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Brand yourself, design your future: Portfolio-building in the social media age

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Abstract

While the portfolio-building narrative has long been established as central to work in the creative industries, the evolving form of the creative portfolio as a key component of the self-brand and the implications on creative work in the age of social media have been comparatively underexplored. This empirical project draws on a year-long qualitative study composed of in-depth interviews of 56 graphic design professionals about their use of social media platforms that cater to creative professionals. This study identifies the social media logics of the design portfolio as multi-platformed, connected, and temporally dynamic, suggesting a new pace, constancy, and subjectivity of what it means for cultural producers to build, maintain, and distribute their portfolio of projects to sustain their creative careers. As the portfolio becomes digitally distributed across a social media ecology, the labor of portfolio production for creative aspirants becomes never-ending and requires an intensified performative of "always designing."

Keywords

Creative economy, design, designers, freelance economy, portfolio careers, self-branding, social media

Introduction

Scholars have used the term "portfolio careers" to describe the project-based, contract, and entrepreneurial forms of employment that pervade the creative industries including music, magazine publishing, television (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011), new media workers and fashion models (Neff et al., 2005), fashion designers (McRobbie, 2003),

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technology workers (Neff, 2012), and fashion bloggers (Duffy, 2017). More specifically, the portfolio of creative work demonstrates skills (McRobbie, 2002) and is central to evaluation and hiring among creative professionals (Neff et al., 2005; Soar, 2002). While the portfolio-building narrative has long been established as central to work in the creative industries, the evolving form of the creative portfolio has been comparatively underexplored. How, then, are the practices surrounding "portfolio-building" in the creative industries being reconfigured in the era of social media and what are the implications for creative workers?

To explore this question, this study draws upon a year-long qualitative study composed of in-depth interviews with 56 graphic design professionals and observational analysis of social media platforms that cater to creative professionals. As contemporary workers engage in project-based work and are encouraged to focus on their portfolios for finding their next gig, graphic designers' long-standing preoccupation with presenting a portfolio as a means of self-enterprise in the design industry presages contemporary trends in entrepreneurial portfolio-building. As such, graphic designers' practices and the central role of the portfolio as a creative product for self-promotion represent a lens through which to investigate the logics of portfolio-building and content creation in the digital age.

Over the past 5 years, the US graphic design industry has grown by 3.6% to generate 14.8 billion dollars in revenue in 2018 (McGinley, 2018: 7). In the same timeframe, the number of businesses including freelancers and firms has grown by 1.1%, and the number of employees has grown by 1.4% (McGinley, 2018). Moreover, approximately 48.5% of the products and services created by graphic designers are for the advertising and corporate branding sector of the market (McGinley, 2018). For the graphic design profession, which has had a long-standing heavy reliance on freelancers (Heller and Fernandes, 1999: 196), *portfolio-building* is vital to sustaining a career. In particular, graphic designers get hired as freelancers across a wide range of media industries including book publishing, editorial services, advertising, and film. Necessarily, graphic designers frequently move between contexts of employment, including freelance/independent work, advertising agencies, design consultancies, and companies in other sectors outside of the design industry (Castillo, 2015). As they move among various contexts, graphic designers frequently do freelance work to bolster their design portfolios and build their careers. Along with creatives' "embrace of entrepreneurial and individualistic ways of working" (Nixon, 2006: 104), the idealized autonomy of freelance lifestyle is part of graphic design culture. Directives for all creatives to "work like a freelancer" (Christmann, 2012: n.p.) serve to further idealize the continual networking efforts and self-promotional practices of temporary workers as the future of what it means to be successful creative workers in the new economy.

As is true for many creative aspirants, portfolios serve as a form of design industry credentialing, which "conflate job skills and clients' prestige" (Neff et al., 2005: 311). Design labor, already "intensely performative" in the way designers perform what it "means to 'be creative' or designerly" for clients (Julier, 2017: 15), is further amplified in the context of self-branding on social media. The *design portfolio*, which has always been about self-promotion tailored to a specific audience, becomes more

malleable and harder to pin down as it becomes digital and moves across various social media platforms.

This study identifies the "social media logic" (van Dijck and Poell, 2013: 3) of the design portfolio as *multi-platformed, connected*, and *temporally dynamic*, suggesting an emerging structure for the creative portfolio in the larger context of design working conditions. Thus, the socially mediated portfolios of graphic designers illuminate the tensions at the center of creative careers, self-branding practices, and digital labor that are relevant across creative industries.

