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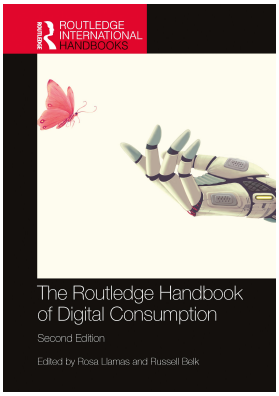

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Rosa Llamas, Russell Belk

The Evolution of Online Self-Presentation

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6

THE EVOLUTION OF ONLINE SELF-PRESENTATION

From Programmable Freeform Websites to Algorithmized Templates that Encourage Commercially Exploitable Content

Ashok Kumar Kaliyamurthy, Hope Jensen Schau and Mary C. Gilly

Introduction

> Probably the worst LinkedIn notification ever. It asked me to celebrate a friend's 8th year in a PhD program.

The above quote is an example of how the design of a social media platform can influence online self-presentation. A student completing the eighth year in a five-year PhD program is unlikely to want to celebrate, let alone alert all their LinkedIn contacts that the degree is now three years overdue. However, to the logics embedded in the LinkedIn algorithm design, the start of another year in the program looked like a "anniversary" worthy of widespread notifications and accolades, and the type of information that may be relevant to paid subscribers tracking career progressions to locate talent.

In this chapter, we examine how the design of social media platforms shapes online self-presentation toward content that can be commercially exploited. This chapter serves as an update to Schau and Gilly (2013) where the authors examined digital self-presentation as it evolved from the first personal webpages often with hosting fees to consumer social media platforms. The authors noted that in the mid-1990s, the key constraint influencing online self-representation was the computer programming necessary to create and update a personal website. The emergence of social networking platforms which provide readymade templates considerably reduced the requisite skills and encouraged less technologically savvy users to participate in online self-presentation. Thus, the emphasis of Schau and Gilly (2013) was on constraints consumers face in *establishing* a personal online presence. In contrast, this chapter focuses on social media platform *reliance* and the increased influence of platform design on the nature of online self-presentation. We describe how the business models, ideologies, and technologies underlying platform design nudge consumer self-presentation toward certain

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types of content that can be commercially leveraged and even outright monetized (e.g., user demographics, user life stage, talent inventory, milestones, product and service preferences, social and professional networks, scope of influence). The focus of this chapter is on how the constraints highlighted by Schau and Gilly (2013) have evolved such that the design of social media platforms *shapes* online self-presentation in ways that firms can *exploit*, and consumers may need to *negotiate*.

We first summarize the constraints early users faced to establish a personal website. We then highlight how the nature of constraints changed with contemporary social media platform design that utilizes user-friendly templates and sophisticated algorithms. We argue that embedded in the design and algorithms are business models that lead consumers toward generating commercially exploitable self-presentation content. We conclude by considering the implications for consumer research posed by these contemporary influences on online self-presentation.

Early Constraints on Online Self-Presentation

Three factors influenced the establishment of early personal webspace in the 1990s. First, in the absence of structured readymade templates, creating a personal webpage meant that the consumer had to have knowledge of computer language (HyperText Mark-up Language or HTML, JavaScript, Cascading Style Sheets of CSS) and programming skills. So, only technologically savvy innovators who had internet access, economic power to pay for hosting fees, interest, programming skills, time, and energy were able to establish a web presence. Personal webpages began as freeform self-presentations with authors curating their own idiosyncratic content and layouts using tools such as FrontPage. Those without programming skills generally did not have personal websites unless they could afford to rely on third-party programmers to construct and maintain their personal websites. Second, there was a scarcity of digital images for use online because analog formats dominated consumer photography and video, thus early personal web presences were text heavy. The initial forays into online self-presentation consisted of narratives and available stock images and icons as opposed to user-generated pictures and videos. Therefore, in addition to technological skills (programming and manipulating rare digital images), participating in online self-presentation required strong written language skills to generate readable and potentially intriguing narratives. Finally, despite the widespread use of the yellow "under construction" icon that site authors used to convey that the site was a work-in-progress, early websites were relatively fixed. The technical complexity of programming and the speed and cost of uploading data made it difficult to modify personal webspace. Modifications were cumbersome and authors often did not achieve their desired outcome in the initial effort, sometimes tinkering for hours to perfect even small updates; therefore, users modified their content on average once or twice a month. By today's standards, these self-presentations on personal websites were static, albeit likely more thoughtful as each modification required time to implement, and consumers were carefully reviewing modifications prior to posting.

