

Market Discourse and the “Enterprising Self”:

Performative Style and Popularity on Twitter

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The “digital economy’s classificatory architecture allows market institutions to apprehend their clients, customers, or employees through new instruments of knowledge, efficiency and value extraction. Markets have learned to ‘see’ in a new way, and are teaching us to see ourselves in that way, too.”

Fourcade and Healy 2017, “Seeing like a Market”

Begin with a question: What is the relation between neoliberalism and work?

Most answers focus on shifts in the structure of paid employment

- De-unionization, favoring capital over labor
- Financialization, shifting the logic of corporate governance
- Globalization, fostering sharp wage competition
- Digitalization, establishing algorithmic labor regimes

My focus is different in two respects:

- Focus on ideological and *cultural* influences, less on structures
- Focus on identity work, performed *outside* paid employment
- *Def.:* The micro-political rituals and self-presentations in which actors engage in order to demonstrate their value-creating capacities
- Identity work is unpaid –but has an obvious bearing on income generation
- Identity work is performed in all manner of status markets
 - including the one in which we are now engaged

My focus is different in two respects

- Identity work is now ubiquitous –as with social media (my focus today)
- Theoretical roots: Foucault, Alvesson and Willmott, Boltanski and Chiappello, others
- notions of “enterprising subjectivity” and “flexible selves”
 - Actors who willingly take responsibility for enhancing their productive capacities, conceiving of themselves as value-creating enterprises
 - Identity work becomes increasingly central to the worker’s employability

Foucault

“In neo-liberalism --and it does not hide this; it proclaims it... *homo economicus* is not at all a partner of exchange. *Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself... The stake in all neo-liberal analysis is the replacement every time of *homo economicus* as a partner of exchange with a *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings” (2008: 226)

Foucault and the governance of the self:

Social relations are increasingly

“broken down, subdivided and reduced, not according to the grain of individuals, but according to the grain of enterprises... The individual’s life itself --with his relationships to his private property, for example, with his family, household, insurance, and retirement -- must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise” (2008: 241)