Creative work and portfolio careers in the freelance economy

Changes in capitalist economies brought on by "new communication technologies, globalization, and neoliberal policies have resulted in increasingly insecure labor conditions" (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013: 15-16, see also: Gill, 2010; Gill and Pratt, 2008). In this context of work, the risk and responsibility are shifted from the organization to the individual (Gill, 2010; Neff, 2012; Neff et al., 2005). McRobbie (2002: 515) observed that creative work is characterized by neoliberal ideals of "entrepreneurialism, individualization, and reliance on corporate sponsorship." The design industry, a part of the broader creative industries, places emphasis on the neoliberal ethos of "flexible working conditions, project-based employment structuring, multi-skilling, entrepreneurship, and individualism" (Julier, 2017: 52). As such, the design industries are characterized by broader economic and organizational post-Fordist trends in labor such as work precarity and contract-based work (Gill and Pratt, 2008). In particular, precarity refers to not only the extraction of value but also the potential for resistance (Cohen, 2018; Salamon, 2016). These employment conditions and neoliberal ideas of individuality and self-governance provide the backdrop to narratives of creative self-enterprise.

Efforts to quantify graphic designers have varied widely over the last decade. However, recent estimates from The IBISWorld Industry Report on graphic designers in the United States documented 172,081 graphic designers in 2018 (McGinley, 2018). Moreover, "industry nonemployers, a category that includes freelance graphic designers, accounts for almost 90% of industry enterprises and about half of industry revenue" (McGinley, 2018: 8). As such, graphic designers make up part of a growing *freelance economy* who subscribe to the meritocratic narrative of being "responsible for their own success and failure" (Storey et al., 2005: 1049).

Similar to other creative professionals across a range of media industries, designers have what Neff et al. (2005) term "portfolio-based careers" made up of multiple creative projects. Originally celebrated, the notion of the "portfolio career" or a "boundaryless career" (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001) was synonymous with freedom from the typical constraints of more organized employment (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). However, critical scholars have pointed to the self-exploitation central to flexible forms of creative work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). The narrative of *passion or love for the work* and "creative lifestyle" becomes a way of rationalizing the low pay and insecure working conditions, highlighting how creative workers draw value from the creative work in ways apart from monetary compensation (Arvidsson et al., 2010: 305). Moreover, the "creativity dispotif"

(McRobbie, 2016: 11) and discourses of *doing what you love* perpetuate the tradeoff of the insecurity of self-enterprise for creative autonomy and passion (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017). As such, freelancers often focus less on the precarity of their employment and instead are "more inclined to see themselves as entrepreneurs" (Gandini, 2016a: 137). Often, the narrative of *portfolio-building* is taken up by creative workers to rationalize under-compensated forms of labor (Duffy, 2017; Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013; Neff, 2012). Despite these key insights about portfolio-building as a key motivator for work in the creative industries, scholars have yet to understand the implications for the work of creating and maintaining a portfolio as a visible creative product in an expanding social media ecology.

Self-branding and the creative portfolio

In his 1997 article in *Fast Company*, management consultant Tom Peters (1997) encouraged workers to think of their careers as "a portfolio of projects" that serve as the core part of their brand (31 August: para 53). In the current "attention economy" (Bueno, 2016), contemporary workers are compelled to think of themselves as brands and continuously promote their branded personas (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013). The design of a self-branded persona of qualities is presented through both "content and networking" (Gandini, 2016a). Demonstrated through coherent "visual and typographic strategies" (Gershon, 2017: 34), a designer's personal brand is increasingly deployed in what Scolere et al. (2018) refer to as *platform-specific* ways across a sprawling social media ecology. There has been an uptick in critical scholarship focused on creative workers' self-branding efforts on digital platforms (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Gandini, 2016a), as well as continued theoretical contributions about the "labor of social media production" (Duffy, 2017: 45; see also Baym, 2015; Duffy, 2015). As part of a "reputation economy," workers are "required to invest in social relationships using reputation as an asset and a social capital that translates digital and non-digital interaction into value" (Gandini, 2016b: 917). Graphic designers who create original design work as part of their professional careers offer an opportunity to examine the tensions that arise as their digital design portfolios become a centerpiece of their self-branding strategy.

Portfolio in the digital age

Drawing on a "labor process perspective" (Cohen, 2018:15), this project acknowledges the larger structural dynamics at play in shaping graphic designers' experiences in the work of portfolio-building. As such, this research seeks to understand the work implications of digital technologies in the larger context of design practices. Historically, physical design portfolios were labored on by prospective designers—taking on a variety of creative forms such as designed portfolio books, boxes, folios, and other meticulously designed print materials to demonstrate a unique point of view (Gomez-Palacio and Vit, 2010). The portfolio has long since been a project unto itself and something that designers notoriously agonize over because it has been seen as the ultimate self-promotional tool in designers' arsenal to further their career goals (Taylor, 2012). Portfolios are often designed with a particular audience in mind, and there are competing demands to appear

multi-skilled, while also tailoring the projects to reflect the type of work that the designer seeks to do in the future. Although the print portfolio has not completely disappeared, there has been a gradual shift to the digital portfolio in the form of a web portfolio and interactive PDF portfolio packaged for easy distribution.