In summary, early constraints to online self-presentation related to establishing and updating a web presence. With the rise of free to consumer social media platforms which provide standardized templates orchestrated by algorithms, people without programming skills could participate in online self-presentation. Consumers flocked to these plug-and-play-structured platforms; however, the platform designs pose new, less transparent constraints that shape self-presentation as we detail in the following sections.

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Platform Mediation of Self-Presentation

How does a social media platform design influence self-presentation? We first review concepts that allow to account for the role of technology in shaping users' actions. On the one hand, the instrumentalism approach sees technology as a mere tool which users deploy to accomplish their will (Feenberg 2009). That is, the user is the driver of action and bends technology to her required ends. This approach, however, ignores the role of the technology itself in shaping action by espousing the untenable view that technology is infinitely malleable (Kallinikos 2011). On the other hand, the technological determinism approach sees technology as the driver of user action. This approach obscures the role of human agency in technology use. In contrast to approaches which focus on either the actor or the technology in shaping action, relational approaches conceptualize action as shaped by both the human actor, and the properties of the technology.

Actor-network theory (Latour 2005) espouses a relational view, which provides concepts that can highlight the influence of platform design on online self-presentation. Self-presentation is explicitly strategic, so users have specific intentions when using a social media platform. The consumer's intention constitutes their "program of action" (Latour 2005). However, the social media platform comes with its own program of action. For instance, as Madeleine Akrich proposed, designers embed "scripts" into technical artifacts that "prescribe" product use (Akrich 1992). She writes that through such scripts "designers define actors with specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudices…" and that "like a film script, technical objects define a framework for action" (Ibid., 208). Akrich's metaphor does not negate human agency. There is scope for the metaphorical actor to improvise but such acts can only occur within the preset parameters of the script. Therefore, the platform's program of action, or scripts, can influence the consumer's intention or program of action such that what eventually emerges on social media platforms is an outcome which corresponds neither to the platform's nor the consumer's program of action. That is, social media platforms are not transparent intermediaries which merely *facilitate* self-presentation as per consumers' intentions, rather they are active mediators (Latour 2005) which *transform* how consumers engage in online self-presentation. Similarly, technology design has been theorized as an attempt at configuring the user (Woolgar 1990). These concepts highlight the potential for tension between the actual user and the user presumed by the designer.

Affordance is another influential relational concept in the study of technology. This concept originated in ecological psychology where it referred to the possibilities for action provided by the physical environment (Gibson 1977). Rather than determining behavior, affordances enable and constrain behavior based on characteristics of both the actor and the environment. Later, this concept was adapted to the field of design studies where it is generally used to describe the strong cues for use that are embedded in the design of artifacts (Norman 1999). Norman's conceptualization shifts the focus from the ecological psychology concern with what the actor sees in the environment to the designer's concern with how artifacts can be designed such that it shapes user action. Subsequently, scholars developed diverse conceptualizations of affordances. For example, a useful distinction is that between more concrete low-level affordances and more abstract high-level affordances (Bucher and Helmond 2017). Low-level affordances refer to the specific user interface features in a platform such as the kind of drop-down menus and the different fields in a form. High-level affordances refer to the kinds of dynamics enabled by a platform such as the temporal persistence of an online post. In summary, relational concepts such as scripts and affordances highlight the role of design of social media platforms in the shaping of online self-presentation.

