deeply interconnected with the well-being of Nature.

Against climate change, policy response has so far been focused on economic and technological tweaks, preserving the ideological structure of late capitalist society. The website of the OECD[35] has an entire section focused on "green growth", complete with a slideshow of generic stock

[35] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is an international economic forum, which includes most Western countries, as well as Japan, Chile and Turkey.

pictures, among which a green bamboo forest, a blue pacific atoll and a group of cheerful young people. The page explains : "Green Growth means fostering economic growth and development, while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies." ("Green Growth and Sustainable Development" n.d.). Nothing very transformative indeed. A splash of green spray paint on the ancient dogma of economic growth. Nature is still seen as an object whose "resources" and "services" need to be exploited for human "well-being".

In line with the Western tradition, science had also for long neglected to study the interaction between human societies and the planet. But a fast emerging scientific field called "Earth System Science" (ESS) is starting to close the gap.

ESS originated in the 70s and 80s, when scientists from different disciplines realized that the study of the environment required breaking the silos between biology, geology, physics or chemistry. Indeed, the different components of the planetary system, forests, oceans, climate, geological events, … influence each other very strongly and therefore need to be studied in conjunction. ESS drew from the theory of complex systems in order to take a holistic approach to the study of the environment (Steffen et al. 2020).

For a long time, scientists had neglected to include in their model the entanglement of human societies with the rest of the environment. They chose instead to focus on investigating the interactions between the Biosphere and the Geosphere therefore staying in the realm of natural sciences. But the gradual realization in the 90s and the 00s that human influence on the environment surpassed that of many other planetary events, led ESS to build bridges with humanities, and in particular with sociology (Steffen et al. 2020). In doing so, it recognized that through a complex interplay of (1) beliefs and values, (2) structures and institutions, (3) behaviors and technical responses, human culture is a force of geological proportions, on par with the oceans or the atmosphere

(O'Brien 2018) (Donges et al. 2017).

In the face of these incredible challenges, which will require a deep integration of different branches of knowledge, **the Anthropocene** has been a powerful unifying concept for humanities and science (Steffen et al. 2020). It refers to a new geological era, where human societies have become a dominant force of the Earth System. It also integrates the notion that the issues of climate change, or more broadly sustainability, are fundamentally cultural, in addition to being biological and physical. The Anthropocene studies call for a fundamental change in human societies, questioning our "beliefs, values and worldviews" (O'Brien 2018), towards a heightened consciousness of our interdependence from each other and with nature, and away from the Western paradigm of nature as a passive object to exploit.

Individualism is a pillar of this exploitative culture. When out of balance, as it is today, it makes us unable from looking elsewhere than inwards. As such, it is urgent to find new tools to challenge its hegemony.

Bibliography

"19 Social Media Metrics That Really Matter—and How to Track Them." n.d. Accessed February 8, 2020. https://blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-metrics/.

"A/B Testing on Social Media: How to Do It with Tools You Already Have." n.d. Accessed February 8, 2020. https://blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-ab-testing/.

Adams, Henry. 2011. "A Tribute to a Great Artist: Steve Jobs." *Smithsonian Magazine*. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/a-tribute-to-a-great-artist-steve-jobs-99783256/.

Anonymous. 2019. "I'm a Normal Person and I Buy My Instagram Followers." *The Cut*, November. https://www.thecut.com/2019/11/im-a-normal-person-and-i-buy-my-instagram-followers.html.

Arnocky, Steven, Mirella Stroink, and Teresa DeCicco. 2007. "Self-Construal Predicts Environmental Concern, Cooperation, and Conservation." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 27 (4): 255–64.

Arvidsson, Adam. 2005. "Brands." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5 (2): 235–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540505053093.

Arvidsson, Adam, Giannino Malossi, and Serpica Naro. 2010. "Passionate Work? Labour Conditions in the Milan Fashion Industry." *Journal for Cultural Research* 14 (3): 295–309.