Profiles of portfolio platforms

In this era of the digital portfolio, co-founder of the online portfolio platform Bēhance Scott Belsky saw the ecology of individual web portfolios and resumes in the creative industry as disconnected and "inefficient" and subsequently launched Bēhance (2017) in 2006 as an "online platform to showcase and discover great work." By connecting creative portfolios together in "one place," where projects could be uploaded as case studies and creatives could follow other creatives and like or "appreciate" the work, the notion of portfolio expanded to online platforms (Bēhance, 2019), becoming social and public to a degree not previously experienced. In contrast to its forerunner, the creative community of DeviantArt which focused on aspiring artists (Perkel, 2011), Bēhance sought to target a broader "creative professional community" including the design professions (Belsky, 2011). With over 6 million members at the end of 2015, Bēhance (2015) is considered one of the most expansive online creative communities, and it includes product designers, user interface designers, architects, interior designers, illustrators, photographers, graphic designers and many more.

Adobe's acquisition of Bēhance in 2012 has afforded Adobe Systems Inc. (Adobe) the opportunity to expand its Creative Cloud software subscription service offerings with a *social component* for encouraging the distribution of creative work. Adobe further integrated its offerings between creative production and distribution by introducing Adobe Portfolio (2019), whereby creatives are encouraged to create their own domain for their creative work while continuing to share their work through Bēhance. With over US$9 billion in revenue in 2018 (Adobe, 2018), Adobe's continued growth has been attributed largely to the decision to move to a "software as a service (SaaS)" business model—whereby creatives pay for a cloud-based subscription for creative production software (Hadad, 2018). Following broader trends of the consolidation and concentration of ownership and control in the media industries (Winseck and Jin, 2011), Adobe is the dominant player in the *Design, Editing, and Rendering Software Publishing* industry, controlling 42.5% of the market share (Hadad, 2018: 26), and is perceived as the *gold standard* for image editing software in the creative industries. The other key players include Autodesk Inc., with 13.4% market share, and Dassault Systemes, with 4.9% market share (Hadad, 2018: 26). While there is some overlap in services, these competitors focus on different areas of specializations than Adobe. For example, Autodesk Inc., specializes in visualization software for the architecture, engineering, and construction industries such as AutoCAD, Revit, and 3ds Max; meanwhile, Adobe is unique by specializing in image editing and design software such as Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign.

Ranked behind Bēhance, Dribbble was the second most visited site for digital design in 2017 (Alexa, 2017). Current web traffic analysis of similar sites indicates that Bēhance and Dribbble have the highest audience overlap (Alexa, 2019). Moreover, both creative platforms are visited by creatives as sources of inspiration for new creative work, with

Bēhance having more than 4 million unique monthly visitors (Alexa, 2018a) and Dribbble having more than 2 million unique monthly visitors (Alexa, 2018b). Founded in 2009, Dribbble (2018) is promoted as a platform for "creatives to share, grow, and get hired." Unlike the open access Bēhance platform, to share work with the Dribbble community, a member must be "drafted" as a player through an invite-only process by an existing design member or platform administrator. As such, Dribbble is structured around a tiered access model and uses the metaphor of basketball for the organization of the platform. An invited member ("player") has the ability to post work (shots), follow other designers, and view and comment on work by other designers. Members who have not been drafted yet ("prospects") can follow designers and view work, but Dribbble has integrated social networking features including the ability to follow and display follower counts, direct mention features, and capabilities for liking & commenting. In the context of digital platforms, how and where these portfolios of projects are showcased and distributed has become ever-more expansive with implications for emerging labor and creative work processes.

Method

Sampling and recruitment

As a leading professionally-oriented portfolio social media platform, Bēhance is not only a vast creative community with a strong presence of graphic and digital designers, but it also represents an open access creative portfolio platform. Moreover, as a part of the "Adobe family" of offerings, Bēhance is a ubiquitous name in the creative community, demonstrating consolidation and integration of both creative *production* and *distribution* happening under one company. For these reasons, I chose Bēhance as the sampling frame to recruit graphic designers who were actively developing their identities as creative professionals. As I expand on below, while I used Bēhance as the sampling frame, this project takes a "social media ecology" (Zhao et al., 2016) perspective on understanding designers' use of Bēhance in relation to their use of other social media platforms.

I employed several recruitment strategies to sample graphic design professionals who were Bēhance registered users. First, I posted recruitment messages on LinkedIn design-oriented professional groups, including the AIGA group and SEGD group, which represent key professional organizations for graphic designers. In addition, I recruited directly from the platform, reaching out initially to graphic designers within the AIGA sub-site of Bēhance. From these initial contacts, I employed snowball sampling to recruit additional participants and was assisted by several participants who promoted the study through their Twitter networks.