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When social media platforms mediate self-presentation, the economic, ideological, and technical considerations underlying platform design influence self-presentation by creating scripts and affordances that consumers may need to negotiate. First, consider the economic aspect. Van Dijck (2013) argues that the word "social" when associated with media has two meanings. On the one hand, the aspect that social media companies like to emphasize is that their platforms enable human connection. On the other hand, corporate communications seek to de-emphasize the fact that these platforms "engineer and manipulate connections" (Ibid.,12). So, while social media platforms project themselves as simply *enabling* self-presentation and social interaction, they function through what Bucher (2018) has termed "programmed sociality" which refers to how these algorithms induce and *produce* new forms of sociality. Programmed sociality seeks to elicit forms of self-presentation content which serve the business model of the platform (such as user demographics, user life stages, milestones, product/service preferences, talent inventory, social and professional networks, scope of influence, etc.). Second, technology incorporates ideologies (Pfaffenberger 1992). For instance, widely used social media platform design elements such as displaying metrics for "likes" and comments derive from an ideology that "values hierarchy, competition, and a winner-takes-all mind-set" (Van Dijck 2013, 20) and become ready metrics of social and professional influence. Third, the technical aspect relates to how the constraints of technology such as data analysis and storing considerations influence design decisions. The structured design templates in social media increase ease of use and likewise enable firms to cull data from identified fields across users.

From a consumer's perspective, the key issue in navigating platform design is self-presentation control. Owing to the influence of templates and algorithms, online self-presentation on social media platforms is less controllable than with user-created personal websites. We trace this erosion of control to two key aspects of social media platforms that differ from the early self-developed personal websites. First, social media platforms impose standardized templates that constrain self-presentation, whereas consumers developing their own websites had more control when developing the website from scratch. Standardized templates form the user interface of the platform. While these templates are easy to use, they are riddled with the economic, ideological, and technical interests of platform owners which influence consumer self-presentation content curation. Platform design nudges consumers to create and post content that can be commercially exploited (e.g., monetized).

Second, social media platforms do not just provide templates for self-expression, but they also incorporate algorithms that process the inputs from these templates in ways that shape self-presentation. While the design of early personal websites was more atomized and isolated (Marwick and boyd 2011), the design of social media platforms incorporates algorithms which orchestrate ongoing communication with an audience. Through such ongoing interaction, other users who comprise the audience play an increased role in one's own self-presentation (DeVito et al. 2018). This interactional dynamic is further magnified in the context of social media platform whose business models are geared toward spurring more interaction between users such that user engagement is increased to improve data capture. Audiences influence self-presentation. Therefore, increased interaction with algorithmically shaped audiences means that self-presentation is also influenced by algorithms. This is especially so when factoring in the role of design features such as the quantification of "likes" and comments from audiences through which consumers receive validation of their self-presentation and firms can ascertain any given user's or post's social influence.

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In short, the platform scripts and affordances created by the standardized templates and algorithms create constraints which users may need to navigate. We now turn to a deeper dive into examining the role of templates and algorithms in shaping self-presentation.

Influence of Templates

Templates consist broadly of forms, drop-down menus, and buttons and constitute platforms' low-level affordances (Bucher and Helmond 2017). Researchers consider the influence of interface elements on self-presentation in at least four ways. First, Marwick (2005, p. 9) suggests that the profile page template on social media platforms encourages the user to frame themselves as a consumer by asking participants to "define themselves through the entertainment products they consume" such as favorite bands and movies. Nakamura (2013) highlights how the user interface features such as drop-down menus shape consumer identity expression by constricting presentation to the predetermined drop-down options (e.g., gender categories, sexual orientations, work status). Second, an important influence on online self-presentation is the "default setting" which is a common feature of user interfaces. Default settings are not accidental design choices. Rather they are strategic choices made by platform owners to shape user action in line with business interests. Users tend to accept default settings, especially if changing them takes effort. An infamous example of this is Facebook's default setting that makes a user's posts accessible to all internet users rather than just to "friends" that the user has explicitly added (Lipford, Besmer, and Watson 2008; Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield 2010). This default allows people beyond the platform to see posts and interactions which may entice consumers outside the platform to register, increasing membership and associated data warehouse making a platform more attractive to firms (advertisers and market researchers).

