Like, Post, Share, Buy: the Commercial Value of Affective Networking on Social Media

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Like, post, share, buy:
The commercial value of affective networking on social media

Cáitríona Murphy

Abstract
The purpose of this article is to unpack the complexities of how economic value is generated in the digital economy, specifically on social media. This article looks at social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, and analyses the labour that is carried out by SNS users.

This is a theoretically oriented project that has aimed to identify and analyse the ways in which SNS users create value and profit for corporations. The article explores the labour processes carried out on social media such as the generation of data, the creation of content and the creation of value through affective networking.

The author outlines the obvious forms of content creation, such as web design and multimedia production that are carried out online. However a more implicit form of creation, such as memes, home-videos and image-creation is also discussed. It is this implicit form of creation that the article focuses on, and the author explores how this unpaid labour becomes a part of the commercial structure of SNSs.

The author examines the affective connections users form online and how these connections are exploited. Similarly the productive processes that SNS users carry out are examined and the commercial value of these processes. The author acknowledges that many SNS users benefit emotionally and socially from SNSs.
However, the article concludes that users are rendered global value subjects in the commercial structure of social networking sites.

Introduction

In 2001 the dot.com bubble burst and the landscape of the Internet economy was at a turning point (Fuchs, 2014; O’Reilly & Battelle, 2009). The profits of many Internet companies could not hold up with the promises of their high market values. In 2005 Tim O’Reilly, the founder of O’Reilly media, introduced the ‘Web 2.0’ ideology at a conference held specifically to restore investors’ confidence in the Internet industry, an industry that had lost its way after the dotcom bust’ (O’Reilly & Battelle, 2009, p. 1). The ‘Web 2.0’ refers to an evolution of the infrastructure of the Internet that is technical, social, as well as economic. O’Reilly argued that the Web was far from over and that it was only becoming the powerful tool of collective intelligence that it is today (O’Reilly & Battelle, 2009). Following this conference the ‘Web 2.0’ ideology emerged as part of the post-crisis plan to establish new spheres and models of capital accumulation for companies in the digital economy (Fuchs, 2014). However, a debate about the value and values of the digital economy and the ‘Web 2.0 ideology’ has emerged. For techno-utopians the ‘Web 2.0’ is about creating platforms for communities to come together, participate and co-create (Farchy, 2009). Techno-utopians say that the ‘Web 2.0’ is based on technologies aimed at making the Internet more interactive and involves the exchange of information submitted by Internet users and user-generated content (Farchy, 2009). Techno-skeptics see a problem in this utopian ideology as they view the new commercial infrastructure of the ‘Web 2.0’ as exploitative and undemocratic. They believe it is part of the neoliberal ideology that has been growing around the Western world since the 1970s (Fuchs, 2014).

Neoliberalism changed the economic landscape of our world, as it promotes free market capitalism and flexible accumulation: ‘a mode of production based on flexible labour processes, labour markets, products and patterns of consumption’ (Harvey, 1990, p. 147). However, neoliberalism did not only change the economic production and labour processes of the Western World; we also saw a cultural and social shift towards affective capitalism. Affective capitalism is a broad infrastructure in which ‘the emotional culture and its classed and gendered history merge with value production and everyday life’ (Karppi et al,
The term ‘affect’ is abstract and difficult to define. Affect is intrinsically linked to emotions and human behaviour ‘has the potential to arouse the body beyond rationality and activate us as subjects’ (Karppi et al, 2016, p. 1). Therefore if it is captured it can become the subject of capitalisation and manipulated to produce an economic effect (Karppi et al, 2016). Humans have the capacity to affect and be affected by others, which means that affect is moving relation that can be formed and circulated collectively (Karppi et al, 2016) - which fits into the neoliberal ideology of flexible accumulation and flexible labour perfectly. SNSs play a part in this affective capitalism because SNSs are platforms where people are networking affectively, they are used every day, they have a rich emotional culture and value can be produced on them. While it is clear that Internet users participate willingly, and many receive emotional compensation for their time spent online, the following article will detail the exploitation of social media users. This article will examine how the user-generated data and the user-generated content is monetised and how their affective engagement and participation is commercialised with little compensation or even acknowledgment.