The participants included women ($n = 20$) and men ($n = 36$), ranging in age from 22 to 42 with a mean age of 30. The sample includes participants working in a range of large cities throughout the United States. Consistent with the geographic distribution of the graphic design industry, which generally follows population and business distribution (McGinley, 2018), more than half of the participants are from markets that have a larger concentration of graphic designers, including New York, California, Florida, and Texas. In addition, this sample includes graphic designers from regions that have a

larger percentage of graphic designers relative to the population (McGinley, 2018) such as the Mid-Atlantic, the Great Lakes, and the West. The remainder of the sample includes representation of designers from smaller markets for graphic design such as the Rocky Mountains (UT), the Plains (MN, NE, and MO), New England (NH, MA), and Southeast (GA, SC). The gender divide in this sample is, in part, a reflection of the referral networks of the graphic design profession more broadly. Regarding employment status, while the majority of the sample of designers are freelance or independent designers, as is common in graphic design, nearly all of the participants have moved fluidly between the roles of more *permanent employment* and *project-based freelance employment*. As such, the majority of my sample was composed of ($n=41$) designers who were employed as independent/freelance workers, with the majority of those qualifying as what Horowitz and Rosati (2014) classify as "freelance business owners" (p.5). The remaining ($n=15$) designers were full-time employees in agency, creative studio, or "in-house" roles. Overall, this sample of designers identified strongly with the culture of self-enterprise.

Data collection and analysis

I conducted 56 semi-structured in-depth interviews which ranged from approximately 30 to 90 minutes and were conducted via telephone or Skype. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. This study was granted permission by the author's institutional review board. Overall, I structured the questions and the overall interview as open-ended reflection questions (Charmaz, 2002) that would encourage the participants to reflect on their own usage. The interviews focused on a range of areas including Bēhance platform use and motivations, work involved with promoting and sharing work through platforms, background and career aspirations, the creative design process, and types of project work undertaken.

Signaling larger trends in how users think about their decision to share content in the context of a broader "social media ecology" (Zhao et al., 2016), the designers I interviewed framed their use of Bēhance in comparison to other platforms, such as Dribbble and Instagram. Thus, this project conceptualized portfolio and self-promotion through the lens of what van Dijck (2013: 21) terms "an ecosystem of connective media," where users make decisions about sharing content based on all of the platforms available to them. While the participants in this study identified a range of creative-oriented platforms—Bēhance and Dribbble as well as popular platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest—as a part of career building efforts, discussions of portfolio promotion focused primarily on Bēhance, Dribbble, and Instagram.

Drawing on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I approached data collection and analysis as an iterative process, moving continuously back and forth between collecting data and analyzing the data using a "constant comparative method" (p. 102). Using the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti, I developed initial coding categories including media ecology, self-presentation, content creation, and portfolio development. Through the lens of portfolio and social media logics, I continued to refine the categories to reflect the emerging themes presented below. To protect their identities, all of the names of the interviewees used in this article are pseudonyms.

Findings: portfolio building in the age of social media

Nearly all of the interviewees highlighted the importance of using social media to promote portfolio-building efforts as a part of steering their creative careers. Portfolio-building was a motivating factor for how designers decided which opportunities to pursue and which projects they decided to promote via digital platforms. For example, after his first full year as an independent designer, Seth felt that the diversity of projects in his portfolio would give him "enough ammo to start hunting, very confidently" if things started to "dry up." Seth's concerns reflect how many of the independent and freelance designers in this study both embraced the creative autonomy of self-enterprise and simultaneously viewed portfolio self-promotion as a way to buffer against the risk of the precarious employment market (Neff et al., 2005). Even with the risks, pursuing a career as an independent or freelance designer was viewed as a remedy for what Kenneth (as cited in Scolere et al., 2018) described as the perception of being "invisible" at a large agency; this approach allows one to pursue a career of perceived creative autonomy.

Even though all the designers I spoke with still maintained personal websites as their portfolios, they viewed social media a vital part of their portfolio self-brand and "*visibility*." Independent D.C. designer Mark explained,

> It makes so much more sense to go to a place like, Dribbble or Bēhance or Instagram than try and hunt down individual designers (via personal websites).

In part, the perception that creative directors and art directors were present on a particular platform served as a signal for the ever-changing location of the creative industry. Creative professionals struggled to understand the return on investment for their cross-platform promotion and yet felt compelled to continue their self-branding strategies across multiple platforms to further their careers (Scolere et al., 2018). As I detail below, the social media logic of the creative portfolio reflects the evolving work processes of designers, as the portfolio becomes multi-platformed and distributed, connected, and temporally dynamic. As designers turn to social media platforms as a key vehicle for self-promotion and portfolio distribution, the nature of the digital design portfolio reflects larger dynamics of working conditions. This suggests a new temporal pace, constancy, intensification, and subjectivity of what it means for cultural producers to build, maintain, and distribute their portfolio of projects to pursue their next gig.