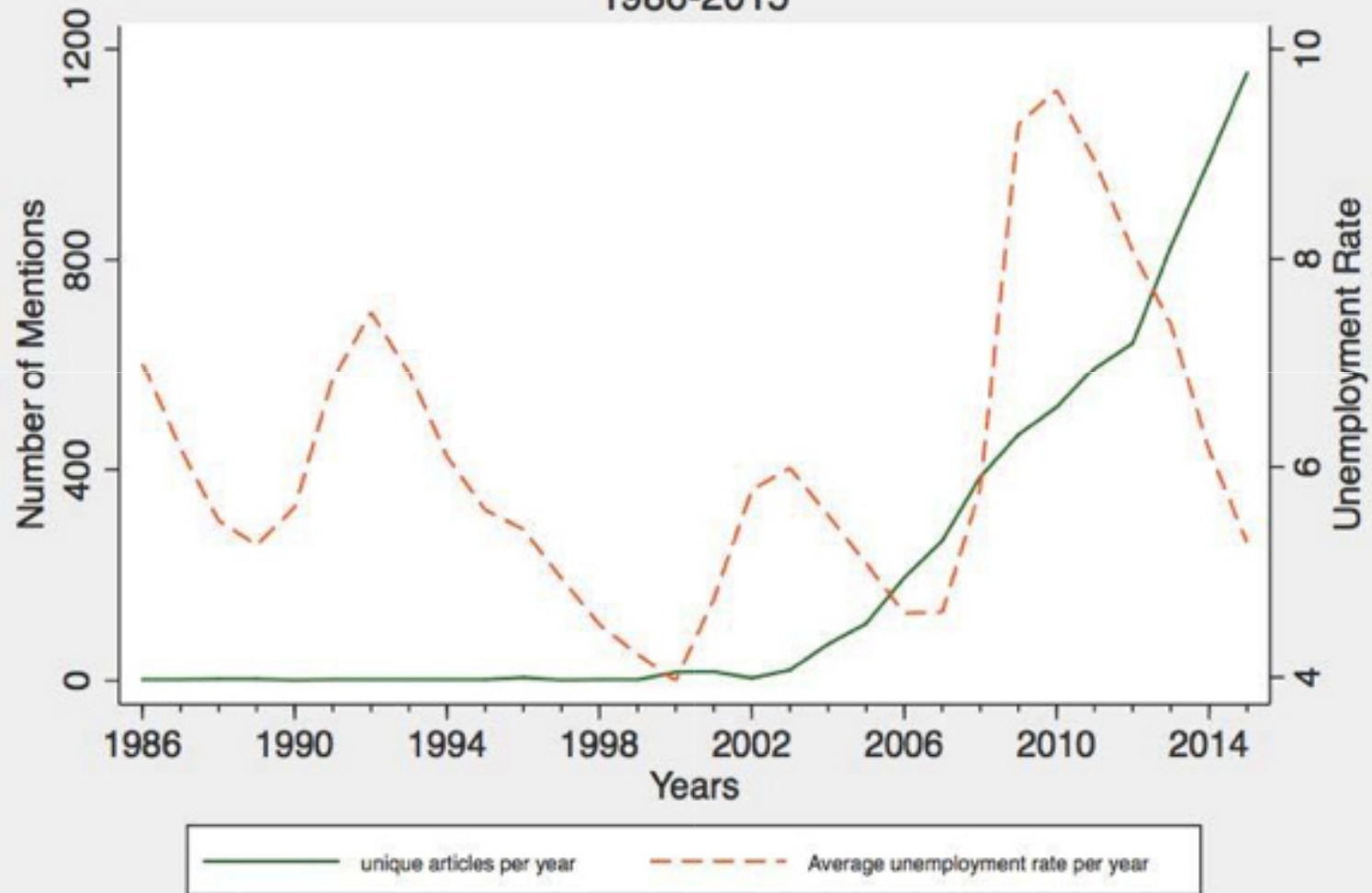
Many other theories

- McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.* (2005) speaks of the rise of the “belabored self” –
- du Gay, *Work and Consumption* (1996): “enterprise culture” fosters a broad responsabilization, in which actors are compelled to align their identities with market needs
- Actors must engage in the work of continuous improvement and self-enhancement –a never-ending labor of self-valorization
- These strands of analysis are increasingly applied to social media – and to the phenomenon of “personal branding”

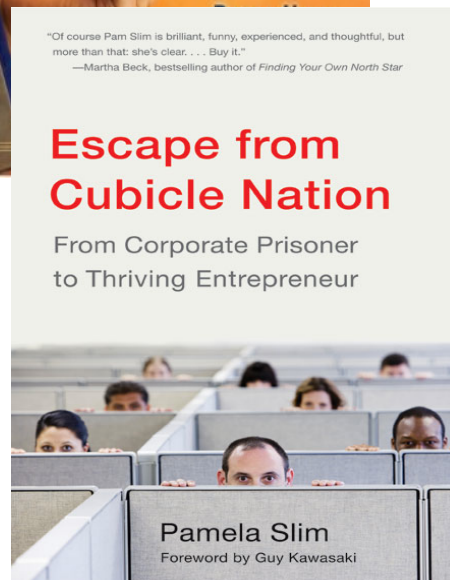
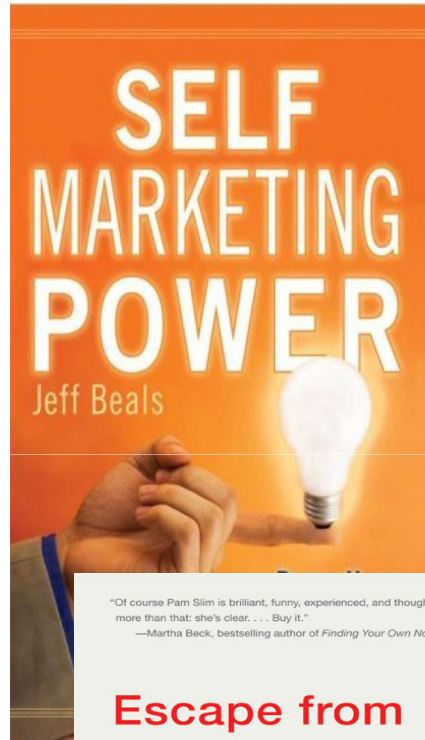
Proliferation of “Personal Branding”: An indicator of the enterprising self?