Third, interface design seeks to cajole users into releasing information about themselves, both consciously and unconsciously (Van Dijck 2013) such that the increased data collected can aid the business models of the platforms. Finally, at the level of the user interface social media platforms impose highly standardized templates for self-presentation. A key consideration in the design of these templates is that they are optimized for data capture as dictated by the platform's business model (Bucher 2018). The platform's interest is to monetize the user data elicited via these templates through processes of standardization which allows the data to be both compared across users and aggregated to reveal patterns that can generate profits. That is, the templates that these platforms provide for a user to setup a profile are defined within a fixed set of standards which make the data that the consumer inputs amenable to database storage and algorithmic processing. Standardized templates also aid the business models of platforms as the uniformity of data allows for algorithmic steering (Van Dijck 2013, 25) of connection which improves user engagement. Hence, the standardized templates for profile creation are not designed merely to meet the consumer's need to express themselves. Rather, templates restrict users to a standardized form of input such that user data is more easily parse-able by the data processing algorithms.

An important method through which designers make data more amenable to algorithmic processing is by categorizing data through standardized templates with distinct fields (Bucher 2018). The important point here is that categorization is normative. For instance, if a profile template allows a user to categorize their gender based on only the options of male and female (Brookey and Cannon 2009), this follows from a normative assumption that it is possible to categorize gender into such a binary. As Bowker and Star (2000) note

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in their book *Sorting Things Out*, "What the categories are, what belongs in a category, and who decides how to implement these categories in practice, are all powerful assertions about how things are and are supposed to be". Consumers may need to negotiate these normative assumptions during platform use.

Influence of Algorithms

Algorithms process the inputs from templates and, thus, create platform dynamics which constitute the high-level affordances (Bucher and Helmond 2017). For instance, Duffy, Pruchniewska, and Scolere (2017) find that high-level affordances constitute the "culture of the platform" which users articulate as tone, feeling, flavor, or impression evoked by the platform – leading to judgments that Instagram creates "pressure" for more prolific posting, Facebook is "not a creative space," Twitter "reduces complicated political debate to 280-character assertions," and Pinterest "promotes heteronormative fantasies of dream weddings." Further, social media provides high-level affordances such as persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability of user posts shared on these platforms (boyd 2010). In turn, these affordances predispose the members of networked publics toward certain kinds of behavior online (Papacharissi and Easton 2013) as we describe below.

A key problem created by contemporary social media platforms is the issue of "new visibility" (Thompson 2005) which arises from the uncertainty over how and when user posts are visible to different audiences. The issue of visibility on platforms has two aspects. First, algorithms filter user posts and differentially display them to users based on black-box algorithms which are not transparent to users. For instance, the Facebook algorithm tends to reward certain kinds of posts with more visibility at the expense of others (Bucher 2012, 2017). These are normative and indeed political decisions embedded in the design of Facebook. Users who want their posts to be visible to more Facebook "friends" must navigate these politics of visibility. Even if they lack technical knowledge of algorithms, users who want to increase the visibility of their posts engage in exercising an "algorithmic imaginary" (Bucher 2017) or partake of "algorithmic gossip" (Bishop 2019) where users develop lay theories about how algorithms work. Such theories shape self-presentation when users change their online interactions "to make it work best for the algorithm" (Bucher 2017, 37). So, through their continued engagement with a platform, users develop tacit knowledge of how the algorithms work. Second, the high-level affordances of persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability of data on these platforms (boyd 2010) mean that the potential audiences for acts of self-presentation are unpredictable. A user's post can be searched for, shared, and seen by an audience that the user did not expect. Therefore, users need to understand how to avoid undesirable visibility to audiences. An example of this is the career advice given to college students about ensuring their "partying" social media posts do not turn off potential recruiters. Users seek to manage this by developing a notion of the "imagined audience" (Marwick and boyd 2011) based on their social context and their lay understanding of how the platform technology works.

