



Scholars in an increasingly open and digital world: imagined audiences and their impact on scholars' online participation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the audiences that scholars imagine encountering online and the ways in which these audiences impact scholars' online participation and presentation of self. Prior research suggests that imagined audiences affect what users share and how they present themselves on social media, but little research has examined this topic in the context of faculty members and doctoral students (i.e., scholars). An analysis of interviews with 16 scholars shows that imagined audiences span the personal–professional continuum. Further, most scholars imagined their online audiences as known and familiar. Though many recognized collapsed contexts as problematic, several others appeared more comfortable with audience collapse than prior literature suggests. Findings also suggest that scholars' conceptualizations of their audiences differ from those of their universities, principally in that scholars imagine their audiences as communities rather than as venues for attracting professional attention.

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In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in scholars' use of social media. More and more scholars are using social media for a variety of teaching, learning, and professional activities (Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-Kane 2011; Moran and Tinti-Kane 2013). For example, researchers have explored how scholars share and disseminate research findings through their own blogs or on dedicated sites like ResearchGate (Thelwall and Kousha 2015), create profiles on social media sites such as Academia.edu or *LinkedIn* for professional branding (Jordan 2014), or use *Twitter* to cultivate networks to connect, support, and share resources with colleagues (Quan-Haase, Martin, and McCay-Peet 2015; Veletsianos 2013; Veletsianos and Stewart 2016). However, although many researchers perceive online networks as professionally valuable and expect social media to have a positive impact on scholarly practice, scholars' relationships with social media and online networks are complex and, at times, tumultuous (Veletsianos 2016). While many scholars' institutions encourage them to be present, visible, and active online (Mewburn and Thomson 2013), only a handful of institutions have clear and accessible social media policies, and the use of social media has resulted in tensions and even censure for a number of scholars (Pomerantz, Hank, and Sugimoto 2015).

One reason for these tensions is the struggle social media users face with knowing just who is the audience of their social media posts. In any type of communication, our understanding of who is listening, of who our audience is, guides what we say and how we say it. Being acutely aware of one's audience is an essential aspect of communicating effectively, whether writing a manuscript for a peer-reviewed journal, synthesizing the results of research for policymakers, requesting funding

from a foundation, penning an editorial to be read by the general public, preparing a presentation for a conference, or compiling a course syllabus. In social media spaces, where it can be difficult or impossible to know who is part of that audience, individuals draw on the limited cues they have available to create for themselves an *imagined audience*—a ‘mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating’ (Litt 2012, 331). The imagined audience shapes users’ social media practices and thus also shapes their online participation and expression of identity (Marwick and boyd 2011). Yet the phenomenon of the imagined audience remains largely unexplored in relation to the use of social media by scholars. To help fill this gap in the literature, this study examines how scholars conceptualize their audiences when participating on social media and how that conceptualization shapes the ways in which they participate and express themselves online. Following a review of the literature relevant to this topic we describe the methods used in this investigation, present and discuss our findings, and conclude with suggestions for future research.

Review of relevant literature

In recent years, a number of researchers have examined the topic of imagined audiences in relation to social media (e.g., Brake 2012; Litt 2012; Marwick and boyd 2011). Much of the literature around imagined audience draws on Goffman’s (1959) conceptualization of self-presentation and impression management. Using dramaturgical metaphors, Goffman described how audience and context shape the way the self is presented. By monitoring responses, reactions, and feedback from their audience, individuals emphasize or de-emphasize certain aspects of their selves to create a desired impression. What one says and does when having drinks with friends is very different than when leading an important business meeting, or, in terms of social media, what someone writes to an imagined audience of friends or family is likely to differ from what one writes for an imagined audience of professional colleagues.

Authors who have examined imagined audiences in relation to social media generally agree that ‘participants have a sense of audience in every mediated conversation’ and that ‘this audience is often imagined and constructed by an individual in order to present themselves appropriately, based on technological affordances and immediate social context’ (Marwick and boyd 2011, 115). When Marwick and boyd (2011) asked *Twitter* users, ‘Who do you imagine reading your Tweets?’ they found that most users had very specific conceptualizations of their audiences and tailored their posts to those audiences. For example, some users described consciously tweeting to cultivate a personal brand that would appeal to followers. In contrast, others reported tweeting ‘for themselves,’ imagining an audience whose characteristics and interests were similar to theirs and being generally unconcerned about how the audience might perceive them or react to their posts. Similarly, Brake (2012) found that most of the bloggers he interviewed considered a specific audience of friends and family when deciding what to post, while a smaller number blogged for themselves, not giving much consideration to who might be in their audience. In a study of users of a variety of social media sites, Litt (2015) found that about half had a specific audience in mind when they posted—family, friends, people belonging to a certain community, or professional colleagues—while the rest described their audience as more indefinite or abstract. The posts of users in the first of these groups tended to include more personal information and to employ different strategies (e.g., using different language or posting at specific times) than the posts from those in the second group. However, all three of these studies noted that even if users imagined their audience as a specific group and posted accordingly, they were aware that there were likely discrepancies between their imagined audience and the audience that were actually reading their posts. In particular, as Bernstein et al. (2013) discuss, users often imagine their audiences as composed of a limited number of known groups and individuals, when in fact these audiences are potentially highly varied.

