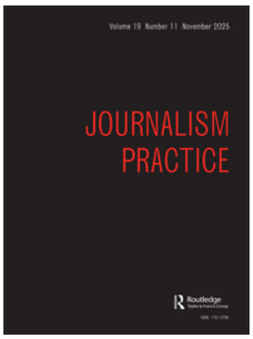

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Gaia Casagrande

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"Never Reveal Anything": On *Negative* Self-Branding and Relational Labor Practices of Journalists on Platforms

Gaia Casagrande

Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Milan, Italy

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates practices of self-branding and relational labor employed by journalists on social media platforms, emphasizing the productive aspect of social relations and placing the concept of relational labor within a critical theoretical framework. Through the empirical analysis of 17 qualitative interviews with early-career Italian journalists—whose primary need is to build their network of contacts and establish their professional image—this work detects self-branding activities and forms of relational labor characterized by the reduction and concealment of interactions and information. Accordingly, it is argued that relationships on digital platforms are organized and structured not only by what one wants to bring out but also by what one does *not* want to show to the public, thereby proposing a theoretical definition of this form of *negative* relational labor.

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Introduction

For more than a decade, the journalism sector has been greatly impacted by the transformations introduced by social media platforms, concerning the form of the information, and the labor and organizational structure of the field, characterized by severe precariousness (Bell et al. 2017; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). This process of *platformization of the news* (Deuze and Witschge 2018; Hase, Boczek, and Scharkow 2022; Caliandro et al. 2024) is not simply limited to understanding digital platforms as infrastructures for disseminating news but also includes the selection and production of content, and redefines the relationship of newspapers and journalists with their audiences (Bell et al. 2017; Møller Hartley et al. 2023). For both journalists and news outlets, it is crucial to be able to capture readers' attention by making their content as visible as possible and by conveying a credible and influential image.

In this regard, more and more journalists are implementing online self-branding strategies, such as disclosing important work milestones, disseminating their journalistic products, and sharing their daily lives (Molyneux 2019; Casagrande 2022). Communication via social media with one's audience becomes an integral part of these strategies to increase the virality of content and publicly disseminate the journalist's image.

Indeed, social media platforms have become key means of reaching increasingly large audiences and transforming journalists into personal hubs of news and opinion. As a

CONTACT Gaia Casagrande gaia.casagrande@unimi.it

result, journalists are incentivized to be recognizable online by engaging in *self-branding* practices and *relational labor* practices, the main focus of this article.

Generally, self-branding practices concern all those aspects that a person wants to show publicly on social media platforms, which may be directly related to professional achievements but may also involve personal details to convey an authentic image of the self. In journalism studies, several authors have explored self-branding attitudes in journalists (Brems et al. 2017; Molyneux 2019); however, scant literature addresses the issue of affective labor in platforms and, especially, that of relational labor.

For example, the excellent work of Bossio and Holton (2021) describes journalists' experiences of affective labor on platforms as social media fatigue, linking it to the experience of burnout; the compelling analysis by Bélair-Gagnon et al. (2022) identifies disconnection practice, such as interrupting communication with other users, deciding to take breaks from social media, selecting one's followers, as a digital work mediation strategy that can help journalists release pressure; the interesting article by Li and Deuze (2024) highlights the complexity of relational labor, reporting, on the one hand, the ambivalent experience of building positive relationships and recognition, and, on the other, the occurrence of feelings of exhaustion resulting from continuous connection and the blurring of personal and economic boundaries.

These studies have the important credit of focusing on journalists, finally understood as information workers, and addressing the impact that the use of platforms for professional purposes has on their well-being, while mainly taking into account professionals already well established in the field.

However, given the increasing tendency toward precariousness and individualization in the journalistic profession, there is a need to better identify labor practices specific to the digital sphere, linking them to the issue of job insecurity in journalism and, in general, to the tendency toward the platformization of work, the purpose of this research.

As mentioned, the affective aspect takes on a significant role; therefore, the concept of relational labor will be critically analyzed, framing it as digital labor mediated by platform logic, in which social relations become relations of production (Gandini 2021; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022). Several scholars have emphasized the processes of commodification of subjectivities in digital environments (Flisfeder 2015; Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018), focusing mainly on relations *of* production relations—that is, social dynamics that exist between individuals, based on their role in the process of economic and value production—and less on relations *as* production, here understood as commodified relations, which are themselves the process of value production (Terranova 2000; 2004). Therefore, this article aims to enquire precisely the latter, resorting to the concept of relational labor proposed by Baym (2015; 2018).

Through the qualitative analysis of 17 semi-structured interviews with young journalists in the process of building and consolidating their professional careers, this paper investigates forms of self-branding and relational labor on social media platforms. The data collected from the interviews were then analyzed using a grounded approach to provide an original theoretical-critical contribution on the concept of relational labor.

