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

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ABSTRACT

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

1. Introduction

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

Given the enshrined position of entrepreneurs in society, it is hardly surprising that to date, except for a small diffused body of work on entrepreneurial precarity that occurs on the perimeters of the field (see Heidkamp & Kergel, 2017; Monahan & Fisher, 2015), relatively little research addresses the potential downsides of following an entrepreneurial path. The paucity of research on this topic might simply be blamed on society's general propensity to value winners rather than losers (Sandage, 2005). After all, championing the metaphor of the entrepreneur as an optimistic agent of forward movement and ever-upward growth, does not naturally equate with pessimistic navel-gazing (Boutillier & Uzunidis, 2013). In any case, if captains of industry, corporate shamans, business titans, wealth creators and all the other top-flight fellows are as indomitable as the myth holds, then negativity need never be countenanced. Consequently, studies of entrepreneurship are perennially positive and overtly optimistic (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2017). Olaison and Sørensen (2014, p. 208) succinctly summarize the consequence of this tendency, “researchers have failed to understand entrepreneurship as a struggle with failure”.

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

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

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

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

2. Background information

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

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

YouTube is the world's third most popular website. It was started in 2005 to offer a means by which people, increasingly called vloggers, could upload, view and share their user-generated video clips with like-minded followers. In the early days it was a free-for-all with no copyright enforcement and no annoying adverts (Whu, 2016). It quickly garnered traction as the main cultural outpost of online video content, such that even Goliaths like Google could not depose it, hence why they bought it for $1.65 billion (Marwick, 2013). Videos of cute cats and dogs, domestic accidents and pranks, amateur and professional singers were common – and to an extent still are – but the site has, in recent years, been slowly transitioning into a fully-fledged network to rival the traditional providers of television entertainment (Ford, 2014). Some uploaders quickly realized that if a video clip garners attention, they could use its currency as a vehicle to promote themselves, and that is precisely what has happening in recent years. There are endless stories of how YouTube, along with other social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, has launched the careers of vlogging autopreneurs. To take one example, Chiara Ferragni, from a small town outside Milan, started her blog, 'The Blonde Salad' in 2009. Her coordinated social media drive on all the major social media platforms, which essentially document little more than her looking fabulous (Cochrane, 2016), has enabled her to launch a global brand that now sells everything from suitcases to stilettos and other high-fashion items. At the same time, what is less discussed is that while some YouTubers like Ferragni have been institutionalized and professionalized, Google's commercial reorganization of the platform has, as we will later explore, marginalized and pushed others aside (Burgess, 2013).

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

3. Foucauldian neoliberal theory

3.1. Background

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