- Off shoot of self-help and career advice genre “Me, Inc.” –
- Themes:
 - Erosion of Fordist employment ==> rise of “free agent nation”
 - Breaking with dependent employment promises an expansion of human freedom
 - Adopting an entrepreneurial orientation delivers both self-fulfillment and prosperity
 - Needed: Application of marketing techniques toward one’s self (SWOT analysis, focus groups, PBS, etc)

Newsmedia Mentions of Personal Branding 1986-2015



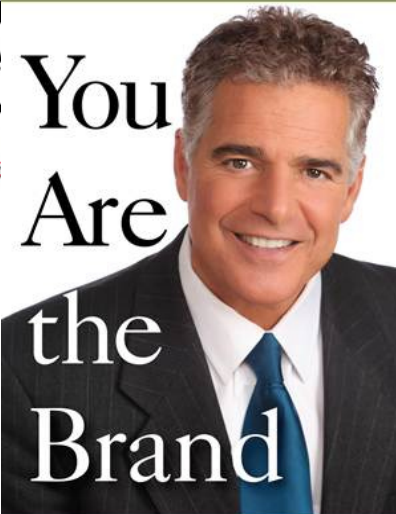
Instances of personal branding discourse



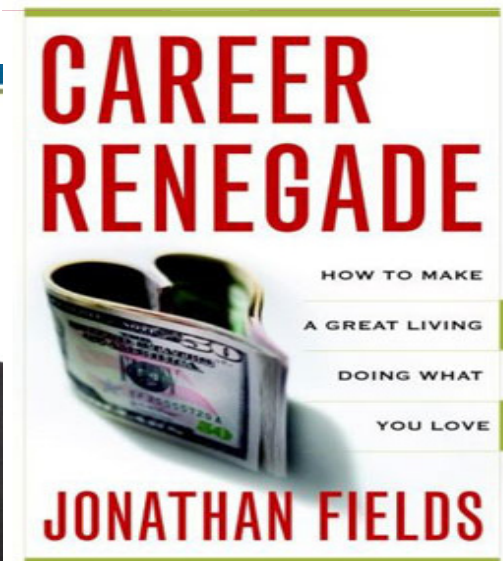
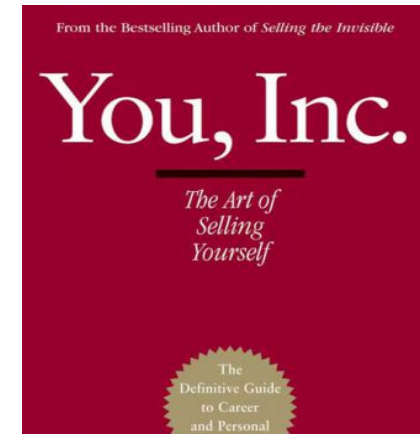
FREE AGENT NATION

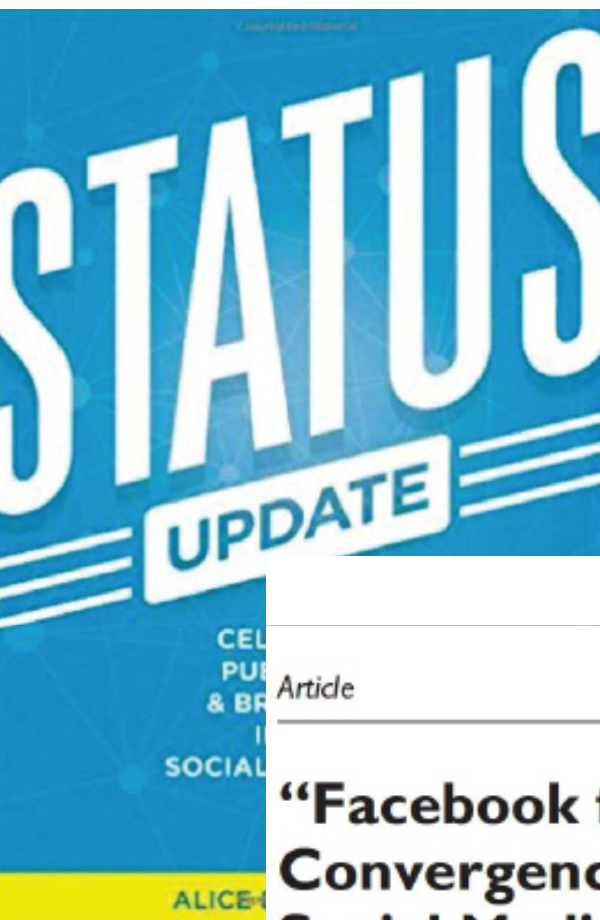
How America's New
Independent Workers
Are Transforming
the Way We

DANIEL H.