The social media factory

Some claim that barriers are broken down on social media between the private and public sphere and for techno-utopians this puts the power in the hands of the user in a socio-economic sense and a political sense. However, for those who make a more critical assessment of the nature of this online communication, social media is deeply involved with the capitalist interests it supports, and the discourses of neoliberalism in which people who use it are immersed (Fenton, 2016). Jodi Dean calls this form of capitalism that is spread on social media ‘communicative capitalism’ which can be defined as, ‘the materialization of democratic ideals in the contemporary information and entertainment networks necessary for globalized neoliberalism’ (Dean, 2010, p. 21). Christian Fuchs applies the Marxist labour theory of value of communicative capitalism when explaining how companies profit from user-generated data on SNSs. He says that the time that people spend on these social networking platforms is ‘work time’ as users create and browse content, establish and maintain relationships and constantly update their profiles (Fuchs, 2014). This online work time produces a commodity, a data commodity, as Internet consumers produce personal data
and user-generated data (Fuchs, 2014). The more active an SNS user is the more data that is generated. The more data that is generated the more information advertising companies have to make more specific advertisements to target at each user. Although SNS users are producing this commodity they do not expect monetary compensation for the data they produce even though ‘this information constitutes the primary profit model of these companies’ (Rey, 2012, p. 400). Therefore, according to Fuchs and the Marxist labour theory of value that he applies, SNS users are infinitely exploited (Fuchs, 2014) because ‘the rate of exploitation can be formulated as the difference between the value produced by a worker’s labor and the value returned to the worker in the form of wages’ (Rey, 2012, p. 411) and SNS users get no wage or compensation apart from some sponsored blogs and social media influencers.

Although it is difficult to identify the exact economic value of the SNS users using the Marxist labour theory of value, the following Facebook statistics are illuminating. Facebook has the highest percentage of daily users, with 1.23 billion people using it every day in December 2016, as outlined in Facebook’s 2016 financial statement (Park, 2017). Facebook had 17,048 employees by 2016 which is considerably low considering their profit margin and the amount of users. The data created by these users has caused Facebook to become one of the largest advertising agencies in the world (Fuchs, 2017) with advertising being their greatest source of revenue (Park, 2017). Facebook’s advertising revenue increased 57% since 2015, with a total of $26.89 billion coming from advertising (Park, 2017). This is due to the increased efficiency of targeted advertisements, as the ‘advertisers can show more advertisements that are likely to fit the interests of consumers in the same period as in non-targeted advertising’ (Fuchs, 2014, p. 106). Although there is a not a direct link between their activity and monetisation, SNS users are still part of the capitalist value chain because they perform material transformations (Jarrett, 2015). The users’ activity transforms the ‘underlying data structure which then goes on to be further transformed in the production process, becoming monetisable audience data’ (Jarrett, 2015, p. 89).

Fuchs’ use of the Marxist labour theory of value does not show the full extent of how value is created on social media. Fuchs says that the value of a commodity can be objectively measured by determining ‘the amount of labour socially
necessary’ for its production (Marx, 1967, p. 129). However, with the emergence of neoliberalism complex forms of labour have emerged and the processes in which value is created is more difficult to identify. The source of value can no longer be determined by measuring the amount of labour that is carried out alone, but companies now need to consider other assets, like their ‘capacity for innovation and flexibility’ (Arvidsson, 2011, p. 45), intangible resources such as branding, and the relations that the company have established with the consumer (Arvidsson, 2011). These practices have become widespread online, from website creation to building virtual spaces with content such as memes and videos. This free labour has become an important feature of the Internet, allowing SNSs to thrive with little or no compensation for the participants or creators, or the ‘netslaves’ as Tiziana Terranova considers them. Tiziana Terranova’s free labour theory outlines how the Internet is driven by cultural and technical labour through a continuous production of value (Terranova, 2013). She focuses on activities such as building websites, modifying software packages, participating in mailing lists etc. (Terranova, 2013) and how the results of this labour are enjoyed and exploited. However, Terranova’s free labour theory stops short when it comes to discussing the extent of how digital labour is free labour, as she does not include details specific to the exploitation of SNS users. Similar to a lot of websites, the contributions from unpaid SNSs users ‘form the backbone of many contemporary digital media sites’ (Jarrett, 2015, p. 79). By taking on this role of content creator without receiving a wage, users reduce the costs for these SNS companies, such as Facebook, ‘thereby significantly increasing the amount of relative surplus-value that can be generated’ (Jarrett, 2015, p. 80).