Hence, it proposes the definition of *negative* relational labor, the activity of *producing* social relations through practices such as reducing interactions or concealing information. The term "negative" is borrowed from photographic images, the negative of which allows an image to be described and represented in inverted tones, making it stand out through the empty spaces. Similarly, negative relational labor describes all those self-branding

practices aimed at the production of social relations and reputational capital, carried out through actions such as limiting contacts, concealing information, and selecting interactions. Framed within a critical approach, negative relational labor is here understood as productive labor of social relations and subjectivity, whose value is expressed through an affective and performative dynamic, carried out in a *negative* form.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the main aspects regarding immaterial labor on digital platforms and their fundamental affective component will be highlighted, as well as the notion of self-branding. This will lead to the concept of relational labor as proposed by Baym, which will be discussed along with that of *negative* relational labor, highlighting their continuities and differences.

This will be followed by the empirical part, which consists of 17 in-depth interviews with Italian journalists between the ages of 23 and 36. These findings will then be discussed in light of the theoretical framework. Three main points emerge from the analysis: the emotional and relational labor of managing online interactions; the labor of selecting and organizing audiences; and self-branding activities aimed at quality and authenticity. These aspects are characterized by emerging through practices of reducing and concealing interactions and information. Finally, the empirical results will be discussed to propose a complete definition of negative relational labor.

This article makes a twofold contribution: firstly, it illustrates how the labor practices of news professionals are changing, both due to the tendency toward precariousness and individualization in the journalism profession, and as a consequence of the current phenomenon of the platformization of work. Secondly, the concept of negative relational labor highlights how, in platform environments, even non-actions have the purpose of producing value, thus contributing in an original way to the debate on digital labor—and in particular on affective labor.

Theoretical Framework

The notion of "digital labor" has been used to describe a wide set of different activities, from content creation labor to platform-based gig jobs. Indeed, as Gandini (2021) points out, since so many different activities related to working in the digital world have been brought under the umbrella term of "digital labor", this has lost some of its original critical power to embrace more generalist analysis.

Recently, with the shift in focus from the "digital" to the "platform", the concept of digital labor has been joined, in some cases overlapping, with that of "platform labor" and the "platformization" of labor, where platform logic intermediates both labor activities and social relations (Gandini 2021; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022). Therefore, despite the now widespread use of the terms of digital labor and platform labor, there is a need to retrieve the critical power originally inherent in the concept, to reframe it within today's debate on platforms. Consequently, this article will develop the analysis precisely from the critical literature regarding the immaterial and affective labor on social media platforms.

Immaterial Labor and Affect as Value

In Lazzarato's (1996) definition of immaterial labor, workers do not simply passively "suffer" the commands dictated by production, but become active subjects of it,

coordinating its various functions, so that through their subjectivities the quality and the quantity of work are immaterially organized. Workers' personalities are part of the production of value, and control resides in the subjects themselves, as well as in the communicative process. In this process, "immaterial labor produces first and foremost social relations" (id.), and relational capital. Therefore, the communicative act becomes productive, capitalizing on both the subjectivity of the producer and that of the consumer. In line with Lazzarato, Terranova (2000; 2004) points out how the advent of digital technologies has accelerated and exacerbated this process. Terranova believes that those who work in the digital economy and the new media industry engage in a form of invisible labor difficult to quantify—free labor, where the commodity becomes *a process* rather than a finished product.

The concept of immaterial labor has often been discussed in communication and media studies, especially referring to social media platforms. Here, users "learn" to be increasingly productive, in a relational and performative act (Coté and Pybus 2007; Butler 2009) which is possible because of the *affect*, a dynamic force that motivates the discursive, communicative and social practices that are created, developed and maintained on social media. These practices are the product of immaterial labor and the subjectivity of users in their value. Affect, then, becomes the basis for a new conception of value through communicative exchanges. Affective flows are productive nexuses (Negri 1999), and value thus relates to the ability to create these kinds of ties (Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012). This process, fueled also by platform affordances (Arcy 2016; Bucher and Helmond 2017), takes place not only between user and user but also between user and platform. For Jarrett (2015), for example, the interpenetration of the affective and informational aspects is significant in sustaining the platform economy, as users use social media to share various forms of text, generating streams of exchange within interpersonal networks. This exchange needs to be understood in a relational context, on and off the platform, in which users' data also express social affinities.

Relational Labor

Social media platforms, therefore, sustain themselves also through logics of exchange, as much related to *information flows* as dependent on *affective flows* that determine social relationships. Affective and relational practices are perpetuated constantly on a large scale and in real time, shaping both social attitudes and patterns of individual expression. Through social media platforms, the creation and production of value is not only linked to economic and technological dynamics but also to the affective and *relational* aspects that involve our daily lives.