Vallas / Precarious Work, Fragile Societies





Article

The Paradoxes of Self-Branding: An Analysis of Consultants' Professional Web Pages

Michal Pagis¹ and Galit Ailon¹

Work and Occupations
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SM+S
social media + society

Article

“Facebook for Academics”: The Convergence of Self-Branding and Social Media Logic on Academia.edu

Brooke Erin Duffy¹ and Jefferson D. Pooley²

Social Media + Society

January-March 2017: 1–11

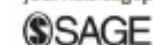
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Studies of person Branding discour

Previously: Used interview data to capture views of this discourse

Prevalence of Personal Branding:

“Oh, it’s online, you know, [in] groups. Just the different career websites and blogs, it's all over the place, this branding.” (unemployed paralegal)

“In the past ten years, it has entered the psyche of, everybody, really. Everybody in the business world. And right down into your church, your synagogue, whatever. The religious sphere. This is a new... Kind of, everything is a product. A brand.” (chemical engineer, out of work for four years)

Findings from interviews with precariously employed:

“You have to have your personal brand. It’s like, what are you known for? Because, you know, *I am the product, and the service is what I do, and the hiring manager is the customer.* So you have to think about it in terms of marketing my brand, and my brand is, like I’ve said, is providing growth in enrollment through mission leadership and excellent service. That’s who I am (emphasis added)”

(an unemployed administrator in higher education, in her 50s)

Findings from interviews with precariously employed:

“I got my daughter on LinkedIn when she was 15, so she could begin her personal branding...If you go to her LinkedIn page, you’d have to say, ‘My God, for 17 years old, look at her personal branding!’ So yes, I’ve been an advocate and a teacher of personal branding... I’ve been helping young people do that as a matter of course for the last decade...You have to give the value proposition of you.”

(high tech consultant working on information security projects, in her late 50s)

Now: Examine Personal Branding on Twitter

- Twitter is a prominent “attention market” –an arena in which users are aware of their follower accounts and often compete for prominence with one another
- Popularity on Twitter has consequences IRL
- Career opportunities, income generation often open up when people become “micro-celebrities”
- Questions:
 1. What forms of talk do adherents of personal branding use?
 2. How do performative styles affect user popularity?

Methods

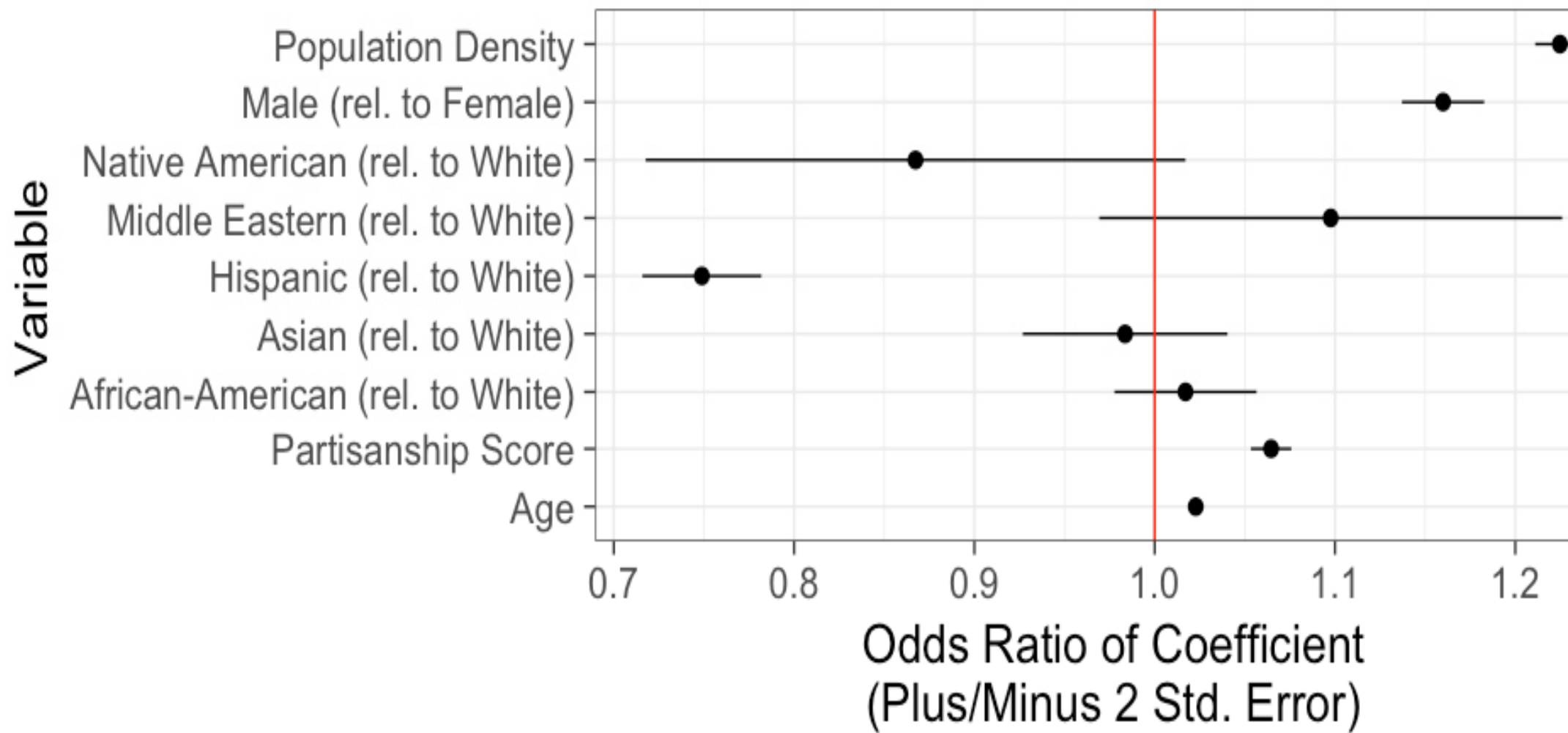
- Started by identifying the field of personal branding –
- Used Twitter's API to identify users whose profiles explicitly reference personal branding as a core part of their self-presentation
- Selected 33 prominent users (those with followers from a max. of several million to a min. of 1500)
- Included all their followers (2.3 million users)
- Eliminated bots, company accounts, those with protected accounts, non-English speakers
- Downloaded all the tweets from the remaining 534,712 users
- Linked a subset of these users to voter registration data