Portfolio as multi-platformed and distributed

As the portfolio becomes digitally distributed across a sprawling social media ecology, the labor involved in the production and distribution of a portfolio for creative aspirants becomes incessant. While designers have always been encouraged to "show your personality" through the *work* in their portfolios, the socialized portfolio, spread across multiple platforms, compels designers to *share more dimensions* of what it means to *be* a designer. In addition to the typical content of client work and self-initiated work, this study illuminates how designers are prodded to share personal moments, sources of inspiration, and a consistent point of view to demonstrate their personal brands through their digital portfolios. Designers manage this expanded, multi-platformed portfolio by

sharing their content in platform-specific ways, making what Zhao et al. (2016) refer to as "conceptual links between platform and audience" (p. 92). As such, common understandings coalesced around how each platform contributed to the design portfolio. Accordingly, the designers I interviewed reflected on how they evaluated other designers' portfolios by examining the digital work spread across multiple platforms. For example, Dribbble and Bēhance were viewed as places to evaluate design ability through demonstrated project work. Independent designer Kacie saw Pinterest as a platform for evaluating what a fellow designer was "inspired by." Trevor, who worked as a part-time freelancer and an in-house designer for a technology company, viewed Dribbble as the platform that demonstrates his "work ability" and Twitter as an indicator of his unique "point of view" about design. Trent reflected on how a designer's Instagram feed was a place where inferences could be made about whether design was "more than just a job" to a designer. In their evaluations of their peers' social media portfolios, designers often drew on affective cues about the types of content and self-presentation that counted as "good work"—such as creative autonomy, high involvement in the work, and passion for the creative work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 30; see also, Arvidsson et al., 2010; Duffy, 2017).

Designers managed this expanded, multi-platformed portfolio by sharing their original design work using a self-presentation strategy that Scolere et al. (2018) refer to as *platform-specific branding*. As such, "imagined affordances" (Nagy and Neff, 2015), or the interplay of each platform's perceived material and design features and social norms, impacted designers' considerations of portfolio presentation. In particular, the design affordances of these creative platforms *shaped the form* of the creative portfolio as it is distributed through digital platforms.

Design affordances of portfolios. The format, display, and size parameters of content varied considerably on each platform, which meant that designers were constantly thinking about considerations of display on each platform as they developed their work. For independent designer Will, the image size features indicated possibilities for the way his work will be viewed on the three platforms he prioritized for his graphic design work. He shared,

> So when I construct the image, [I think]: would it work in a square format on Instagram? Would it work vertically on Bēhance, cause it's a bigger screen, and also would it work horizontally on my personal website?

When comparing Bēhance's vertical format and Instagram's typical square format, Will is also alluding to the differences in how content will be viewed by an audience—noting distinctions between mobile applications like Instagram and desktop viewing on Bēhance.

Some designers developed efficiencies to allow their projects to cross platforms more easily. Independent designer Miles described how he observed designers creating a vertical template in a graphic program where they could layout and arrange multiple images for a project. He explained,

> I know several of my peers—what they do whenever they come up with something on Bēhance is that they end up creating one long image—a long image with a lot of the elements in it. So that when they upload it to Bēhance, it fits that website perfectly. They can pin it.

This strategy can also be viewed as a form of resistance (Salamon, 2016)—a tactic that afforded designers more control over how their images were presented and how their projects (if pinned via Pinterest) circulated as one image rather than separate images. As a result, the format of the digital portfolio has been influenced in part by these platform parameters.

Other designers went a step further, explaining how the image parameters on various platforms were starting to influence the format of self-initiated projects or other content designed *for specific platforms.* Independent designer Dina observed this pattern of designers "building things to a 4:3 [aspect] ratio" to fit the image parameters of Dribbble and viewed this approach of building for a platform like Dribbble as a "precursor to people building out imagery for Instagram." As such, Dina viewed this trend as risky because it was so dependent on platforms that are perceived as always changing or disappearing. She explained,

> People started realizing there's a constraint, and so now I need to fit this in a constraint, rather than, my work is beyond this platform. It's now, the platform is the work. I've even known people who have Dribbble as their portfolio, and I go, "I love this platform, guys, but I wouldn't get it tattooed on my forehead."

Dina's perspective was certainly controversial among the designers I spoke with. Many participants firmly asserted that design solutions were created independent of platform parameters. Yet, this study seemed to show that design workflow practices among designers were evolving such that designers were giving additional consideration to platform constraints and even developing self-initiated design projects and work *for platforms* like Instagram and Dribbble.

In addition to image parameters, the affordance of *comparability* built into creative platforms like Behance and Dribbble structured designers' works around activity feeds and featured galleries that are organized in 'infinite scrolling' style where thumbnail images of projects (Bēhance) or "shots" (Dribbble) are aggregated and appear side-by-side in a grid. The consistency of the grid within these feeds and galleries allows for designers *and potential clients* to easily make comparisons between designers' works in a way and scale that is unprecedented—amplifying an already hypercompetitive design employment market.