Bandinelli, Carolina, and Adam Arvidsson. 2012. "Brand Yourself a Changemaker!" *Journal of Macromarketing* 33 (1): 67–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146712465186.

Barbrook, Richard, and Andy Cameron. 1996. "The Californian Ideology." *Science as Culture* 6 (1): 44–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/09505439609526455.

Baym, Nancy. 2013. "Data Not Seen: The Uses and Shortcomings of Social Media Metrics." *First Monday* 18 (10). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v18i10.4873.

Berryman, Rachel, and Misha Kavka. 2018. "Crying on Youtube: Vlogs, Self-Exposure and the Productivity of Negative Affect." *Convergence* 24 (1): 85–98.

Black Mirror (S3e1), Nosedive. 2016.

Botsman, Rachel. 2012. "Welcome to the New Reputation Economy." *Wired UK* 20.

Brown, Megan. 2009. "Survival at Work: Flexibility and Adaptability in American Corporate Culture." In *The Cultural Work of Corporations*, 75–100. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230100626_3.

Bucher, Taina. 2012. "Want to Be on the Top? Algorithmic Power and the Threat of Invisibility on Facebook." *New Media & Society* 14 (7): 1164–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812440159.

"BUILD Your Brand - Turn What You Love Doing into a Career." n.d. Accessed February 8, 2020. https://about.instagram.com/creators/build.

"Buy Social Traffic." n.d. Accessed February 8, 2020. https://buysocialtraffic.net/.

Castrillon, Caroline. 2019. "Why Personal Branding Is More Important Than Ever." *Forbes*, February. https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecastrillon/2019/02/12/why-personal-branding-is-more-important-than-ever/.

Chiapello, Eve. 2004. "Evolution and Co-Optation: The 'Artist Critique'of Management and Capitalism." *Third Text* 18 (6): 585–94.

Clark, Dorie. 2017. *Reinventing You, with a New Preface: Define Your Brand, Imagine Your Future*. Harvard Business Review Press. https://www.xarg.org/ref/a/1633693880/.

Cohen, Dov, and Etsuko Hoshino-Browne. 2005. "Insider and Outsider Perspectives on the Self and Social World." In *Culture and Social Behavior: The Tenth Ontario Symposium*, 49–76. Lawrence Erlbaum Hillsdale, NJ.

Cojuharenco, Irina, Garriy Shteynberg, Michele Gelfand, and Marshall Schminke. 2012. "Self-Construal and Unethical Behavior." *Journal of Business Ethics* 109 (4): 447–61.

Confessore, Nicholas, Gabriel JX Dance, Richard Harris, and Mark Hansen. 2018. "The Follower Factory." *The New York Times*.

Cotter, Kelley. 2018. "Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram." *New Media & Society* 21 (4): 895–913. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684.

Curtis, Adam. 2017. "Adam Curtis on the Dangers of Self-Expression." *The Creative Independent*. https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/adam-curtis-on-the-dangers-of-self-expression/.

D'Alessandro, David F. 2008. *Career Warfare - 10 Rules for Building Your Successful Brand on the Business Battlefield*. McGraw-Hill.

Daniel, Ryan, and Robert Johnstone. 2015. "Becoming an Artist: Exploring the Motivations of Undergraduate Students at a Regional Australian University." *Studies in Higher Education* 42 (6): 1015–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1075196.

"#DearMoon." 2018. 2018. https://dearmoon.earth/.

#DearMoon Project - Special Ver with Mz Announcement. 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPyyXeyVfGI.

DeCicco, Teresa L, and Mirella L Stroink. 2007. "A Third Model of Self-Construal: The Metapersonal Self." *Transpersonal Studies* 26: 86–104.

Dee, Liam. 2017. *Against Art and Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://www.xarg.org/ref/a/9811070911/.

Deresiewicz, William. 2015. "The Death of the Artist—and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur." *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/the-death-of-the-artist-and-the-birth-of-the-creative-entrepreneur/383497/.