Creating and maintaining social relations, inside and outside the platform dimension, is an activity that Baym defines as a form of work, proposing the following definition of what she calls *relational labor*:

> I define "relational labor" as the ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work. is includes (1) the communication itself, but also (2) the time and effort it takes to develop the skills, knowledge, and other human capital such communication requires (from years of experience in the field to familiarizing yourself with new social media platforms or metrics); (3) the ongoing sense making needed to understand yourself, others, and the

> relationships you are building; (4) the development of communicative and relational strategies; (5) the boundary making and marking it takes to set limits on relationships; and (6) the never-ending revisiting of all of these things as each encounter can raise new dynamics. (Baym 2018, 19)

Although built on the notion of *emotional labor* theorized by Hochschild (1983), that involves constricting one's feelings to maintain a professional image, Baym's concept of relational labor differs from it in terms of the mode of interaction and temporal duration. Where the emotional labor, in fact, develops primarily as a one-to-one dynamic in a limited time frame, the relational labor concerns a process that unfolds over time, involving multiple actors simultaneously and with different degrees of interaction (Baym 2018). Relational *labor* also differs from relational *work-activity* because it is aimed at obtaining economic and career gain. In fact, although a relationship may be enjoyable and develop voluntarily, it is nevertheless part of an economic logic geared toward work, whether paid or unpaid; in some cases, for example, a relationship may be built with the hope of securing new or better opportunities. Users engaged in relational labor *perform* an affinity, constructed for exclusively economic purposes, rather than experience that *compulsion of feeling*—which characterized the notion of emotional labor.

The context in which these relationships develop is fundamental in delineating their characteristics, and, in this sense, relational labor is inextricably linked to the space of interaction provided by social platforms. Baym points out that although the affordances of platforms do not necessarily determine relationships, they do influence their forms and modalities. Indeed, relational labor is inextricably linked with digital media:

> New media ramp up demands for ongoing relationship building and maintenance in ways that may bear greater resemblance to friends and family than to customers and clients. The concept of "relational labor" abuts "emotional labor," "affective labor," "immaterial labor," "venture labor," and "creative labor" but offers something new by emphasizing the ongoing communicative practices and skills of building and maintaining interpersonal and group relationships that is now so central to maintaining many careers. (Baym 2015, 20)

Understood as *a process* built through continuous interactions, relational labor can be described as a declination of immaterial labor, which makes *affect a productive force*.

Self-branding

One mode through which users enact such performative dynamics directed at an audience is online self-branding practices. Observing such communicative acts empirically, then, allows us to also analyze forms of immaterial and relational labor that are enacted through them. For Gandini (2016), self-branding is primarily aimed at acquiring reputational capital, to gain economic return; it is aimed at *producing value*, largely developed through the management of social relations. Self-branding is also inextricably linked with the expression of one's social identity, which goes beyond the mere performance of a communicative act, but "implies economic value" (id. 8). Moreover, the way we present ourselves will change according to the network and the environment in which this exchange takes place (van Dijck 2013). Thus, self-branding practices will exhibit different characteristics depending on the platform, its affordances, network and contacts.

When we brand ourselves on social media, we relate to an *imagined* audience, which includes both real and potential people connected within a communicative network that has both public and personal elements (Marwick and Boyd 2011). Users *manage* this type of audience, bringing out tensions between public and private aspects, between frontstage and backstage, and thus shaping the content conveyed by the user, as well as his or her "branded" identity. At the same time, it brings up the need to balance the desire for performance with the desire to protect the privacy of personal information from the risk of public dissemination. Thus, users can enact forms of control and management of their online identity, and these actions are identified by Duffy and Chan with the concept of *imagined surveillance*, which denotes the responses consequent both to the scrutiny and "interaction of an imagined audience" and to the "imagined affordances of individual platforms" (Duffy and Chan 2019, 121). In other words, response mechanisms that users enact through social media are attempts to find a balance between the tendency for self-promotion and the need to protect personal aspects.

As a result, among the various activities related to online self-branding practices, there are several that presuppose immaterial labor in constructing a coherent self for public consumption and, at the same time, relational labor with an imagined audience—enacting both activities of performance and of protection from the imagined surveillance. This last point emerged from the results of this research, suggesting a particular type of relational labor here called *negative relational labor*. Negative relational labor includes those forms of immaterial and relational labor which are indeed aimed at the construction of a self for the audience's consumption, but carried out through activities of information and interaction reduction. Borrowing a photographic metaphor, this labor aimed at self-promotion is done through that which is not communicated, just as when, through the negative of an image, the form is revealed through its empty spaces.