To compensate for the difficulty of knowing their actual audience, social media users rely on a number of cues to help conceptualize their audience; the more limited the cues, the more they must rely on their imagination to fill in the gaps. Litt (2012) posits two types of cues that influence

how individuals imagine their online audience: structural and individual. Structural cues are those that are inherent in the social media environment itself. For example, the requirement of reciprocal ‘friending’ on *Facebook* means that users know specifically who is in their audience; using hashtags on *Twitter* allows users to target specific audiences; and interest-based sites, such as the Ravelry site aimed at knitters, suggest certain characteristics of the audience. Individual cues, in contrast, include the understandings and personal characteristics that users themselves bring to their use of social media, such as self-awareness, concern for social approval, and the ability to interpret social or behavioral cues in online spaces. Although several empirical studies support Litt’s assertion that users make use of structural and individual cues to understand who is in their audience (e.g., Marwick and boyd 2011; Quan-Haase, Martin, and McCay-Peet 2015; Stewart 2015), other authors note that relying on such cues can lead to highly inaccurate conceptions of one’s audience (Bernstein et al. 2013) and that even when these cues are available, users often choose not to pay attention to them (Brake 2012). This can lead to a misalignment between the audiences that social media users imagine and those that actually read their posts.

Further, one’s audience on social media is usually not one homogeneous group. Instead, audience members come from multiple contexts, something boyd (2008) terms *context collapse*, where ‘people, information, and norms from one context seep into the bounds of another’ (Davis and Jurgenson 2014, 477). Context collapse makes it difficult, if not impossible, for users to present themselves in different ways to different groups. This merging of audiences has been a popular topic in the social media literature. Most studies have found that users are aware of collapsed audiences and are often troubled by them. Hogan (2010) posits that instead of separating their audiences, most users employ a ‘lowest common denominator’ strategy, sharing only what they believe would be acceptable to every likely audience member viewing their post. Although Hogan’s theory is often cited in the literature on self-presentation on social media sites (e.g., Bernstein et al. 2013; Davis and Jurgenson 2014), other studies have refuted the idea. For example, in a study specifically examining the effect of context collapse on what users disclose on social media sites, Vitak (2012) found that collapsed audiences actually encouraged users to share more freely rather than less, while others have found that while users may be aware of tools and strategies that can help them separate audiences, few actually use them (Bennett and Folley 2014; Litt 2012; Marwick and boyd 2011).

Collapsed audiences and the misalignment of imagined and actual audiences can have serious, often negative, consequences for social media users. These consequences can be particularly relevant to scholars, who are frequently encouraged by their institutions and peers to develop a social media presence and participate on a variety of social media sites (Barbour and Marshall 2012). For instance, scholars can face embarrassing or career-threatening repercussions over their social media posts (e.g., Grusin 2015; Guarino 2014; Herzog 2015; Jaschik 2015). Problematic situations often stem from the merging of personal and professional audiences into one collapsed audience. Veletsianos and Kimmons (2013) describe the tensions faculty members experience because of these collapsed audiences, noting that:

faculty who wish to use SNS in any professional way find themselves torn between having a diverse audience of people whom they care for to varying degrees but which have very different reasons for having a connection to the faculty member. (p. 47)

Unsurprisingly then, previous research has noted that when scholars do participate on social media, most do so with a recognition of these blurred personal and professional boundaries that engenders forethought, concern, and intentionality in posting (Gruzd, Staves, and Wilk 2012; Veletsianos 2016). As Sugimoto et al. (2016, 4) suggest, ‘impression management is a growing concern on social media platforms, as scholars gravitate to these sites to construct and display their scholarly identity and accrue academic capital.’ Research has shown that the identities that scholars present in online spaces are authentic but also fragmented and partial, perhaps consisting of carefully chosen aspects of their selves that they deem appropriate for their particular audiences at particular points in time (c.f. Kimmons and Veletsianos 2014). Yet we know little