An important aspect of managing visibility is that the business interests of the platform may be in conflict with the self-presentation interests of the user. Van Dijck (2013) argues that on the one hand, the interest of some dominant platforms is in ensuring that users have one identity across platforms and the user interface design promotes this ideology. On the other hand, as Goffman (1978) theorized, the interest of the user is to engage in forms of self-presentation that are contextually appropriate. For instance, with face-to-face communications, different contexts have different audiences which determine the kind of

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self-presentation that is suitable to a given context. People often present themselves differently to their close friends than when compared to professional colleagues or want to control the temporal unfolding of the content (e.g., a user's enthusiasm to share a fast run pace or high mileage may want to share the content immediately with friends and family but delay content access to those connected to their employer because the run occurred when the user had called in sick).

However, in the case of social media, as Marwick and boyd (2011, 9) argue, the platform design may cause a condition of "context collapse" when it "flattens multiple audiences into one." Note that while such flattening of audiences may better serve the business interests of the platform owners by increasing the potential for engagement and data collection, it becomes difficult for consumers to vary self-presentation to distinct audiences. In response to such visibility issues, users of Instagram create a "Finsta" (Dewar et al. 2019), short for fake Instagram, allowing them to partition audiences. On these Finsta accounts, users present themselves to a smaller circle of close friends in ways that are different from how they feel compelled to present themselves on their "real" Instagram account where they have a wider circle of followers. In this context, Papacharissi and Easton (2013) argue that a key determinant of a user's ability to manage their web presence is "redactional acumen" which they conceptualize as the ability of "individuals to present a coherent and polysemic performance of the self that makes sense to multiple publics, without compromising one's authentic, or rather intended, sense of self" (Ibid., 181). This allows users to optimally draw on the expressive and connective potential of social media platforms while managing the potential harms to impression management. Gambetti (2020) builds on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to call such skills technocultural capital.

Online Self-Presentation as a Negotiation

Owing to the influence of the algorithms and templates, consumer self-presentation online is a negotiation of user interests with the normative design choices of the platform owners. Van Dijck (2013) takes this argument further when she argues that rather than seeing social media profiles as *reflections* of consumer identity, we should see them as sites of struggle between users and platform owners. The scripts and affordances of platforms constitute steering mechanisms that enact power of the platform maker. Self-presentation online is, thus, not a reflection of a preexisting self, but the result of consumers' negotiation with the embedded logics of platforms. The risk for consumers in such a process is that as Andrejevic (2019) has argued, the requirement of computation results is a form of social deskilling. That is, instead of tools simply enabling humans, designers reframe social activities in computational terms such that it is the humans who seem to become automated (Burrell and Fourcade 2020).

It is important to note that practices of self-presentation and the affordances of social media platforms are mutually constitutive. While the platform owners have more power in this struggle, they must also balance the needs of users with their own interests. For instance, Instagram began a series of tests in 2019 which allowed users the option to hide the "like" and "comment" count on their posts. This likely evolved from feedback that these features caused consumers to feel pressurized to conform to forms of self-presentation that will yield higher like and comment counts. In 2021, Instagram and the larger Facebook platform have rolled out this feature (Perez 2021).

The power dynamic is unmistakable particularly when a few large social media platforms dominate the industry and consumers are often unable to quit a platform because doing so would mean losing an irreplaceable mode of contact with people with which they would

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like to be in touch. It is difficult for consumers to avoid social media platforms especially as there is an increasing social expectation that a person has an active online presence. Absence from social media platforms can cause loss of social and cultural capital. So, while the discourse of the 1990s focused on the liberatory potential of the internet for individuals, in the contemporary online environment, the self becomes increasingly institutionalized since the basic functioning becomes reliant on the demands of these commercial institutions (Couldry and Hepp 2018).

Conclusion and Future Research

Above, we argued that while the availability of templates on social media platforms has eased the skill constraints to establish an online presence, they have created constraints to managing self-presentation online. These constraints arise from the low- and high-level affordances of the social media platforms, specifically from templates and the algorithms which process the inputs from these templates. We now turn to considering the implications for consumer research arising from the platform shaping of self-presentation.