"Devumi Social Media Marketing Services." n.d. Accessed May 4, 2020. https://devumi.top/services.html.

"Do Instagram Pods Work? The Truth Behind Instagram's Latest Engagement Hack." n.d. Accessed February 10, 2020. https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-pods/.

Donges, Jonathan F, Ricarda Winkelmann, Wolfgang Lucht, Sarah E Cornell, James G Dyke, Johan Rockström, Jobst Heitzig, and Hans Joachim Schellnhuber. 2017. "Closing the Loop: Reconnecting Human Dynamics to Earth System Science." *The Anthropocene Review* 4 (2): 151–57.

Duff, Alistair S. 2016. "Rating the Revolution: Silicon Valley in Normative Perspective." *Information, Communication & Society* 19 (11): 1605–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1142594.

Duffy, Brooke Erin, and Jefferson D. Pooley. 2017. " "Facebook for Academics": The Convergence of Self-Branding and Social Media Logic on Academia.edu." *Social Media + Society* 3 (1): 205630511769652. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117696523.

Duncan, Carol. 2005. "The Art Museum as Ritual." *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, 78–88.

Elaridi, Frank. 2013. "On the Internet, Is Fame for Sale?" *Tubefilter*. https://www.tubefilter.com/2013/11/29/on-the-internet-is-fame-for-sale/.

Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* John Hunt Publishing.

Florida, Richard L. 2012. *The Rise of the Creative Class - Revisited*. Basic Books.

"Freelancing in America 2019." n.d. Upwork. Accessed February 17, 2020. https://www.upwork.com/i/freelancing-in-america/2019/.

Gandini, Alessandro. 2015. "Digital Work: Self-Branding and Social Capital in the Freelance Knowledge Economy." *Marketing Theory* 16 (1): 123–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593115607942.

Genz, Stéphanie. 2014. "My Job Is Me." *Feminist Media Studies* 15 (4): 545–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.952758.

Gibbs, Anita. n.d. "Social Research Update 19: Focus Groups." Accessed February 11, 2020. http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU19.html.

Gill, Rosalind, and Andy Pratt. 2008. "In the Social Factory?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (7-8): 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408097794.

"Green Growth and Sustainable Development." n.d. Accessed April 24, 2020. http://www.oecd.org/greengrowth/.

Hardt, Michael. 1999. "Affective Labor." *Boundary 2* 26 (2): 89–100. http://www.jstor.org/stable/303793.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Harvard University Press.

Hartwell, Christopher J., and Michael A. Campion. 2019. "Getting Social in Selection: How Social Networking Website Content Is Perceived and Used in Hiring." *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 28 (1): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.12273.

Hearn, Alison. 2010. "Structuring Feeling: Web 2.0, Online Ranking and Rating, and the Digital'reputation'economy." *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 10.

———. 2008. "Meat, Mask, Burden." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8 (2): 197–217. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540508090086.

Holmes, Brian. 2002. "The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique." *Hieroglyphs of the Future*, 106–45.

"How Does the Art World Live with Itself?" n.d. Accessed February 20, 2020. https://www.vulture.com/2018/10/how-does-the-art-world-live-with-itself.html.

Hvistendahl, Mara. 2017. "Inside China's Vast New Experiment in Social Ranking." *WIRED*. https://www.wired.com/story/age-of-social-credit/.

"Introduction by Christine Macel Director of the Biennale Arte 2017." n.d. Accessed February 20, 2020. https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2017/introduction-christine-macel.

Isaacs, Julia B. 2008. "International Comparisons of Economic Mobility." *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America. Washington, DC: Brookings and Pew Economic Mobility Project*, 37–46.

Johnson, Cynthia. 2019. *Platform - the Art and Science of Personal Branding.* Lorena Jones Books.

Kang, Karen. 2013. *Branding Pays - the Five-Step System to Reinvent Your Personal Brand.* BrandingPays Media.