Negative Relational Labor

Certainly, the concept of *negative relational labor* necessarily derives from that of relational labor proposed by Baym, to which it does not intend to replace but rather to integrate, positioning itself within the debate on the critical platform labor perspective.

As said, in defining relational labor, Baym refers to the feminist tradition on domestic labor, as well as to the concept of emotional labor. In *Playing with the Crowd*, she highlights such references:

> No matter how personally enriching these relationships may be, their creation and maintenance require labor. It is another job layered on top of those for which relational laborers get explicit credit. Much of this labor involves the feminized work of expressing and assisting others with emotion and relationship. It is mundane and domestic, mirroring housework in its multiplicity of tasks, never- ending nature, lack of recognition, and sometimes in the locations from which it is done. Relational work is often seen as "immaterial," in contrast to "productive" labor.
>
> "We are still embedded in a masculine model of what is work, what is skilled work, what is productive work," writes Sharon Bolton, "and I think this is what we need to move away from if emotion work is to be recognised as work, not merely as social interaction, caring, embodied and/or women's work." Bolton argues that there are "tragic consequences" of

> thinking about emotional work as immaterial "because, fundamentally, it misses emotion work's materiality and overlooks the fact that it is hard and productive work that is often unrewarded and unrecognised because of its association with the domestic sphere". (Baym 2018, 196)

In Baym's words, relational labor is understood as a form of feminized, emotional labor. Recalling Sharon Bolton, she suggests that relational labor understood as immaterial labor is a misleading parallel because it would not recognize the productive aspect of it. It would seem that the term "immaterial labor" is understood here as a synonym for feminized labor, within a dichotomous distinction between non-salaried feminized labor on the one hand, and on the other, salaried material labor and, as such, productive labor.

However, immaterial labor and productive labor are not at all at odds; quite the contrary. Immaterial labor is productive labor, and it produces above all social relations and subjectivities—commodities which become process rather than finished products. In the context of a platform society, immaterial labor affects the basis of a new conception of value. Accordingly, *negative* relational labor refers above all to this performative and affective component, rather than to the understanding labor in terms of labor time.

This is a relevant point, because negative relational labor develops from platform logic in which social relations become relations of production, and it is precisely in this sense that it is intended to integrate the one proposed by Baym. The latter, clearly referred to the tradition of domestic and emotional labor, the first is rather linked to the production of affective flows and the commodification of subjectivities that takes place thanks to platform logic. In the following pages, aspects characterizing negative relational labor will be analyzed in more detail.

Methodology

In the last two decades, information-related professions have undergone a profound transformation, among the consequences of which has been the need for journalists to build their personal brand on social media platforms, to increase their market value (Brems et al. 2017).

Several studies have examined how journalists promote themselves online, both at individual and organizational levels (Sacco and Bossio 2016; Molyneux, Holton, and Lewis 2017; Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2018), while others have emphasized how personal and professional aspects tend to intermingle (Holton and Molyneux 2015; Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017; Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018; Molyneux 2019); a few studies, however, investigate the implications of self-branding practices on the workers themselves.

Among these, for example, are the research studies conducted by scholars such as Bossio and colleagues on practices of disconnection (2021; 2022; 2024), which are characterized by the act of communicative "subtraction", as well as *negative* self-branding and relational labor practices. These two phenomena differ in their premises and purposes —although they are not mutually exclusive and can even occur together. Indeed, while the former mainly seek to manage feelings of burnout and social media fatigue, the latter are aimed at strategically building one's professional image and managing one's relationships. Accordingly, journalists who have recently entered the job market are a suitable unit of analysis to study relational labor practices, as they have greater needs to make themselves known online and to build their network of contacts.

Moreover, to take into account the profound disruptions that have taken place in the information industry, this research examined the Italian reality, characterized by significant elements of precariousness. In Italy, embarking on a career as a journalist can be particularly challenging—especially at the beginning—mainly due to low salaries and lack of contractual protections (Blanco-Herrero, Splendore, and Alonso 2023). According to the AGCOM Report "Observatory on Journalism" (Marrazzo 2021), the evolution of the journalism profession in Italy is characterized by aging, and a polarized structure between insiders (those who work as structured within newsrooms) and outsiders (freelancers). In this scenario, young Italian journalists are particularly susceptible to the logic of widespread precariousness, with low wages, unstable contracts and uncertain future perspectives.

Accordingly, the unit of analysis is represented by 17 Italian journalists between the ages of 23 and 35, equally distributed between men and women (9 females; 8 males), who are variously involved in sports journalism, investigative journalism, news reporting, local reporting, foreign, political, cultural and crime reporting. They work for both national and local newspapers, TV stations, online media, and local, national and international news agencies. Their duties may overlap, including activities such as audio-video operator, social media manager for the newspaper, editor, and so on; for this reason, they are employed under different kinds of work contracts: permanent contract, fixed-term contract, freelancing; paid internship, and so on.