Although there are Internet users that receive compensation for their productivity online, such as paid bloggers and influential people on Instagram, Snapchat etc., the majority of people who create content do so for the emotional compensation alone. It is collective knowledge that makes these products and this content possible, but the profit of this labour is disproportionately appropriated by corporations (Terranova, 2013).

The following images are examples of the type of content that is created for free and benefit corporate social media. This is a small selection of the massive amounts of promotional images that can be found online, of food and drink that people have bought, and products that people have purchased; and of their own
volition have chosen to advertise on their own SNS profiles that not only profit corporate social media, but also the brands and products that are mentioned.

(Wetherill, 2016)

(Gilleece, 2016)
(Murphy, 2016)

(O’Shea, 2017)
(Joyce, 2017)

(Hull, 2016)
In the above images either the brand is displayed, the users have checked-in to the location where they purchased the product or they have tagged the product they purchased, essentially providing free publicity for the company. The users promote products without any compensation but instead are ‘willingly conceded in exchange for the pleasures of communication and exchange’ (Terranova, 2013, p. 46). The so-called ‘netslaves’ not only give the Internet and SNSs value, but they produce value for other corporations. Therefore, it is not only corporate social media companies that benefits from free labour, but any corporation is now able to profit from the activity of SNS users’ behaviour.

**Affective networking**

Affective networking and engagement comes in different forms because positive and negative emotions are experienced by social media users. A study conducted
by Facebook Scientist Adam Kramer in 2014 proved the existence of an emotional contagion effect on SNSs and concluded that ‘the emotions expressed by friends, via online social networks, influence our own moods’ (Kramer et al, 2014, p. 8788). In the context of affect and the digital economy, this study demonstrates the importance of affective intensities (Jarrett, 2015) and how SNSs have become a platform where users’ emotions are affected negatively due to social comparison. Jodi Dean associates the enjoyment social media users feel with anxiety, as she says; anxiety induced by social media is anxiety about enjoyment, and enjoyment becomes an object of desire for the users (Dean, 2010). Users fantasise about things they could be doing and enjoying, and satisfy those desires with the enjoyment that they feel through performing ‘multiple, repetitive, mediated interactions’ (Dean, 2010, p. 20). She calls this repetitive cycle ‘drive’, and says that online users find satisfaction in their own failure via repetition (Dean, 2010). Dean uses the term ‘affect of networking’ to describe the enjoyment that is felt from the endless circular movements of liking, posting, commenting, sharing, following and friend ing, as each activity on social media ‘accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment’ (Dean, 2010, p. 21) and all contribute to the affective network. As outlined above, SNS users find satisfaction in the monotonous circuit of SNSs even though it is enjoyment that the users derive from the self-fulfilling sense of failure. It is this affect, this anxiety about enjoyment and satisfaction from repetition, that ‘communicative capitalism expropriates’ (Dean, 2010, p. 39) as it makes users more susceptible to suggestions and recommendations from friends.

Anxiety is felt and amplified on SNSs because one of the ways that people enjoy themselves is through fantasising about the ‘other’ (Dean, 2010). For example, anxiety is felt on SNSs when users are faced with past alternatives or unrealised pasts (Dean, 2010). Similarly, anxiety is felt on SNSs when users are exposed to the enjoyment of others, because users experience anxiety as a result of their personal insistence to constantly enjoy themselves and be fulfilled (Dean, 2010). Researchers posit that people push themselves to ‘find complete fulfilment in sex, exercise, professional achievement, a fabulous vacation’ (Dean, 2010, p. 40). And studies have shown that Facebook users are envious of their peers and depression can be triggered from feelings of envy on SNSs (Krasnova et al, 2013, Tandoc et al, 2014). Studies have also shown that SNSs can lead to low self-esteem and communication overload, that there are links between social media
and anxiety and that Facebook gives the impression that everyone else is happier and live better lives that they do (Chen & Lee, 2013, Flannery, Ohannessian & Vannucci, 2017, Chou & Edge, 2012). However, Facebook users also experience positive emotions such as joy/fun (28.8%) and satisfaction (9.5%) (Krasnov a et al, 2013). Similarly Tandoc et al. (2014) found that Facebook can actually lessen depression of its users, as it provides a platform for people to communicate, extend their social circles, alleviate boredom and can boost confidence in some users. However, it is the negative emotions that Dean associates with communicative capitalism, because it is the users’ desire to be included and their anxiety about enjoyment and fulfilment that keep the circuits of drive moving and SNS users consuming.