Methods, continued

- Start by characterize users (drawing on voter registration data, comparing personal branding adherents with non-adherents)
- Used Singular Value Decomposition (similar to factor analysis) to identify the dimensions that underlie the talk (identity work) evident in users' tweets
- Then use regression analysis, predicting popularity using the different dimensions we identify in users' tweets

Key question concerning presentational style:

- Studies vary in their depictions of personal branding
- Key difference: “**relational**” versus “**calculative**” portraits
- Some scholars see personal branding as only effective when the user can seem natural, friendly and authentic (Pagis and Ailon 2017)
- Here, self promotion must be presented as a *non*-market form of behavior
- Others see personal branding discourse as much more explicitly market-based
- As in my interviews –here, people speak of their own “value propositions,” and of their own personalities as representing their “equity”
- Hence Wee and Brooks (2010) self-branding = the “commodification of reflexivity”



stic regression of Twitter users who do and not adhere to personal brand

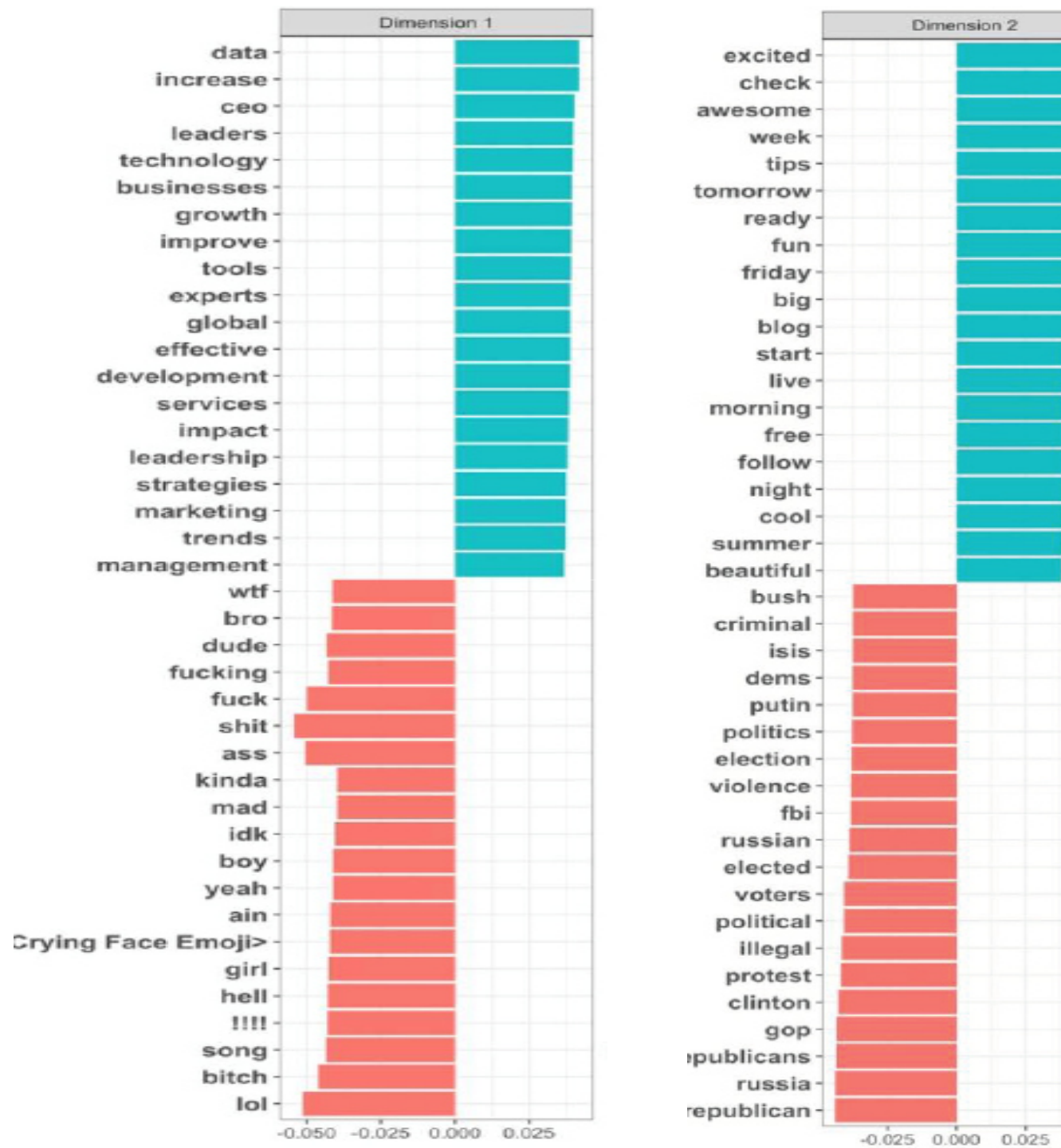
Results of the SVD analysis

We find that dimension 1 describes “entrepreneurial rationality”...

While dimension 2 describes “personal aspiration”

Note: Data represent the latent dimensions underlying user tweets

Blue = high end/Red = low end



Results of the SVD analysis

Dimensions 3 and 4 both capture forms of gender talk

We term dimension 3 “masculine irreverence”

We see dimension 4 in terms of “popular femininity”



Which forms of talk predict greater popularity?

- We conducted regression analysis predicting variations in the number of user followers
- Predictors are the four performative styles –