about the audiences scholars imagine they are presenting these carefully chosen selves to, and literature around imagined audiences suggests that even if scholars make an effort to consider who may be in their social media audiences and post accordingly, they may still experience a misalignment between their imagined and actual audiences. The potential consequences of such a misalignment point to a need for research that analyzes the audiences imagined by scholars as they participate on social media and examines the relationships between these imagined audiences and the decisions scholars make about what to share and how to present themselves across social media sites. This need is supported by other researchers' call for further empirical studies in this area, particularly to examine the audiences imagined by specific groups of users, how different social media spaces lead to different conceptualizations of audiences, and the impact of context collapse on the practices of social media users (Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Litt 2012; Vitak 2012). This study intends to contribute to those efforts by providing a more nuanced picture of scholars' social media conceptualizations, participation, and expression of self by seeking to answer the following research questions: (1) how do scholars conceptualize their audiences when participating on social media and (2) how does that conceptualization impact their self-expression online?

Design and methods

This article reports the results of one aspect of a larger research project examining scholars' experiences, disclosures, and practices on social media. The goal of this particular study is to investigate the audiences with whom scholars imagine interacting when they participate on social media and the potential impact of those audiences on their participation. To uncover this information, this study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews.

Participants

Potential participants in this research included scholars in various higher education careers and positions, including doctoral students, professors, and alternative academic career professionals. Two researchers distributed invitations to participate in this research via three means. First, they emailed five scholars who were active bloggers and provided them with a link to the invitation. Next, they posted the invitation to participate in this study on their own personal blogs and disseminated the posting via *Twitter* and *Facebook*, which was further disseminated by others via standard social media processes (e.g., re-sharing blog posts via *Twitter*). Finally, researchers used a snowball sampling method to recruit additional participants by asking the participants they interviewed to suggest other scholars who they knew made personal and professional disclosures on social media and emailing a link to the research study invitation to those so identified.

Forty-two individuals completed a consent form. From those, we invited to participate in the study, all of whom accepted. We added participants to the study in an iterative manner. We first interviewed five individuals and continued adding interviews until we were confident that the research questions could be adequately answered using the data collected, a standard process in qualitative research (Baker and Edwards 2012). In selecting these 16 individuals, we sought to ensure diversity among the participants as to age, gender, career path, field, and nationality.

Participants are listed in [Table 1](#). Their age ranged from 30 to 57 years (mean = 41.6; SD = 8.1; median = 40.5). Twelve self-identified as female, three as male, and one as transgender. At the time these individuals were interviewed they identified their field as follows: education or educational technology (10), humanities (3), social sciences exclusive of education (2), and nursing (1). Participants lived in five countries: the United States (8), Canada (3), the United Kingdom (3), Australia (1), and Egypt (1).

Table 1. Participants.

Name ^a	Academic status	Age range	Reported gender
Alec	Associate Professor	40–49	Male
Anne	Lecturer (non-tenure-track)	30–39	Female
Ash	Doctoral Candidate and Sessional Instructor	40–49	Female
Becky	Doctoral Candidate	40–49	Female
David	Associate Professor	40–49	Male
Grainne	Professor	50–59	Female
Jack	Assistant Professor	30–39	Transgender
Jessie	Professor	50–59	Female
Kate	Associate Professor	50–59	Female
Katia	Doctoral Candidate	30–39	Female
Lee	Alternative-Academic Career	30–39	Female
Liana	Alternative-Academic Career	30–39	Female
LP	Doctoral Student	30–39	Female
Maha	Associate Professor	30–39	Female
Richard	Professor	40–49	Male
Sally	Alternative-Academic Career	50–59	Female

^aSome participants elected to use their real names while others elected to use pseudonyms.

Data collection

We interviewed participants using a semi-structured interview protocol asking them to describe their social media use, various aspects of their participation, and their imagined audiences (Appendix). The semi-structured nature of the protocol allowed us to probe for additional comments while ensuring consistency across participants. The interviews ranged from 35 to 80 minutes in length. The variation was the result of the open-ended nature of the interview protocol and interviewees desired responses. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

We analyzed the data in an iterative process. First, two researchers read all the data to gain a broad view of the experiences reported by participants. Next, we conducted several rounds of open coding on the data to identify responses to the two overarching questions guiding the research: ‘What audiences is the participant imagining?’ and ‘How is the participant reporting the imagined audience impacting their online participation?’ We used open coding so as to allow an understanding of the phenomena under investigation to arise from the raw data. We employed a constant comparative approach to data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967), examining data in an iterative and flexible manner. Specifically, we assigned codes to topics that emerged from the interview (e.g., known audience, colleagues, reducing sharing), added new codes as new topics occurred and then re-read the interview to see if later codes better described segments of the texts or overlapped, thereby refining our set of codes and ensuring they were applied accurately to the data. The process of constantly comparing codes and data led to a list of codes that described the data.