Portfolio as connected

"Connectivity" is identified by van Dijck and Poell (2013) as a key principle of social media logic in connecting "content to user activities and advertisers," where "the mutual shaping of users, platforms, advertisers and more generally, online performative environments" is the key driver (p.8). The *connected* nature of the creative portfolio as a part of the social media ecosystem influenced the way designers made decisions about their "imagined audiences" (Litt, 2012), portfolio content, and the process of distributing their design work. Independent designer Jordan (as cited in Scolere et al., 2018) pointed to the way followers on social media platforms complicated the notion of portfolio and sharing his work through these systems:

> Your [personal website] portfolio exists alone. Bēhance and more specifically Instagram has the follower attached to it, which means whatever I upload, you're going to be confronted with whether you like it or not, and then you have the decision to continue to follow that or not, which your (website) portfolio doesn't have at the moment.

Jordan's observations point to the ways in which the platform "programmability" (van Dijck and Poell, 2013: 5) of social media impacts how he thinks about the process of updating his portfolio. While updates to a web portfolio may not be immediately visible to a perceived live audience, an update of project work on Bēhance means immediate notifications to followers.

For design professionals who view these platforms as part of their portfolio presentation, each post was experienced as a form of portfolio evaluation through the social media metrics of likes and followers. These "connective affordances" (Kalsnes et al., 2017: para 11) of social media serve to make a once static and controlled portfolio presentation into one that is interactive and tied to tangible metrics where the portfolio and the creative work becomes *quantifiable* by the number of likes, shares, and comments attached to it.

Indicative of the underlying connectivity of platforms, the rise of the so-called "Instagram portfolio" (Greenfield, 2014), has given way to new forms of work and value-generating opportunities that intersect with larger industry trends in influencer marketing programs. To marketers trying to promote brand content, designers' Instagram portfolios represent another avenue for connecting users to sponsored brand content. A number of designers I interviewed described their participation in a wide range of models for creating work for Instagram, which to varying degrees commoditize their followers as audiences for various brands. As such, these designers' Instagram feeds have become promotional channels for various brands, plugging into a pervasive aspect of social media marketing which Serazio and Duffy (2018) refer to as *earned media.* In contrast to showing completed client work or self-initiated projects, designers' Instagram portfolios are increasingly featuring traditional client creative work intermixed with various degrees of sponsored brand content. Sebastian, a part-time freelancer and designer at a boutique creative studio offered this distinction:

> You can tell when someone's posting a job they did for a client because they wanna show it off, and when someone's posting a job because that's the final goal of the job—to post it, and to be an ad for your following.

The designers I spoke with were highly attuned to this distinction as a *break* in the norms and authenticity of the more typical self-promotional efforts of portfolio design work—a sort of break that, as one designer quipped, "his followers could sniff out." While in communities of bloggers, fashion bloggers in particular were among of the first groups targeted by marketers to be social media influencers (Serazio and Duffy, 2018), this later wave infiltration of marketers into the professional design community represents the persistence and expansiveness of influencer programs.

Even more so is the intertwined nature of what one designer referred to as "a growing amount of people who are into the idea of being *graphic designer influencers.*" The so-called *designer influencer* is a designer who has a large enough following to be sought after for both their design services and their audience reach. For example, Jordan

highlighted how he just recently started getting proposals for creative work based on *both* his design ability and his audience reach or social media metrics:

> There are stipulations within my contract that dictate when I can post about them, how often I'm comfortable doing it, and what kind of posts I'm comfortable doing. It's opening up these really interesting, weird … business and contractual things that I never thought I would be asked to do.

This example illustrates how, as the design portfolio becomes intertwined with social media platforms, its form is also being shaped and reshaped by the social media logics that underpin platforms such as Instagram. Of course, the degree to which designers promoted products or brands through their social media portfolios varied unevenly across the sample of designers interviewed. For example, independent designer Jonathan described a project with a large banking institution and how his agent "pitched the idea of them sponsoring an Instagram post" for him. He explained,

> So they actually paid me much better than a normal kind of influencer thing would've been, it was a very reasonable rate. And then they also promoted that post as well, so then people saw my work, but under my name as well not just their brand's name.

These stipulations represent his attempts to participate in influencer activities while still maintaining his sense of design autonomy. The connective context of the socially mediated portfolio makes it potentially value-generating in ways that extend beyond the traditional self-promotion of "show and tell" of design work. As such, this study revealed how designers attempted to shore up the line of who is getting the most value or payoff from their distribution of portfolio content in a connective environment.

Portfolio as temporally dynamic

In addition to follower engagement and social media metrics, Mark noted how portfolios were structured through social media platforms as "feed based" instead of being "index based" like personal portfolio websites. The "constantly updated refreshing feed of new work," to which Mark refers is a feature of social media that changes the temporal nature of the portfolio from a creative product that is updated every couple of months to something that must be continually updated in order for designers to stay relevant. The "feed" nature of the social media portfolio was experienced by designers as a constant demand for new design content.

However, the temporal aspects of portfolios were experienced by designers in *platform specific* ways. Designers made conceptual links between content posting norms and expectations of posting frequency across platforms. Platforms like Bēhance which, encouraged the "project" upload of multiple images seemed to align much better with the timeframe of design projects. Designers often discussed how they posted new projects on Bēhance much less frequently, waited until a project was completed, and had client permission to upload those projects. This norm of the full "project" upload was designed into the platform from the beginning and was carefully cultivated by the platform curators through the selection of work that was featured in the Bēhance gallery (Bēhance Blog, 2015).