Karinthy, Frigyes. 1929. "Chain-Links." *Everything Is Different.*

Kashefi, Max. 2007. “Work Flexibility and Its Individual Consequences.” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 32 (3): 341. https://doi.org/10.2307/20460647.

Kelley, Colin P., Shahrzad Mohtadi, Mark A. Cane, Richard Seager, and Yochanan Kushnir. 2015. “Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent and Implications of the Recent Syrian Drought.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112 (11): 3241–6. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1421533112.

Komatsu, Hikaru, Jeremy Rappleye, and Iveta Silova. 2019. “Culture and the Independent Self: Obstacles to Environmental Sustainability?” *Anthropocene* 26: 100198.

“Kylie Jenner and David Beckham Make Instagram Rich List.” 2018. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-44952480.

Lasén, Amparo. 2013. “Digital Inscriptions and Loss of Embarrassment: Some Thoughts About the Technological Mediations of Affectivity.” *Intervalla* 1: 85–100.

———. 2015. “Digital Self-Portraits, Exposure and the Modulation of Intimacy.” *Mobile and Digital Communication: Approaches to Public and Private. Covilhã, Portugal: Livros LabCom.*

Lazzarato, Maurizio. 1996. “Immaterial Labour.” *Contemporary Marxist Theory*, 77.

Lukes, Steven. 1971. “The Meanings of” Individualism”.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 (1): 45–66.

Marcus, Bert, dir. 2018. *The American Meme*. Netflix.

Markus, Hazel R, and Shinobu Kitayama. 1991. “Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation.” *Psychological Review* 98 (2): 224.

Markus, Hazel Rose, and Shinobu Kitayama. 2010. "Cultures and Selves: A Cycle of Mutual Constitution." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5 (4): 420–30.

Marwick, Alice E. 2015. "Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy." *Public Culture* 27 (1 75): 137–60. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2798379.

Meet Spacex Bfr's First Paying Customer - Yusaku Maezawa. 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FwpRn-jaSo.

Miller, Vincent. 2008. "New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 14 (4): 387–400. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856508094659.

"More Than One Billion Animals Killed in Australian Bushfires." n.d. Accessed April 25, 2020. https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2020/01/08/australian-bushfires-more-than-one-billion-animals-impacted.html.

Munar, Ana María. 2010. "Digital Exhibitionism the Age of Exposure." *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 2 (3): 401–22. https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.10223401.

Nead, Lynda. 1995. "Seductive Canvases: Visual Mythologies of the Artist and Artistic Creativity." *Oxford Art Journal* 18 (2): 59–69.

Nicholas Ind, Rune Bjerke. 2015. "Participatory Marketing." In *Branding Governance*, 105–29. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119209126.ch4.

Oakley, Kate. 2009. "From Bohemia to Britart–Art Students over 50 Years." *Cultural Trends* 18 (4): 281–94.

O’Brien, Karen. 2018. “Is the 1.5 c Target Possible? Exploring the Three Spheres of Transformation.” *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 31: 153–60.

“One Epic Social Movement.” 2014. 2014. https://web.archive.org/web/20140719114543/http://www.fiestamovement.com/about.

Peters, Tom. 1997. “The Brand Called You.” *Fast Company* 10 (10): 83–90.

Rainie, Lee, and Barry Wellman. 2012. *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. The MIT Press.

Rand, Ayn. 1961. “The Objectivist Ethics.”

Ritzer, George. 2015. “Prosumer Capitalism.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 56 (3): 413–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/tsq.12105.

Rodden, John. 2006. “Reputation and Its Vicissitudes.” *Society* 43 (3): 75–80. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02687599.

Rogers, Richard. 2018. “Digital Traces in Context| Otherwise Engaged: Social Media from Vanity Metrics to Critical Analytics.” *International Journal of Communication* 12: 23.

Rothman, Joshua. 2015. “Was Steve Jobs an Artist?” *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/was-steve-jobs-an-artist.