During this process, we met multiple times to discuss emerging codes, share findings that each of us observed in the data, and explore potential thematic categories. We followed this process to arrive at a consistent and shared understanding of the codes and themes. We continued meeting, examining the data, and discussing the themes until no more patterns could be identified. At that time, we generated a list of broader themes that emerged from the codes.

To reduce the possibility of bias, we developed our results in the form of ‘thick descriptions’ that readers can use to determine the validity of our findings and whether they can be transferred to other research situations (Merriam 1995). Further, we each analyzed the data independently and sought to bracket our pre-understanding of the phenomenon examined as strategies against individual biases.

Findings

While the term *imagined audience* suggests a nebulous construct, the scholars interviewed for this study expressed a close familiarity with, and a clear understanding of, their social media audience. Our analysis uncovered three themes regarding how participating scholars conceptualize those who constitute their audiences and how these conceptualizations influence the self that they express through social media: imagined audience groups, known and unknown imagined audiences, and the imagined audience's impact on sharing, filtering, and projecting. These will be examined in turn.

Imagined audience groups

The informants identified four specific groups composing their social media audiences: academics, family and friends, groups related to one's profession, and individuals who shared commonalities with them.

All 16 participants identified academics and family and friends as the two main groups within their audiences. The category of academics included close colleagues (e.g., research collaborators, peers teaching in the same degree program), colleagues in the same academic field, colleagues at a similar career stage, and colleagues in different fields who shared some overlapping interests. As Jen Jack noted, 'I would say that the majority of my [Facebook] friends are academics in very different fields. I was able to map all my friends using social network analysis, and [I saw] just these giant clumps of academics.' Family and friends were usually mentioned in tandem, suggesting that the individuals the participants placed in this category were seen as constituting a somewhat homogeneous group. While all participants referred to their family in general terms, many also identified specific family members, such as their mothers, fathers, in-laws, siblings, or children. David, for example, described how 'my father-in-law pretty much clicks "Like" on every one of my Facebook posts and my mother-in-law clicks "Share" on lots.'

Most of the participants (14) also described their audience as comprising other groups related to their profession, such as teachers, students, or supervisors. Speaking of *Twitter*, Alec noted, 'The audience would be K-12 educators, pre-service teachers who would be my students, higher ed.' For Katia, 'students' was an audience group that she herself had a role in creating:

A lot of them [students] will get Twitter or start using Twitter because of my classes, so I am one of the people who's in their Twitter feed a lot. So that's a big one for me. And then, I guess, other professionals. I put things out there [on Twitter] that I think would be useful to other educators, for the most part.

Informants also identified their audiences as consisting of individuals who shared some commonality with them, such as 'people who share an interest with me' or 'people who are going through a similar experience as me.' This theme of a common interest or bond often surfaced when participants discussed the disclosure of health concerns on social media.

For instance, Becky maintained a blog in which she discussed her experiences with breast cancer, which appealed both to others going through breast cancer themselves and those with a related interest:

It attracts a lot of people who are going through the process. Maybe 25% of the people that read my blog do it because of a family member, but more than 75% get to it from lived experience, either better understanding friends or family or what they're going through.

Participants unanimously divided the four aforementioned groups into two larger audience categories: professional and personal. Often, these audiences were described as aligning with different social media spaces. *Facebook* was generally perceived as more personal, with an audience of friends and family, while *Twitter* and sites such as *LinkedIn* and *Academia.edu* were described as more professional spaces, with an audience composed mainly of colleagues, academic contacts, teachers, and students. Blogs were often described as being meant for either a professional audience or for a personal one. Ash's description of the social media sites she used highlighted these categories. 'Facebook

is mainly friends and family. I do more of my personal stuff on there. I don't have a lot of friends or family on *Twitter*, so it's mainly about professional academic contacts.'

Even though participants identified specific groups and categories of audience members, they did not appear to see these groups as discrete or bounded entities. Instead, they viewed their audiences as what Maha described as 'multiple but intersecting,' composed of a number of overlapping groups with similarities and differences. Kate expressed a similar sentiment, noting that her audience contained 'a number of overlapping circles':

I connect to people who talk about education technology and people who talk about higher education policy, and they're not always the same. People who talk about the casualization of higher education, and they're really not always the same. And then a separate group of people who are concerned with health, health experience, health policy, and patient narratives, and finally, and most recently, a circle of people who are particularly focused on human rights and the death penalty.