In contrast to Bēhance, Dribbble was defined by the primary unit of an image rather than a project with each post being described as a "shot." Independent designer Noah saw

Dribbble as a platform that he could "constantly be posting to" because "there wasn't the expectation that it has to be finished," and he could post "just a piece of the process or just a little crop" of something that he was working on without waiting "until a project is done and the client signs off or gives permission to post the project." While the "shot" format on Dribbble and the swipe to see multiple images within a post on Instagram gave designers greater flexibility in terms of content creation, there was a *perceived* expectation of a higher frequency of posts on these platforms.

This expectation of post frequency was experienced as particularly amplified on Instagram. Keith noted that on Instagram, "You have to be posting, and you have to be prolific all the time, and that in itself can be pretty stressful." These perceived temporal qualities of the platform influenced how designers thought about sharing new work. Independent Bay Area lettering artist and designer Jonathan described how the change in the algorithm amplified the perceived pressure to post "everyday" in a way that "penalizes people who post less often." He explained,

> Yeah, it does require just a really high output […] You're no longer able to spend time on anything. It penalizes people that take the time to do it well, and unfortunately elevates people who are pretty sloppy with their work.

Because designers saw frequency of posting as linked to the potential to get followers and increase their visibility, many designers struggled with the pressure to continuously be creating high-quality design work to post. A number of graphic designers formed the impression that the design of certain content types is better suited for the temporal dynamic of Instagram than others. Kenneth, an independent graphic designer specializing in branding and advertising campaigns, emphatically described how his "branding projects take months." He continued,

> What floats my ship is branding and advertising, and those campaigns take a long time to develop […] You go through a month and you don't even have anything to show for it. And so, it's like, Well, great. What am I gonna post?

For graphic designers like Kenneth, whose work does not easily align with the perceived temporal structure of Instagram, it became an issue of figuring out what type of content to post to best ensure staying relevant. When constructing a portfolio of work on Instagram, designers often felt obligated to establish what Manovich (2016: 13–15) refers to as a "temporal pattern" for how pieces of content appear next to each other in the feed—where the sequencing of content and consistency of "theme" become key mechanisms for attracting followers on Instagram. For many designers, the *sequencing* of portfolio content using planning apps became more important than the individual project posts and resulted in additional time, effort and capital.

Discussion and conclusion

In the digital era, a creative portfolio is defined by the ongoing, on-demand packaging and presentation of creative endeavors that expand beyond the finished client project work—both personal aspects of the creative's life and the professional parts of the project work

including the frequent public pitching of ideas, inspirational content, process work (work in progress), and the final design work. This "portfolio" of work, as a central component of the self-brand for creatives, is evaluated instantaneously through follower likes (or lack thereof), comments, mentions, shares, pins, and features. While creative industry proponents champion how the *Instagram portfolio* "reaches more people with less effort and fewer resources" (Greenfield, 2014), my interviews with graphic designers suggest there is much more invisible labor being performed than previously thought. Over the last decade, the rise of social media and personal branding has meant that the frequency with which designers need to create highly visible creative products has intensified. While social media afford exciting reach for aspirants, portfolio promotion in the age of social media requires an intensified performative of "always designing" that is all encompassing—where the meta-composition and strategic sequencing of content combined with the "relational labor" (Baym, 2015) of networking across a fluid social media ecology becomes part of the design evaluation of portfolios.

While this study highlights changes in design working conditions surrounding portfolio-building, it simultaneously recognizes "continuities through change" (Cohen, 2018: 16). Even though the work dynamics of designers may evolve, the way designers negotiate the production process, the power structures that pressure designers to produce innovative ideas at competitive prices, and the compulsion to continually pitch creative work through various channels remains constant. In the context of the larger structural dynamics of design work, this study identifies three new dimensions of creative "portfolios" as a part of the digital economy and associated labor implications: portfolio as *multi-platformed, connected, and temporally dynamic.* The multi-platformed portfolio is a result of "platform-specific self-branding" practices (Scolere et al., 2018), where designers' portfolios are distributed across multiple platforms, each requiring specific tailoring of content. Moreover, the interviews revealed the degree to which platform design affordances were shaping and reshaping the form of the portfolio. Specifically, the design affordances of *comparability* and *searchability* of social media in how content is aggregated and organized has contributed to an environment in which a distinct visual style is a requirement for being *visible*. This is especially true in design centric social media platforms, as lower barriers to entry continue to exacerbate "competition among freelancers" in the graphic design industry (McGinley, 2018: 12).