 - Entrepreneurial rationality
 - Personal inspiration
 - Masculine irreverence
 - Popular femininity
- Note: the latter three are forms of “relational” identity work
- All regressions controlled for relevant drivers of popularity (number of tweets, duration of tweeting, use of mechanical aids, etc.)

Results

- Several points emerge:
- First, entrepreneurial rationality emerges as having much more explanatory power.
 - Explicitly market based identity work seems more strongly associated with Twitter popularity than any of the other three presentational styles
- Second, users of masculine irreverence seem to incur a penalty (it may be too informal or anti-corporate to be attractive)
- Third, there are interactions between entrepreneurial rationality and gender, though these are modest (women incur a penalty when performing entrepreneurial rationality)

Conclusions

- The most authoritative voices in the personal branding field employ a neoliberal dialect, not the humanizing discourse and personalizing talk that some expect.
- Notions of the financialized self, premised on discussions of one's “value proposition,” have apparently gained sufficient social legitimacy as to speak on their own behalf.
- We interpret these data as lending support to notions steeped in the rise of *homo economicus*, in which the self is reconceived as an economic enterprise on its own account.

Caveats and Next Steps

- Caution: We need to capture dynamic or temporal features of these Twitter accounts before making causal inferences
- We need to extract particular tweets that instantiate the kind of talk we are analyze so abstractly
- These cautions aside, the paper begins to move the debate over markets and identities beyond the realm of localized case studies, presenting one of the first large-scale studies of market discourse in on-line forums.