The branded self

While consumers remain in this online drive searching for personal satisfaction and fulfilment they come across a spectrum of identities, as Alison Hearn says, SNSs ‘are inventories of various types of ‘selves’,’ (Hearn, 2008, p. 197). Opportunities are provided for users to find new ways to imagine themselves and with a variety of lifestyles to try on (Dean, 2013). According to Dean, this exposure to so many various lifestyles makes SNS users’ imaginary identities extremely vulnerable (Dean, 2013). To overcome this vulnerability the SNS users construct an identity online as they spend time crafting their public profiles and connecting with others doing the same (Hearn, 2008). Meanwhile users’ explicit expressions of ‘self’ on SNSs becomes a type of labour as these expressions are forms of self-branding that users’ are continuously trying to improve and spread. Self-branding can be seen as a distinct form of a labour, as it involves this process of self-construction and it is directly linked to corporate promotional mechanisms (Hearn, 2008). Users continually produce and reproduce their ‘brand’ and the self becomes a commodity for sale which generates its own promotional packaging within the boundaries of the dominant corporate culture (Hearn, 2008). This can be seen in the images displayed in the earlier section. These images demonstrate how difficult it is to ‘separate out the desiring, meaningful affective activities of users from the exploitative frameworks of digital media’ (Jarrett, 2015, p. 45). These types of images also show a branded self that is a form of self-presentation that attracts attention and acquires cultural and monetary value (Hearn, 2008). SNS users’ personal brands are
valuable because they are a form of affective investment and strong affective investments have the ability to sustain a brand and even a community around a product as well as spread a general sentiment about a product (Arvidsson, 2011). Therefore SNS users’ brands act as a form of promotion for the products and companies of which the users are fond. This promotionalism is an essential step of increasing the reputation of a company and some theorists even argue that this form of market logic has allowed the consumers to have more of an involvement with commodities in a positive way (Jenkins et al, 2008). The consumer feels empowered by simply expressing their opinion and having their say about a brand, product or person, such as a celebrity or politician. According to this perspective, affective relations are placed at the centre of market logic in the online economy. This engagement with the product generates value through the SNS users’ ‘visible, affective and quantifiable participation in these conversations and the tangible reputations we accrue as a result’ (Hearn, 2010, p. 422).

The value of reputation

Although reputation is a cultural product, it is intrinsically linked to affect and value creation. SNS users’ reputation has been economically exploited by institutions and corporations for the extraction of value, as they have ‘the power to authorize and direct attention, and transmute that attention back into value’ (Hearn, 2010, p. 423). Users not only work to construct a brand but they also build social relationships online and the more active and social SNS users are, the stronger their reputation becomes. The strengthening of SNS users’ reputation ultimately benefits companies and social media marketers as well because users’ reputation builds the reputation of others, resulting in a constant circuit of exchange driven by affective relations (Hearn, 2010). Maintaining and engaging with these circuits of exchange has become the role of the SNS users and the online persona and reputation of each user is produced for public consumption as the users positions themselves at a ‘site for the extraction of value’ (Hearn, 2008, p. 201).