The semi-structured interviews, conducted during 2019–2020, were recorded both face-to-face and through online video calls, and for ensuring anonymity, all names were replaced with fictional names. In detail, 10 interviews were conducted in person and 7 interviews were conducted via video call, with each interview lasting an average of 45 min. Participants were identified through snowball mode, a widely accepted sampling technique in the social sciences, which recruits the research population based on referrals from other participants. On the one hand, this method certainly encouraged the establishment of a sense of trust between the researcher and the interviewee, especially when discussing more sensitive aspects related to the profession; on the other hand, it potentially exposed participants to engaging in forms of "relational labor". Although in this research no significant aspects emerged in this regard—since the information collected, processed anonymously was not intended to create "structures that can support continued work" (Baym 2018, 19)—it is worth highlighting this dynamic, which, in other contexts, could present a potential limitation.

Likewise, another potential risk that this technique may present, like engaging in similar cases with each other, is not significant for this research: the individuals interviewed here belong to different networks, work in different organizations, and have different jobs and contracts.

The interview outline was designed with a descending-sequential approach to first familiarize the respondent with the interview and then gradually proceed with more focused questions. Respondents were asked about their use of social media, and the motivations underlying some usage choices; the type of relationships they maintain and create through social media and the activities that result; their approach to the audience; their public and private activities on social media.

The collected data were analyzed through a thematic analysis inspired by a grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Each interview has been first subjected to (more

than) a vertical reading, to capture the overall meaning of the narrative, and then examined crosswise to identify themes and sub-themes. Then, the code of analysis has been created by identifying the most recurrent keywords about each thematic area, and consequently giving rise to new conceptual categories.

Analysis and Results

The relationships people develop on social media platforms can be either personal or professional, and they can originate both offline and online, intersecting with each other. These are *mediated* relationships and sometimes require a strategic approach to interaction and communication.

Connecting with others is part of the journalists' job, especially when this relationality is aimed at building or developing their career. In this regard, the journalists interviewed for this research said they pay attention not only to what and how they communicate but also to whom. For the interviewees, connecting with others (with their audience, with colleagues and with superiors) is not a spontaneous activity but a constructed, organized and managed one. In short, for them relationality is—also—work.

On Trolls and Criticism: Emotional and Relational Labor on Twitter

For journalists, Twitter (now X) is the platform that requires more relational labor, also due to its characteristics of being an asynchronous social media, where it is not necessary to "follow" back those who follow us in turn. Usually, journalists tend to keep their profile and messages open, precisely to convey more information by reaching as many people as possible. This encourages the selection of one's network, but, at the same time, it makes it potentially more laborious to create and maintain.

> Twitter has brought me several [acquaintances] on the professional side, even with people we haven't met yet but it's like we've been friends forever. And that definitely happens with various tools: hashtags, tagging people, direct and private messages, or groups on Twitter or Facebook. Lately I would say a lot more Twitter, [because I want to] have the contacts and start interacting with people from that world that I want to belong to, and in my small way I belong, I think it's the most suitable tool. *Federico B., 31, financial and political reporter*

> Professionally on Twitter I often tag people I work with, especially if they have a big following (…) and I interact with the journalists I like the most by liking and retweeting their posts. Professionally, I interact a lot on Twitter just to maintain those connections. (…) On Twitter especially I post certain things hoping that certain journalists or news editors will see it. *Gioia, 23,multimedia journalist*

Twitter's design and architecture lead easily into discussions with strangers, and negative comments and criticism are potentially open to all. The respondents who had to deal with these kinds of interactions often encounter difficulties—on Twitter but also on any other social platform. Whether these interactions are personally related to the journalist, they can be intimidating or painful, because the exposure is direct and the criticism more personal. In the case the journalist acts on behalf of the newspaper they work for, difficulties arise mainly from the amount of comments to be handled; here, the feeling of displeasure is succeeded by that of fatigue and exhaustion.

Trolls and criticisms can also be a visibility boost, being used to make noise, and have one's name appear at the top of the timeline list. This will lead to more visibility and, consequently, more followers and contacts.

> At first I struggled because of the language on the Web … On Facebook [people] troll me less, in the sense that most of the comments come from people with a real profile … [although] with an aggressiveness and verbal violence that at first hits you … Other times I was hurt by it, when … I received criticism, but not criticism on the merits, but from people in my village … There, you understand that there is something wrong, and you … suffer … Now I am calmer, more serene. I worry if I get qualified criticism, that worries me … The avalanche comment of the … keyboard warrior … that … in fact, it's even good for me for visibility. *Federico, 31, financial and political reporter*

However, as much as dealing with trolls can even be "strategically" exploited, becoming the object of constant criticism as a public figure can bring out very troublesome situations. Fierce criticism can bring out vulnerabilities and call into question one's peace of mind, or even one's personal safety.