Despite these overlaps, participants frequently noted the incompatibility of certain groups in their audiences. Prior research has found that academics often express feeling a tension resulting from the collapse of personal and professional audiences into a single space (Veletsianos and Kimmons 2013), and 14 of the participants in this study described experiencing a similar tension. Some saw this tension as highly problematic. LP, for instance, felt particularly uncomfortable with what she saw as her two conflicting audiences, reporting that she had closed her *Facebook* account 'because my personal life and my professional life were starting to mix on Facebook, and I really, really don't like that. I try to maintain a very separate personal life, and a very separate professional life.' When faced with such problematic situations, some participants reported that they sought ways to keep these audiences separate. David, for example, had a private *Facebook* page for friends and family, and a separate public *Facebook* page with 'a couple thousand readers,' Rebecca maintained separate professional, personal, and cancer blogs, and Sally used 'a family list, a close friends list, an acquaintances list, and so on' to separate her audience. But while all participants were conscious of these collapsed contexts, not all found the amalgamation of contexts as being problematic. Lee, for example, reported that:

As I became better friends with people on Twitter and meeting people at conferences and all that kind of stuff, they started wanting to friend me on Facebook, and I was like, 'Oh, I don't know. It's just my kids, so, I guess if you want to.' And so that started to bleed over, but then the same thing was happening on Twitter, where people ... were tweeting about their families ... and being parents.

This type of conscious, and often recent, decision to allow their audiences to merge was described by the majority of the participants and may have significant implications for the study and use of social networks in education.

Known and unknown imagined audiences

Interviewees felt fairly confident that they had a good understanding of the people and groups that made up their audiences on social media. Analysis of their responses revealed that they also distinguished their audiences as *known* – groups and individuals known to interviewees personally, and *unknown* – a group participants felt they understood much about but did not know personally. The known audience included people and groups the scholars knew well, such as family, friends, or students, and those they knew less well, like colleagues. Often, these were people who the scholars knew offline before connecting with them online; Jessie described *Facebook* as a 'nice way to cement those loose ties' with people from her church, and Richard called his online interaction with fans of his hometown soccer club as 'my last connection to where I grew up.' The overlap between online and offline audiences sometimes worked in the other direction as well; seven participants explicitly mentioned meeting members of their online audiences in person:

Both with Twitter and Facebook, what I find amazing is the number of people I've become friends with—genuine friends with—that I've then met face to face. A girl once came up to me at a conference, no it wasn't a conference, it was a meeting in Paris on UNESCO, and she was quite a bubbly girl with big fuzzy black

hair, and she bounced up to me and she said, 'Hi, I'm Shakira!' And I thought, 'Oh, who's this?' And then, she said, 'I'm @username!' And I went, 'Oh, @username!' So, it's been amazing. (Grainne)

The participants' known audiences also included individuals with whom they had interacted solely online. Fourteen scholars described their audience as those with whom they shared reciprocal links on social media. For many participants, these connections seemed closer than simple reciprocal links would suggest: 10 participants explicitly used words like 'community' or 'network' to describe their audience. LP, for instance, noted:

In terms of academia or work life, I used [Twitter] initially, and still use it to this day, to find my personal life community, my kink community, my BDSM community. I use it a lot for that. So, I would say 50% of my Twitter is that kind of community, and another 25% is just people that I've met around the country as I've moved around the country, and then the last 25% is this new kind of professional PhD or grad student community.

All participants also spoke about communicating with an unknown audience who they may not have known personally but felt they understood much about. Often participants viewed this unknown audience as composed of groups or individuals that shared characteristics with their known audience. For example, David referred to 'some freelancers, some staff, who follow me and who I follow, and then there's a much bigger pool who I follow who are more famous than me, but who know who I am and respond to me.'

The structures and affordances of different social media tools appeared to influence the extent to which an audience was known. For example, *Facebook*, with the need for a reciprocal friendship connection, lent itself to a more known audience, while *Twitter* audiences contained more unknown members. Katia summarized these differences as follows:

Primarily I use Twitter and Facebook. Facebook ... it's mostly for friends and family. Twitter is ... it's what I use for my professional life. I connect with my students on there, I connect with other educators, with some friends as well, but mostly people I don't actually know face-to-face.

Participants also discussed strategies they used to gain an understanding of their audience, such as looking at the hashtags used by their *Twitter* followers or noting when people followed them after a conference or presentation. While participants were often aware of other tools that could provide them with more information about their audience, such as social network analysis, only two participants mentioned actually using these tools.