SNS users create value by giving mental worth to something and choosing to broadcast what they consider to be important (Fuchs, 2014). The stronger a users’ reputation is the more people they can connect with and broadcast to.
Therefore reputations can also be exploited by corporate media and marketers by the commercialisation of friendship, as Tania Bucher argues: ‘the configuration of friendship online is fundamentally technologically driven and commercially motivated’ (Bucher 2012, p. 480). There is a heavy emphasis on friendship and friend accumulation on Facebook because of the potential commercial benefits. Due to the fact that friendships are unique, signify something exclusive and because there is an implied trustworthiness, friends can be used for commercial purposes (Bucher, 2013). Therefore SNSs work on the assumption that a recommendation within a personal network is far stronger than a non-personal recommendation and that the wisdom of a friend is more important to users than the wisdom of the crowd. Similarly SNSs work on the assumption that that ‘if one’s network likes or shares content, oneself is more likely to like as well’ (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2010, p. 26). This is why are friends are beneficial for marketers and advertisers because we tend to trust our friends and often think like our friends, turning our friends into the most relevant recommenders (Bucher, 2013). In this way Facebook has moved past being an online sphere for socialising and is now a sphere of consumerism too, as ‘businesses and organizations can take advantage of the phenomenon of word of mouth, a powerful way of recommending goods and information of potential interest’ (Bucher, 2013, p. 488).

**Affective value**

As outlined previously, the creation of value is primarily related to the affective bonds that are created online. These bonds are the connections that tie consumers into a community of people with similar interests or the ‘link structure that underpins the network centrality of valuable influencers’ (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012, p. 136) and are reaffirmed and manipulated by corporations on social media. This affective networking has become more important because of the lack of attention paid to advertisements, brands or products (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012). Although Internet users are now presented with advertisements on almost every website that they visit, the amount of attention that is paid to each advertisement is minimal because of the sheer number of pages they visit. Similarly, click-through rates are also low, especially on SNSs because SNS users look at many of pages and advertisements making it less likely that they will actually click on a particular advertisement.
(Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012). Consequently, Facebook’s average advertising revenue per user in 2016 was approximately $15, which demonstrates how difficult it has become to monetise Internet users in the growing digital economy, because the amount of attention that users pay each advertisement can be minimal. However advertising is still Facebook’s greatest source of revenue because of the amount of attention and users that Facebook itself has attracted. This means that the principal product of corporate social media is audience power (Smythe, 2006), which is sold to advertisers, creating profit for Facebook and attention for advertisers. However, SNSs take this idea of the power of the audience further, because they actually give the audience power to interact with brands, products and companies and vice versa. Rather than just looking at an advertisement on the television or in a newspaper, SNS audiences are able to rank and rate people, places and products using ‘social buttons’ - such as the ‘like’ button on Facebook.

For this reason, SNSs valorise affective relations far more than hits or views (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012) using what Gerlitz & Helmond (2013) call the ‘like economy’, to create the power of the audience. Social activities such as liking and sharing give value to the ability of SNS users to create affective attachments and positive sentiments around media objects (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012) such as other SNS pages, websites and brands. These affective investments of consumers are directly profitable for companies because they ‘reduce the costs involved in the realisation of profit from consumer goods’ (Jarrett, 2015, p. 80) as they are essentially a free form of advertising. Facebook uses the principle of collaborative filtering ‘whereby the interests and social centrality of a particular user are deduced from affective investments within his or her network of friends as rendered explicit by the like button’ (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012, p. 144). This affective networking continuously generates more affective products for others to consume and therefore their affective interactions are sustaining the cyclical ‘drive’ of SNSs, as Dean refers to it (Dean, 2010; Jarrett, 2015). The information about the affective investments users make, e.g. what they like and share, is then collected from collaborative filtering and is sold on to advertisers either as spaces for targeted ads, or as data from which to mine market information (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012, p. 144). Affective attachment to a brand or page has become so important, that when companies measure the return on investment (ROI) of a viral advertisement or a media campaign, they do so by calculating the
degree of affective attachment that is generated for a page or brand. This can be measured using three dimensions: quantity – the number of likes a post generates; intensity – the particular sentiment expressed e.g. love, hate, joy etc; and influence – the social influence or reputation that the SNS user has that shared the post and expressed the sentiment (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012). Therefore, though the attention of the SNS user is important, value is created by affective attachment and engagement in this growing digital economy. Brands and products are given value by being inserted, in the form of advertising, into the webs of affective social networks (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012). When companies make affective investments online by participating in various groups, and by interacting with social media influencers and SNS users who are fans of a particular brand, individuals lived ideas and emotions are translated into ‘quantifiable value for the market’ (Hearn, 2010, p. 433).