The *connected portfolio*, particularly on platforms like Instagram, has implications for the boundaries of design work and a designer's portfolio in so much as designers are actively negotiating the degree of commercial influence on their portfolio content. The social media logic of popularity (van Dijck, 2013) stands in as indexes of "good design work" and "talented designers" on these platforms whereby these metrics often outweigh experience. Klein et al. (2017: 234) argue that in the creative industries, such as the music industry, *selling out* has become extremely nuanced such that there is "no single act" that demonstrates one has lost "cultural autonomy" as a creative producer. In a similarly hyped promotional context of self-branding and reputation building on social media, graphic designers are continuously making decisions about how the work they create and publicly display on social media signals their design autonomy. At this snapshot in time, nuances of *selling out* for the graphic design community have centered on the degree of participation in paid influencer activities that illuminate tensions around the boundaries of what qualifies as the work of designers.

The *temporally dynamic* aspects of the portfolio suggest a new primacy of sequencing of creative content over documenting project work. This new temporal pattern to the creative portfolio in the age of social media is experienced by designers as a continuous, daily demand for meticulously sequenced design work in addition to their paid client work in order to stay relevant. The digital design portfolio means a new pace, constancy, and subjectivity for designers who find themselves racing to churn out creative projects to increase what Banet-Weiser (2012: 122) refers to as their "cultural visibility" in a crowded and competitive creative employment market for graphic design.

While this study identifies new dimensions of digital portfolio-building, these dimensions should be understood in the context of a "labor process perspective" (Cohen, 2018: 15) that acknowledges the larger structural dynamics at play in shaping graphic designers' experiences in the work of portfolio-building. These connective media technologies are "deployed in the production process" (Cohen, 2018: 15) in the larger context of capitalist design economies driven to increase profitability and lower labor costs. The portfolio-building practices of designers are part of larger labor conditions, where success in the graphic design industry is linked to the ability to provide a wide range of design services to a variety of clients across sectors to "minimize revenue volatility," to compete effectively on tender with a competitive price for innovative ideas, and to continually adopt new technologies (McGinley, 2018: 21). Furthermore, with the lack of well-defined project standards, graphic designers are continually challenged with educating clients on the value of design and subsequently negotiating their rates in a profession in which "pay rates and scales are not made readily available" (Drumm, 2018: para 25). Together these labor conditions illustrate how design professionals now have to negotiate the power relationships of digital platforms, in addition to working among the tensions between profession and labor.

As a part of the digitally networked environment, the portfolio becomes public and value-generating. In contrast to the physical or even the personal website portfolio, where the designer reaps the primary value from the effort of building and displaying it, a *socially mediated* portfolio means that *others* can also more easily extract value from the designer's portfolio-building labor. On social media, "others" take the form of a diverse audience composed of advertisers, brands, prospective clients, other designers and the platforms that depend on designers' creative content. In the face of such precarity, the designers interviewed for this study demonstrated their continual efforts to ensure that as their design portfolios freely circulate, they still are reaping the maximum value from their own portfolio-building efforts. As such, a few of the designers interviewed describe tactics to resist exploitation such as developing techniques to ensure how their creative content circulates and that it is properly attributed, as well as negotiating compensation for both their design work and influencer activities.

Creative workers have been able to "recompose precarity" through acts of labor resistance, such as the refusal tactics demonstrated by freelance journalists in the digital economy (Salamon, 2016: 980), and de Peuter (2014) points to larger trends of labor union organizing across the creative industries. Recent discussions in the graphic design industry have centered on exploring ways to engage in collective action without the burden of constraints on individuality and creative autonomy. Proponents point to the advocacy efforts led by nonprofit graphic design organizations such as AIGA and the recently initiated Design Census "as a means of disclosing pay rates to better inform those working across the industry"; they also suggest prototyping a more adaptable guild-like entity that

could help guide industry-wide standards (Drumm, 2018: para 31). While industry professionals laud platforms like the freelance talent agency Working Not Working's potential to command competitive rates for freelancers (Drumm, 2018), Reader (2017) suggests that while invite-only creative platforms aim to be meritocratic by emphasizing the portfolio as the primary form of credentialing, their invite-only policies may contribute to the further stratification of the gig economy for freelancers. Thus, the experiences and challenges faced by the graphic designers I interviewed point to the need for more research around the evolving labor conditions of designers. Also, additional research is needed to understand modes of resistance such as labor organizing and activism in this digital era of design. Moreover, the digital portfolio *work* of designers is fundamentally *reputation work*—an investment in what Gandini (2016a) refers to as the "loop of self-branding, visibility, and reputation construction across a network of social relations" (p. 132). The struggle of having a portfolio tied to extremely fluid platforms that are further stratifying the industry suggests a new dimension of precarity for creative producers and freelancers across industries; nevertheless, these designers view social media platforms as, in the words of one independent graphic designer, our "bread and butter to get more work."

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Note

1. Although becoming a Player on Dribbble requires an invitation, Dribbble advises that if members purchase a 'Pro' account, they don't need to wait for an invitation to share their work with the Dribbble community (Dribbble, 2018b).

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