Research examining how consumers deal with social media platform constraints can serve to highlight how such negotiation influences consumer experience of algorithmic technologies and artificial intelligence (Puntoni et al. 2021). Social media platforms are now the primary vehicle of online self-presentation. The contemporary socio-technical milieu compels individuals to share stories about themselves online and rewards authorship by enabling the accrual of social capital within and across fields (Papacharissi and Easton 2013). Given their omnipresence, it is important to know how scripts and affordances influence the cognitive-intellectual, pragmatic-behavioral, and affective components of consumer experience (Schmitt 2011) when using social media platforms. Future research could shed light on how user experience varies by virtue of gender, racial, and/or sexual identity performance, and the manner in which the platform reflects existing, creates new, or amalgamates social structures that undergird privilege, stigma, and marginalization. Designers tend to "belong to the group that shares the dominant values and symbols of a society" (Staudenmaier 1989, 154) and so it is likely that the product design reflects the hierarchical values prevalent in the society in which it was created which likely influences consumer experience. Further, consumers have different motivations to use social media platforms. So, research is needed on how consumer platform experience varies based on user motivations. Moreover, research on the intersection of use motivation and use frequency may be explored to discover how the consumer experience of a person who is an enthusiastic and active user differs from that of a less enthusiastic user who engages in the platform due to peer pressure and social obligation.

Consumer researchers may want to interrogate how online self-presentation, guided by platform design, impacts consumption experiences. For instance, researchers may focus on how a consumption experience such as enjoying a meal at a restaurant is changed by posting about it during the meal to a social media platform audience. Researchers may address how consumers pick consumption experiences based on platform affordances. For instance, marketing researchers may study the phenomenon of "Instgrammable" hotels and holidays (Anderson 2017) where consumers seek out experiences which provide a specific kind of visual aesthetic that is rewarded by validation on social media platforms like Instagram.

Social scientists and brand managers may study how social media platform design influences self-presentation, shaping relationships between consumers, consumers and products, and consumers and brands. For instance, platform design characteristics which guide private, public, or professional participation influence the kinds of content creation and platform

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interactions that ultimately increase consumer desire (Kozinets, Patterson and Ashman 2017). This could manifest in the quest for content that garners increased audience reactions. For example, a professional platform like LinkedIn tends to reward individual posters for touting their accomplishments, many of which are team efforts, increasing users' tendencies to self-promote. Relatedly, the design of platforms has been criticized for fostering polarization on topics ranging from politics to vaccines. In this context, research is needed on how the affordances and the scripts of platforms shape consumer interactions with brands toward passionate polarity. Further, researchers are invited to investigate how platforms influence interpersonal relationships when a consumer learns of, and reacts to, the nature and intensity of their friends' potentially controversial beliefs from their online self-presentation.

While this chapter focuses on traditional social media platforms which require a user's explicit input such as writing a post on Facebook or LinkedIn, or uploading a photo on Instagram, or a video on TikTok, the proliferation of the "Internet of Things" (IoT) creates new forms of self-presentation where sensors automatically read consumers' actions and represent these to others. For example, fitness trackers algorithmically "read" and make a representation of a user's exercise activity to other users. The representation of such activities by sensors is shaped by the design choices of how the algorithms choose to collect, analyze, and show the data. These are choices shaped by the economic, ideological, and technical underpinnings of platform design. Therefore, future research can consider how consumers negotiate self-presentation when such representations are mediated by the electronic sensors and algorithms that constitute the IoT.

Lastly, in pursuing the above suggested research, recent methodological developments such as critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock 2018), discursive interface analysis (Stanfill 2015), app-walkthrough technique (Light, Burgess and Duguay 2018), object ethnography (Carrington 2012), more-than human netnography (Quinton and Reynolds 2020), and post human-research inquiry (Adams and Thompson 2016) may be useful.

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