These affective investments are extremely valuable on SNSs because they are the most solid link between public expressions of affect, in terms of its sway with users, and the economic value of affect in terms of financial market valuations of a company. Therefore, an important aspect of the commercial business model of Facebook is that it has branded itself as something that people need if they want to socialise. Facebook encourages affective engagement and attachment with the application and with each user’s network. SNS users are promised that they will be part of the hive mind that speeds up the constant innovation of capitalism, and if they are not active online they will become obsolete (Terranova, 2013). This is why Facebook is constantly innovating and adding new interesting tools or addictive games to their network. It wants to keep users hooked with persuasive design. Even when a user finally decides enough is enough, and figures out how to deactivate their account, they still find themselves faced with design features of Facebook that are made to persuade change of mind. Questions are displayed on the screen: ‘but are you sure that you want to leave? How will you socialise without us? You will be missed...’
Are you sure you want to deactivate your account?
Deactivating your account will disable your profile and remove your name and photo from most things that you’ve shared on Facebook. Some information may still be visible to others, such as your name in friend/param list and messages that you’ve sent.

Your 880 friends will no longer be able to keep in touch with you.

(Murphy, 2017)

The above image has been included as an example of the kind of persuasive design features of Facebook that attempts to keep a user.

(Parker, 2017)
Facebook encourages its users to keep their network alive and stay connected to people and therefore each user encourages its network to remain connected to Facebook.

**Like, post, share, buy**

These affective investments that SNSs users make are also profitable for companies because it can be motivational in terms of consumer behaviour, as it results in conspicuous consumption of goods. When users are promoting themselves they ensure to purchase positional goods and promote themselves with these goods because the appropriation of consumer goods has become a key factor in the construction of one’s identity (Jarrett, 2015). Positional goods are ‘all aspects of goods, services, work positions and other social relationships that are either scarce in some absolute or socially imposed sense or subject to congestion and crowding through more extensive use’ (Hirsch, 1977, p. 27). Positional goods can be anything from a gourmet meal, to a luxury vacation to exclusively branded clothing. Whether or not a good is considered desirable to the zeitgeist depends on the amount of reputation that is generated by SNS users as previously discussed. SNS users’ profiles display their brand and these positional products become part of that brand, they become extensions of the user (Belk, 2013). Following this, due to social comparison and the feelings of envy that are induced on SNSs, these positional goods are occasionally bought by peers and followers ‘to reduce feelings of inadequacy from their social comparisons’ (Strutton & Taylor, 2016, p. 235). The cycle continues when these same users who were prompted to consume to reduce their feelings of inadequacy, also feel the desire to promote themselves and this leads to ‘social reproduction’ (Jarrett, 2015, p. 4). It is not enough to buy the product; the user then must tell the world that they have bought it and that they are part of the group of people who has this product.

This social reproduction creates a sense of community around a product allowing companies to exploit the users’ desire to belong, and be part of a community. Consequently, because SNS users trust their friends, they will trust their evaluation of a product, place or brand and SNS users satisfy their desire to enjoy by imitating these friends that they are often envious of as discussed earlier. They do so by buying the products that their peers endorse, drinking in the same
cafés, eating in the same restaurants and visiting the same holiday destinations. Therefore the cycle of promotionalism and consumerism are driven by the emotional contagion effect as it is these emotions and these desires that lead to conspicuous consumption. The anxieties of the SNS users maintain their attention to the SNSs, maintaining the circuits of drive and SNSs use this audience power to ‘mass market the mass-produced consumer goods and services generated by monopoly capitalism’ (Smythe, 2006, p. 187). For this reason businesses are eager to advertise on SNSs, specifically Facebook, because of their ever-increasing audience power. Everyone wants to be part of the hive mind that the ‘Web 2.0’ promises.