The imagined audience's impact on sharing, filtering, and projecting

The scholars interviewed reported using their understanding of their audience to guide their decisions around both *what* to share on social media and *how* or *where* they shared information. All but one of the participants described reflecting on how what they shared would influence their audience's perceptions of them. This was particularly true when considering their professional audience, since, as Becky commented, 'There's always that question when you're putting it out there, of "Is this going to potentially affect my career? How is this going to impact [me]?"' Concerns about how their professional audience would perceive them also affected where participants shared information. As *Twitter* was seen as having a more professional audience than *Facebook*, participants commonly noted that they were more reflective about what and how they presented themselves on *Twitter*. As Ash put this:

And so, Facebook, I do more of my personal stuff on there. I have more of an identity, it's more sarcastic, a little more non-professional ... I don't have a lot of friends or family on Twitter, so it is mainly made up of more professional academic contacts. So what I share on there is ... personal in some ways, but I do filter what I decide to share.

Three subthemes also emerged from participants' discussion of the audience's impact on their choices regarding social media: *sharing* (how the audience influenced what was shared), *filtering*

(how the audience influences what was not shared), and *projecting* (how they attempted to create a certain impression of themselves for the audience).

Sharing

Participants were concerned about how their audience would react to what they shared or would perceive them as a result of what was shared. Speaking of a post in which she had revealed her depression, Katia noted that she had ‘concerns about people’s perception of me. You know, just wondering what my students would think of me, what my colleagues would think of me.’ While Katia’s was a mostly personal concern, other participants often expressed concern about how posts might impact their professional image. Becky, for instance, described sharing her breast cancer diagnosis as taking a professional risk:

That’s a big risk that I took when I started doing that, and it’s a risk that, from a career perspective, I don’t know how that’s going to play out. It’s a particular risk living in the U.S., because once you’ve been diagnosed with cancer, especially as a woman, it significantly impacts your employability.

Participants also reflected on how their sharing might impact their online or offline connections, including family or friends. Like Becky, Kate also worried about sharing a breast cancer diagnosis: ‘I was also really conscious that people who follow my blog, who are friends of mine and get my blog post in their email, would hear this very significant news by this relatively impersonal means.’ Such concerns also extended into the professional arena, with many participants expressing concern over how their sharing would reflect on their institutions, their colleagues, or their students.

Decisions regarding what to share were guided not only by the responses that participants anticipated receiving, but also by actual responses they had received in the past. Many participants, for instance, spoke of being motivated to share more after receiving positive responses to what they had shared, such as Katia:

I got a lot of support. There were people who said, ‘Yes, I’m going through something similar.’ It was just this really nice feeling. And so, for the first time I felt like maybe it was possible to share things online and to open myself out there online, to put myself out there and not have it be something scary but have it be something that would be positive for me. And so, that was where that started. So I got a little bit more comfortable putting personal things out there.

Nearly half of the participants reported intentionally sharing something with the goal of soliciting a response from the audience, such as the familiar strategy of using a hashtag or @ symbol on *Twitter* with the goal of being re-tweeted to a larger audience. Jen Jack shared a more complex example, describing how he used a post on *Facebook* as a way of encouraging his mother to accept his name change:

She gets home, she looks at Facebook, she always looks at my wall, and there it is. And she’s like, and I said, ‘You didn’t like it. I saw you didn’t like it. You’re gonna like it?’ And then we started going back and forth about this. She’s like, ‘I’m gonna like it in a few days.’ But I said, ‘You didn’t like it.’ ‘I’m gonna like it.’ So, she liked it. And then I made the comment underneath, that for Mother’s day, what I got was, her liking that.

Filtering

All participants reported that they engaged in filtering, or restricting what they shared online. Like sharing, filtering was primarily motivated by participants’ concerns about how postings would reflect on themselves or others. While this filtering took a number of forms, it most commonly involved avoiding posting something for fear of offending or alienating others, or as a way to maintain personal privacy. Topics that were seen by many as potentially controversial included political views, sexuality, social justice, and religion. All participants were also very conscious of the tone, language, and emotion conveyed in their posts. Alec, for instance, noted, ‘I don’t think I’ve ever sworn online ... Even in context, for instance, if it’s a lyric of a song. I’m thinking of every possible context where a swear would be appropriate. I never do.’ Scholars also filtered their online presence by limiting how

much or how frequently they posted on a given topic. Kate, for instance, reported filtering her postings about her experience with breast cancer:

You can read about chemotherapy anywhere. I didn't feel the need to add to the very well known details of how rigorous that treatment is. And I certainly didn't talk about how ill I was when I was really sick. Because I think I didn't want to become the poster person for having cancer.