Rubery, Jill, Arjan Keizer, and Damian Grimshaw. 2016. “Flexibility Bites Back: The Multiple and Hidden Costs of Flexible Employment Policies.” *Human Resource Management Journal* 26 (3): 235–51. https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12092.

Røyseng, Sigrid, Per Mangset, and Jorunn Spord Borgen. 2007. “Young Artists and the Charismatic Myth.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 13 (1): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630600613366.

Schaefer, Mark W. 2017. *KNOWN: The Handbook for Building and Unleashing Your Personal Brand in the Digital Age*. Mark W. Schaefer.

"Self-Construal." n.d. Accessed May 2, 2020. https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199828340/obo-9780199828340-0051.xml#firstMatch.

Sennett, R. 1998. *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. W. W. Norton. https://books.google.de/books?id=os0U-hxtEfIC.

Serazio, Michael. 2013. "Selling (Digital) Millennials: The Social Construction and Technological Bias of a Consumer Generation." *Television & New Media* 16 (7): 599–615. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476413491015.

"Share Your Best Photos Shot on iPhone." 2019. 2019. https://www.apple.com/uk/newsroom/2019/01/share-your-best-photos-shot-on-iphone/.

Soares, Conceição. 2018. "The Philosophy of Individualism: A Critical Perspective." *International Journal of Philosophy and Social Values* 1 (1): 11–34.

"Social Media for Business." n.d. Accessed February 8, 2020. https://www.business.gov.au/Marketing/Online-presence/Social-media-for-business.

"Starbucks Invites You to Decorate Its Iconic White Cup." 2014. 2014. https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2014/starbucks-invites-you-to-decorate-its-iconic-white-cup/.

Steffen, Will, Katherine Richardson, Johan Rockström, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, Opha Pauline Dube, Sébastien Dutreuil, Timothy M Lenton, and Jane Lubchenco. 2020. "The Emergence and Evolution of Earth System Science." *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment* 1 (1): 54–63.

STOP Reporting My Instagram Account. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQonbtV2iaA.

Streeter, Thomas. 2003. "The Romantic Self and the Politics of Internet Commercialization." *Cultural Studies* 17 (5): 648–68.

Svensson, Jakob. 2011. "The Expressive Turn of Citizenship in Digital Late Modernity." *JeDEM - eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government* 3 (1): 42–56. https://doi.org/10.29379/jedem.v3i1.48.

"The Best Time to Post on Instagram in 2019 (and the Worst)." 2019. *Hootsuite*. https://blog.hootsuite.com/best-time-to-post-on-instagram/.

"The Dilemma of Criticising Individualism." 2018. http://facebook.com.

"The Paul Zollo Blog: Q&A with Carole King." n.d. Accessed February 21, 2020. https://americansongwriter.com/the-paul-zollo-blog-qa-with-carole-king/paul-zollo/.

"The Ultimate List of Social Media Definitions You Need to Know in 2019." n.d. Accessed February 8, 2020. https://blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-glossary-definitions/.

Turner, Fred. 2005. "Where the Counterculture Met the New Economy: The Well and the Origins of Virtual Community." *Technology and Culture* 46 (3): 485–512.

Virno, Paolo. 1996. "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment." In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, NED - New edition, 7:13–36. University of Minnesota Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttssjm.4.

We Found a Dead Body in the Japanese Suicide Forest - Deleted Logan Paul Vlog. 2017. https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=07c_1514996657.

Wesner, Simone. 2018. “The Artist and the Artistic Myth.” In *Artists’ Voices in Cultural Policy*, 17–40. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76057-5_2.

“What Are Authorrank and Paperrank?” n.d. Accessed February 14, 2020. http://support.academia.edu/customer/en/portal/articles/2201342-what-are-authorrank-and-paperrank-.

Whitehurst, James ”Jim”. n.d. “Meritocracy: The Workplace Culture That Breeds Success.” WIRED. Accessed February 13, 2020. https://www.wired.com/insights/2014/10/meritocracy/.

2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqPARIKHbN8.