**Conclusion**

The creation of economic value is complex as it relies on the intangibility of the Internet, specifically SNSs, and the complexity of affect. It relies on the emotional culture that has developed on the Internet and what behaviours these emotions elicit. These emotions and sentiments that are expressed online are ‘part of an affective contagion eliciting conformity and entrainment’ (Sampson, 2016, p. 56). This affective contagion is then collected and monetised by companies and brands in many different ways. Firstly, affective engagement generates more specific user-generated data that not only shows their online activity but it specifically shows advertisers what the user loves, hates, finds interesting etc. Secondly, it adds a social and affective value to the digital economy and to those corporations who participate. The activity of Internet users contribute to the validation of websites and content on websites and SNSs. This can be quantifiably measured by the amount of likes and shares that a post or tweet receives, indicating how ‘engaging and affecting the web content is for web users’ (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2011, p. 24). The activity also draws other users to the website or post or funny video which in turn generates engagement and more value for the content. Therefore, a like, share or retweet is ‘not a means in itself, but designed as an ongoing and potentially scalable process’ (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013, p. 1359). Thirdly, SNS users create value on these networks by engaging, interacting and expressing a sentiment about a brand, and because of their ‘affective proximity’ (Arvidsson, 2011, p. 51) to other people online the brand sentiment is able to spread. This brand valuation is how companies are profiting from SNS users because companies have an indirect link to a users’ entire social
graph and whatever influence they possess in their network. When trying to identify the value of public affect there has been a focus so far on ‘people who have a central position in relational networks and communication flows, and who are therefore worth more as communication channels’ (Arvidsson, 2011, p. 51), such as celebrities, social media influencers and bloggers. They are the social media users who have been able to capture not only the social value but also the economic value of social media platforms. They have capitalised on their popularity by making money from promoting sponsored content, product placement and connecting with other influential people to spread an idea or sentiment about a brand. In terms of the value that the rest of the population create on social media it is more complex and ultimately, it is exploitative of both their labour and the affective relations that they form online. The labour they contribute such as content creation, data creation and brand valuation of commercial digital media platforms is ‘unpaid and saturates all of life, it is almost entirely surplus’ (Jarrett, 2015, p. 86).

SNS users happily take part in the constant activity on SNSs because they find enjoyment on SNSs. These platforms provide users with a stage to present themselves in the best light possible, giving the users filters to make themselves look better. They give users the opportunity not only to become part of the crowd but to speak to the crowd, and show off the positive attributes they possess or pretend to possess. Social media provides a platform for users to broadcast their constructed identity and idealised ‘selves’ to more people than possible in their offline world. Although this broadcasting platform is obviously appealing to people, recent studies have shown despite the popularity of SNSs they do not necessarily satisfy people in the same way that socialising with people in the real world does. SNSs provide users with feelings of satisfaction because of how easy it is to socialise on SNSs and how repetitive SNSs are (Dean, 2010). While users find satisfaction in scrolling and engaging with others online they feel anxious about their desire to enjoy. When the Facebook newsfeed is opened, users are often confronted with an image of an acquaintance on holidays, or a friend praising the coffee from their local coffee shop. In response to the feelings of envy and anxiety that are experienced, users continue scrolling, interacting and engaging with other users assuring themselves that they will be successful, part of the crowd, and will have the opportunity to brag. Therefore, it is the users’ desire to enjoy and desire to be involved that makes social media so
appealing and maintains the users’ attention to the circuits of drive on SNSs. The active users on SNSs draw other users into the dynamic web of posting, liking and sharing. Therefore, increasing engagement with content on SNSs with external brands they mention, resulting in increased consumption, as they fetishise the commodities that are part of their brand and extensions of themselves. The work the SNS users have carried out to construct their brand and create value for the product is ignored and it is the commodity consumption itself that ‘becomes the prism by which personhood is understood’ (Skeggs, 2014, p. 9).

This is the economic value of SNS users as the value they create for products and brands is highly profitable for companies on social media. This cycle of consumption, or the cycle of communicative capitalism as Dean puts it, is reliant upon both the affective labour that SNS users carry out in terms of identity construction and the presentation of self on SNSs, as well as the effect that this affective labour has on us in terms of the envy and anxiety that the users feel. The constant visibility that SNSs provide has resulted in SNS users feeling the pressure to perform to the same standard as their peers. Similar to Foucault’s idea of the Panopticon, designed to alter the behaviour of inmates in a prison, SNS users alter their behaviour and construct their identity online around the idea that they are permanently being watched (Bucher, 2012). The difference with social media is that, for some, this is a stage and for some, this is a prison, where the only satisfaction that is received is from sticking to the crowd of people incessantly liking, posting, sharing and buying, feeding the machinery of communicative capitalism.

References