Another way participants filtered what they shared was to restrict what they shared to a certain platform or a certain audience. Nine participants stated that they avoided sharing personal information in what they saw as public or professional spaces. Maha spoke freely about her daughter on *Facebook* but told us, 'I don't like posting very, very, very personal stuff about my daughter on my blog. And I used to have this very weird, very weird superstition about posting her name on Twitter.' Individuals also used features of social media sites as a way of filtering, such as communicating by direct messages rather than public posts, posting only to a certain segment of the audience, or, as LP describes, locking and unlocking access to an account:

Sometimes, I will lock my account, and I will put up pictures of myself and will have these sexual conversations, and I'll have just very open kinds of pictures. And then in the morning, before I unlock my account, I will go and delete things, images that I don't want people who are not in there to see.

Projecting a self

The way participants spoke of sharing and filtering made clear that most were highly aware of how they used these strategies to project a certain impression or image of themselves. When asked about how they thought their audiences perceived their online selves, all participants described sharing and filtering the content of their online postings in an attempt to convey themselves in a positive manner, such as 'family oriented,' 'professional,' 'honest,' 'engaging,' or 'a good colleague.' Conversely, many worried that their audience might find some postings 'possibly offensive' or 'inappropriate.' They were aware that filtering made their online self-image highly curated and selected. As Ash put it:

When you have to go out there and put yourself out there, you're going to choose and you're going to filter. And just by the time and activity and what you can do, it's not going to be entirely you.

Some participants described consciously attempting to curate a specific self. David, for instance, wanted others to perceive him as a 'disability journalist': 'That's actually a phrase I'm cultivating intentionally for professional branding reasons; I want to sell a non-fiction book on some of my disability writings, so having me known as a disability journalist is professional use.' Of the participants, 13 mentioned feeling that the curating process in some ways limited who they were. Anne, for instance, worried that she sometimes was typecast 'based on research, good and bad, and what I am. I'm usually like "That's the Canadian," if it's an American audience, or "That's the social media person expert guru," which I hate.' Given that participants were often concerned about presenting a professional self, what they filtered out was usually aspects of their personal self, which many felt led to a bland or sterile representation of themselves. Liana described attempting to find a middle ground:

I try to have a balance of, 'Here are some quirky, funny things that I thought were ... that I want to share with other people and I want us to laugh together about it.' And balance that out with, 'Here are some real issues that I'm seeing either has to do with gender or with higher education.'

Because scholars perceived different social media spaces as encompassing different audiences, the selves they reported expressing appeared to differ across sites. *Facebook*, as a more personal space with a known audience, was generally perceived as a place in which they could express a more comprehensive self. Ash noted, 'On Facebook, I have more of an identity. My sarcastic side comes out a lot. A little bit of my cynical side comes out on Twitter, but it's not the same sort of really irreverent, sarcastic self.' In contrast, three participants felt that the closeness of connections on *Facebook* led instead to a more limited self. Jessie, described *Facebook* as a safe space, but one in which herself

was ‘heavily curated’ toward what the audience expects from her, whereas ‘the place that is most representative of me is probably Twitter, just because I share more interests, more varied interests on there.’ Katia similarly viewed the self she expressed on *Twitter* as closer to the offline self she expressed in public or professional spaces: ‘My Twitter self is probably closest to my teaching self, which is very different in many ways from the everyday me.’

Although the self-image that scholars presented on social media may have been limited and incomplete, they reported that it was highly authentic. In fact, three participants described ways in which their online self was more authentic than their offline self. In the offline world, Sally hesitated to identify herself as someone with a disability, since when she had done so previously ‘there was sort of friendly concern but people don’t want to get involved with illnesses, it’s like it’s catching.’ When she disclosed her illness online, in contrast, it was seen as ‘run of the mill and everyday—I didn’t get a strong reaction, and that’s exactly what I wanted it to be.’ While most participants chose to share only fragments of their self online or to shape their perceived self into something they felt would be acceptable to their audiences, a few reported consciously trying not to tailor the self they expressed. Grainne, for instance, described herself as being ‘very, very open in social media’ and freely shared aspects of her personal self across a variety of spaces. Others noted that their online self had become more authentic over time than they had expected it to be, such as Richard, who reported finding himself sharing ‘more sort of intimate things than I expected.’

Discussion and implications

The responses of the scholars interviewed for this study reveal that they imagined their online audience as familiar, made up of friends, family, peers, students, teachers, and other people who shared their interests. These audiences spanned a personal–professional continuum, supporting previous findings that users have specific audiences in mind when engaging with social media (Marwick and boyd 2011) and that those audiences are characterized by a blurring of personal and professional boundaries (Davis and Jurgenson 2014). Many of the scholars in our study reported finding these collapsed contexts problematic, as observed in previous research into the social media practices of educators (Veletsianos and Kimmons 2013), but several of the scholars also appeared more comfortable with context collapse than prior research suggests. Although most of the literature we reviewed described collapsed contexts as unintentional and problematic, our findings are similar to those of Davis and Jurgenson (2014), who posited that context collapse can be practiced intentionally, something they call ‘context collusion.’ This finding therefore seems to be worthy of further investigation. What are scholars’ perspectives on context collapse? Are scholars more comfortable with contexts collapsing currently than in the past? If so, what might have caused this shift over time?