> Twitter … I sent this tweet to a colleague … and from that moment I was insulted for the whole day … Another example: when I wrote the book [on a geo-politic case] from that moment I started receiving a flood of insults - privately, publicly … This is tiring and in my experience literally dangerous … it all came from social … following a piece on [a] blog … The virality of my piece led me to that situation there [of danger]. And the virality is on social media. In the sense that this stuff here, on the one hand gave me visibility and gave me so much, but on the other hand it also exposed me to dangers. *Marco, 33, foreign affairs reporter*

Selected Audience, Managed Audience

Having to deal with trolls and criticism is part of the more general activity of audience management. For example, Filippo, 28 years old, social media editor for an international media outlet, recounts how, following their decision to brand their image on social media, they also deleted all those contacts no longer considered "functional" or in line with the new profile. Similarly, Flavio, 34 years old, fixed-term cultural journalist for a national newspaper, decided to stop following people whose content was no longer interesting to them but, at the same time, to target their professional updates to a selected audience.

> I tend to have a somewhat radical approach to managing my following. For example, if I realize that I'm following a person … a high school classmate who posts his picture at the beach … I'll unfollow. Because that's not what I'm looking for on Instagram, not because I don't care to know what this person is doing, but because still the enjoyment on Instagram continues to be, for me, primarily work. *Filippo, 28, social media editor*

> If you post a piece of content, you are in fact addressing an ideal audience, which is the one that is most similar to you. That is, if you write something, you don't think that at that moment even your school teacher might read it … You always think about the audience who are your ideal interlocutors … Somehow, then, you operate a selection, because it happens that all the people maybe I'm not interested in, I have friendship with them but then stopped following them, so their posts don't appear on my timeline … But I indeed follow a lot of people there professionally … when I started working for [a famous online media company], and updated my profile to include this work experience … I did it with the intent to let my contacts know that I was working there. Because this could have been

> useful to fellow journalists who didn't know about it, but also to personalities in other fields … If you work on journalism, this thing is crucial, which is self-promotion. You have to promote yourself. *Flavio, 34, cultural journalist*

These choices and activities are mainly directed to job requirements, to have more possibilities and opportunities, and to provide the selected audience with a professional image of the journalist. A selected and targeted audience and network can be a source of pride, as Elena, 25 years old, a political reporter for a national TV network, explains with respect to their Twitter circle, built over quality contacts rather than quantity.

> Let's say I have a few followers, but I think I have quality followers … However, let's say it's very reasoned. First, I don't go and follow people for the sole reason of getting follow back later … I only go and follow people whose content I'm interested in, that they share and then … I think I have good followers. *Elena, 25, political reporter*

Indeed, audience management activities also involve affective and emotional aspects of relational labor, such as pride or satisfaction at having created a good virtual network. Not only audience management but also peer management falls under relational labor activities and can take on both collaborative and competitive dynamics. Regarding the first case, Marco, 33 years old, a freelance foreign affairs reporter, for example, is part of an online group of colleagues where they update each other on possible job positions:

> For four years I have had a common chat on Messenger with friends who are also journalists … that is a place where we are there, and we update each other when things happen … We have all met each other for work reasons … it has often happened that the group is a self-help group, in the sense that … it's a support group for journalists who are more or less all in my [freelance] situation. *Marco, 33, foreign affairs*

Collaboration among colleagues is a work practice because it requires time, energy to maintain contacts. Although at first it may be identified as a less strenuous activity, since it is aimed at "mutual help", it too falls under relational labor activities.

However, the dynamics of competition among colleagues and peers lead to relational labor activities as well. Valeria, 30 years old, breaking news reporter for a national newspaper, and Fabiana, 31 years old, freelance cultural journalist, for example, state that they do not communicate news or post in advance a job they are working on, precisely for fear that a colleague might steal their idea. In this case, even the act of not posting, of holding back, is part of managing one's online relationships.