Unlike previous studies suggesting a significant proportion of social media users were not concerned about their audience’s reaction to the information they shared (e.g., Brake 2012; Marwick and boyd 2011), all of the participants in our study expressed concern over how the audience would perceive them as a result of their posts, which in turn influenced what and how they shared. They made conscious decisions about restricting or amending posts and appeared aware that the persona they shared online was a curated one. Even though this curated persona appeared to vary across social media sites, participants unequivocally felt it was an authentic persona. In some cases, participants in our study reported that their online curated persona was more authentic than they had originally anticipated. Although this concept of a fragmented but authentic identity has been described in recent work on online identities (Kimmons and Veletsianos 2014; Veletsianos 2016), it contrasts with popularly held views of online identity as constructed or inauthentic (e.g., Turkle 1995).

Significantly, the audiences imagined by the scholars we interviewed appear to be well defined compared to the nebulous constructions often described in previous studies (e.g., Brake 2012; Vitak 2012). In this way, our results lend empirical support to past research that describes users’ imagined audience as a ‘networked audience’ composed of those with whom the user regularly interacts and from whom they seek and receive feedback (e.g., Litt 2015; Marwick and boyd 2011). Even if it is

likely that they may be underestimating the size and diversity of their online audiences, unlike the literature that speaks of not being able to know one's audience in social media (e.g., boyd 2008; Litt 2015), these results suggest that participants envision social media as a community or gathering place (Veletsianos 2013) rather than as a space scholars visit to broadcast information about their research or expertise.

While previous studies have noted that misalignments between imagined and actual audiences can occur (Brake 2012; Marwick and boyd 2011), this finding suggests another type of misalignment: one between the audiences that scholars imagine encountering online and the audiences that higher education institutions imagine their scholars encountering online. Prior research suggests that institutions exhort scholars to share their research online largely to gain media attention and increase their citations (Mewburn and Thomson 2013). Yet conspicuously missing from the networked audience or community our participants described were mentions of journalists, other persons associated with the media, and researchers examining similar areas. If scholars conceptualize their audience as community, it makes sense that they would rarely include journalists and others associated with the media in their descriptions of their imagined audiences. This association of 'audience' with 'community' in the interviewed scholars' descriptions of their imagined audience suggests that they may consider their online presence as a reciprocal one through which they engage mindfully and deeply with others, as opposed to one that serves to further institutional agendas. If scholars imagine their online audiences as their community, they may not anticipate the presence and responses of audiences that are present online but out of sight, such as political groups or others whose interests or beliefs may be threatened by a particular scholar's messages. As scholars engage in scholarship and critique online, failing to account for the presence of these groups could, therefore, result in unexpected consequences. While we are not advocating for silence or for changing one's online presence based on the possibility that adversaries may be present, this reality suggests a need for future research into cases in which scholars encountered unimagined audiences online, and into the ways that such encounters impacted scholars' subsequent participation online.

While this study raises significant implications for research and practice, it also faces a number of limitations that readers should take into account. First, its results are grounded in one-time interviews with a limited number of scholars. Second, the participants' responses depended upon accurate recollections of past events. Third, while we sought to locate a diverse sample of scholars at different career levels, ages, and gender identities, it is possible that the results reported herein are not representative of all scholars and might over-represent the percentage of women and scholars in the field of education in the academy. Future research could address these limitations by conducting analyses similar to those reported here or by using alternative research methods (e.g., surveys, participant observation protocols during social media use).

Conclusion

This study adds to the increasing evidence that scholars' online participation is intentional and thoughtful. The scholars interviewed for this study appeared to understand their online audiences and to be relatively cognizant of the impact that their conceptualizations of their audience had on their expression of self. Recognizing that scholars participating online are not merely disembodied personas aiming to amass citations and followers may enable researchers to make better sense of the negotiated relationship between scholars and digital. Sensitivity to scholars' motivations for being online can also help educational institutions create more effective policies to support the growth of their scholars' networked participation.

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Appendix

Sample questions used in the interviews included the following:

- Describe to me how you participate on social media.
- What do you share or communicate?
- Who do you share or communicate with?
- Do the people you connect with belong to one group or multiple groups (e.g., colleagues, family, friends, etc.)?
- Can you tell me more about these groups?
- How would people that you connect with through these sites describe who you are or how you present yourself through these sites?