> Here, the only thing I'm careful about is to never reveal anything. Never anything. Nothing. I don't know, maybe I have a story and I want to publish it and share it right away with others, because it's a cool story and instead I don't, I just mind my own business and shut up. Or, if I find a news story from an [interesting] source but like hell I'm going to share it back or post it on Facebook! I'll write about it first, and then, if anything, share the article afterwards - let me rip it off first, though. *Valeria, 30, breaking news reporter*

> Certainly the competition is there … if they [some colleagues] publish an idea that I had, and that I was not able to pursue because I also have [another job besides being a journalist], this thing affects me on an emotional level but also on a personal level because it forces me to look for a new approach, a new point of view in reporting that specific news … [I only publish professional things] or republish third-party words when I know they can be useful

> to those who follow me … But I don't republish or re-post when in that reflection I see, for example, a cue for a future article of my own. If I notice that, as a freelancer, there is something that can give me an advantage over others, then I don't publish it and I expect the same from colleagues. [There is] this factor of competition among various colleagues. *Fabiana, 31, cultural journalist*

A "Discrete" Self-Branding

Always having in mind what kind of audience (real or imagined) one is referring to also determines the management of one's online image. For the respondents, a profile that does not easily refer to the image of a professional journalist is likely to have a reduced impact compared to those who, instead, convey their content through better-defined and recognizable profiles.

Consequently, for a good promotion, it is not enough to convey quality products and be familiar with specific platform functions. More importantly, it is necessary that one's profiles immediately recall the idea one wants to convey—in this case, that of a brilliant journalist.

Several interviewees stated that they changed their public image on their social media profiles—both consciously and drastically, aand also more gradually—in parallel with their career development. Such a "restyling" operation can take various forms, and generally lead to a greater attention to details related to the presentation of the online self.

One's image can also be built "in the negative" by deciding to select not only the content to be shared but also the pace and quantity, thus measuring the publication not to overload potential readers with information and, at the same time, provide a *quality* profile. Says, for example, Valeria:

> In my opinion, staying quiet is helpful because then, when you go to post, it means that what you posted is important to you … Even my likes are dosed. I have this strategy: I watch a lot, it's normal because we all consult social every day and all day long. But I dose the likes, in the sense: I put like to colleagues if they have posted things that I think are very valuable, or if they show part of their private life. *Valeria, 30, breaking news reporter*

Other times, deciding *not* to publicly communicate a message, for example, through a social media post, results from the fear of expressing an incorrect or unappreciated opinion, which, in the future, could damage the journalist's credibility. This is the case of Gioia, 23 years old, working as a multimedia journalist for an international media outlet:

> I often don't post nor publish because I'm afraid of expressing an opinion … like an opinion that doesn't make sense, or that people will find a "hole" in my argument … I don't feel like I'm experienced enough and I'm afraid that people will remember me for it … so I often write a post but then I delete it after half an hour of thinking about it, because maybe I think it's not suitable and because I don't want to be remembered [negatively] for something I said on social media. *Gioia, 23, multimedia Journalist*

Indeed, some respondents believe that too much profile-branding risks not conveying a properly authentic image: for them, it is evident when a colleague's profile is too much branded. As Flavio says, the goal, then, would be to be authentically themselves—authentically brilliant journalists.

> I try to [communicate myself as authentic as possible] because when that doesn't happen, you usually notice it. Because you notice it when someone design their image … [like] it's just blatant that that picture is made to be there … there's an idea of personal branding that's a little bit exaggerated in some respects, a corporate logic of self … there, you notice that. I try to be authentic, so I don't want others to perceive that there's a filter. *Flavio, 34, cultural journalist*

The self-branding and relational labor practices conveyed by journalists are diverse and can include actual forms of action, like deleting unwanted contacts because they're "not functional", but also forms of non-action, like consciously avoiding certain communication activities, such as posting "preview" content, or even forms of appreciation. However, in the platform environment where everything is potentially quantifiable, a non-action also becomes an action with productive purposes—in this case, the production of social relations through "subtractive" practices of affective and relational labor.

Discussion

On social media platforms, the management of one's image and audience would seem to be the result of mediated social relationships between users and the platform. These relationships have to be balanced between intimacy and detachment, sharing and subtraction.

Participants in this research stated that they deploy branding activities using various publishing strategies, including some subtle and implicit self-branding practices (Molyneux 2014; Casagrande 2022), such as counting the followers or monitoring and self-checking their performance. Some strategies are aimed not only at promoting content but also at creating and maintaining contacts: that is, subtle and implicit relational labor practices that involve managing the audience. For example, the management of trolls and criticism is used as a visibility booster for promotional purposes, and it is also a form of relational labor, which implies emotional management and an interaction strategy.

Online relationships and networks determine the social reputation of users but can be subject to bias or lead to sensitive information. The respondents showed they are aware of this "secondary" information, leading to response activities such as the selection of contacts and the rebranding of their profiles—to targeting their content to a selected audience, imagined or real. Moreover, it has emerged that they often prefer to hide from the public *and* their colleagues their best ideas, valuable news, for fear of being "fooled". This attitude harks back to the imagined surveillance (Duffy and Chan 2019), which describes the forms of control and management of one's online activities, in response to the interaction with an imagined audience, to strike a balance between the tendency for self-promotion and the need for privacy.

From these findings, what emerges is a certain way of self-branding, implicit and which proceeds by subtraction. Dosing likes, hiding news items, calibrating comments, favoring a pool of contacts based on quality rather than quantity: all these activities aim to brand a *certain image*, usually that of a brilliant and calibrated professional. In short, on social media, journalists interviewed here build and brand their image also through what they *do not* want to show, what they *do not* want to share. These *activities-not-activities*, these forms of control over the visible, do not only involve aspects related to self-

branding but also, and consequently, forms of relational labor, since they are all directed at the potential glance of the other—whether it is the colleague who might "steal a good idea", or a future client or employer.

The interviews revealed that some self-branding practices and relational labor activities proceed by subtraction, recalling, in a way, what happens in photography when looking at the negative of an image, which maintains the composition in inverted tones while figures are outlined through blank spaces. Thus, referring to this optical metaphor, this particular type of relational labor is here labelled as *negative relational labor*.

Echoing Baym's relational labor definition reported in the previous pages, communicative practices are here to be understood by *subtraction* (for example in the decision to "dose the likes"); these practices employ the time and effort required both to build one's network of contacts, as well as the "development of communicative and relational strategies" (Baym 2018, 20). The communicative and relational strategies are subject to "continuous review" (id.) even by the respondents in this study, and in some cases involve defining the "boundaries necessary to establish the limits of relationships" (id.), like when participants stated that they *unfollow* certain contacts, thereby placing a communicative and relational boundary. Finally, "the ongoing process of understanding necessary to understand oneself and the relationships one is building" (id.), which Baym refers to, is echoed in the productive and affective power underlying the user's sense-making with the platform.

Indeed, in the context of the growing trend towards the platformization of work, where everything—even the seconds spent passively watching a video—is potentially quantifiable, non-action takes on productive purposes. In particular, through the subtractive practices that characterize negative relational labor, social relations become part of the process of value production.

Ultimately, negative relational labor is selected, parceled, and implicit communicative, performative, and affective labor. It is aimed at the construction and reinforcement of a certain self-image through the construction and maintenance of relationships deemed advantageous, and through the management of relationships deemed disadvantageous. Like relational labor, it is aimed at the production of value through the management of one's relationality, and the subjectivity involved is both part of the production process and a commodity. Negative relational labor moves in the affective space of social media, relating in an imaginative-interpretive way to both the audience and the algorithm. The practices and non-practices enacted to build relationships for professional purposes are decided on the basis of a possible imagined reaction from the audience and a personal interpretation of how the platform works.

Conclusion

This work aims to contribute to the debate on labor in digital platforms by emphasizing the productive aspect of social relations and, consequently, attempting to situate the concept of relational labor within a critical theoretical frame. In addition, this research also aims to contribute to the field of journalism studies by investigating the practices of self-branding and relational labor that journalists enact on social media platforms.

Accordingly, the analysis moved from the concept of immaterial labor, a process in which the communicative-affective act produces value, capitalizing on subjectivity and

social relations. Thereafter, the concept of relational labor as theorized by Baym has been taken into account to then proceed with the empirical analysis. The analysis was conducted through qualitative interviews submitted to 17 journalists at the beginning of their careers, with a focus on their online self-branding practices.

The findings reported an attitude oriented primarily toward control and self-control. Relationships on platforms are organized and structured on the basis of how much one wants to stand out but also what one does not want to show to the public. Nonetheless, even invisible self-branding and relational activities are still the result of relational labor, since they are also value-producing relationships that capitalize on affects and contacts. Thus, this article suggests that *negative* relational labor is a particular form of relational labor closely related to platform dynamics that proceeds by subtraction. Negative relational labor is closely related to the production of affective and communicative flows conveyed also through self-branding activities, where subjectivities are commodified and processes of production as social relations are activated.

In conclusion, by suggesting the theorization of *negative* self-branding and of relational labor practices, this paper firstly contributes to the debate on digital and affective labor, highlighting how even *non*-actions, such as reducing interactions and concealing information, acquire a productive purpose; secondly, it provides interpretative tools for journalists' job activities, affected by the tendency towards the precariousness and individualization of the profession, as well as that of the platformization of work.

Although the research was conducted in 2019–2020, and since then there have been significant changes on social media platforms (e.g., the global diffusion of TikTok; the shift from Twitter to X), activities related to self-promotion have not diminished but have become widespread, adapting to new trends and approaches. Similarly, it is plausible to suggest that forms of negative self-branding and relational labor occurring in the present media landscape: future research could investigate how they are expressed in relation to the most popular social media platforms, possibly expanding the target, and diversifying age groups and professions.

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ORCID

Gaia Casagrande http://orcid.org/0009-0003-7648-1218

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