What is Expertise in Cultural Work?

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Good morning, I'm Karen Patel from Birmingham City University, and today I'm going to talk about one aspect of my PhD, which is nearing completion. My PhD is about expertise in cultural work. By cultural work, I mean people working in the arts and creative industries, and the participants in my research included artists, writers, craftspeople and musicians.

What really illustrates what I'm talking about today is this blog post, 'How to Promote Your Art on Instagram' by Agora, an art gallery in New York. The post begins as follows:

"A successful artist in today's fast-paced world not only needs to create art but also should focus on promoting their art. Gone are the days of the "starving artist" and elite art dealers. Art is becoming more open for everyone to enjoy, and also forces artists to preserve quality both online and offline"

This quote, and indeed the whole blog post, is a demand to artists that they keep up with the rigours of the art world – they need to promote themselves, make sure they stand out against the rest. Nowadays 'everyone' can enjoy art, so quality needs to come through online. Artists cannot 'starve' any more, they need to make money. And they need to be able to use social media to do this effectively. According to this piece of advice, success involves being visible, particularly online, where identity, reputation and even livelihood are at risk.

It may seem strange at first that a physical art gallery should encourage artists to promote themselves online rather than in the gallery itself, but Agora is providing an additional service to artists - in the form of advice and guidance, to cement themselves as the 'NYC art experts' as they proclaim on their website – in an attempt to mitigate the risk and pressures art galleries also face today, to stay relevant, attract

visitors and sell art.
This screenshot captures the intersection at which cultural workers, expertise and social media meet, which is the focus of this presentation. While the Agora Gallery is based in New York, its blog post illustrates what is at stake for cultural workers everywhere.

Pressure and risk

"If you disappear from social media or people don't think you're doing anything, they forget about you quite quickly. I suppose there is a pressure to maintain a presence alongside your work."

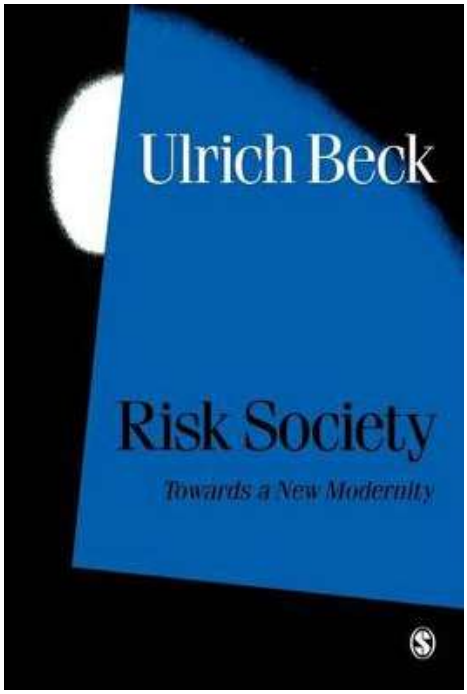
- Colin

Apparent in that blog post is the pressure to succeed for cultural workers, and an expectation to have an online presence. As many of us know, having a presence online can be risky – you open yourself up to scrutiny and criticism, and this is amped up if you rely on social media to promote and sell your work, as many of my participants do. For example, Colin here, talked about the pressure he feels to keep his online presence up to date:

"If you disappear from social media or people don't think you're doing anything, they forget about you quite quickly. I suppose there is a pressure to maintain a presence alongside your work."

- Colin

This illustrates one of my arguments that social media presents different risks and pressures to cultural workers who use it as part of their practice.



"People themselves have become small, private alternative experts in risks of modernisation" (Beck, 1992:61)

So why is expertise important? Cultural work has long been risky and precarious, particularly for independent workers such as those in my research - with little or no guarantee of a financial return for their work, which for some takes years to create. Add to that the cuts in arts funding and the economic climate post financial crisis, risk too seems to have increased. In the early 1990s Ulrich Beck characterised modern society as a risk society, where society is increasingly functioning to only mitigate risk. He noted how experts were not trusted by the public, and that thanks to emerging new technologies people are becoming their own experts, learning how to deal with risks which affect them in their everyday lives. In the contemporary context, particularly when we think about social media and the spread of fake news, for example, this could be problematic.

However, I find value in Beck's argument that people can become their own experts in order to manage certain everyday risks. Cultural workers need to gain, build and signal their aesthetic expertise in order to be successful in a competitive cultural work sector, and mitigate the risks of precarity, instability, lack of institutional support, and other such risks which relate to independent, freelance work. For cultural workers using social media, the platforms provide opportunities to signal their expertise, but there are also additional risks with not only what they put on social media, but in its everyday use as part of their creative practice.

How can we tell?

Social media platforms are argued to allow anyone to create and share work online, meaning, that potentially anyone could call themselves an expert in anything. So how can we tell? This ambiguity is illustrated by the case of someone who calls himself 'the most famous artist' (**play 40 seconds of video. If it doesn't work, say the following**)

Basically the most famous artist is this guy based in LA who goes to flea markets, buys old paintings, splashes paint on them and posts his finished work on Instagram.

That video goes on to show the most famous artist going into an art gallery and asking to show his work, when they refuse, he mentions that he has over 90,000 Instagram followers, and after that they accept his work. Commentators and art critics in the video heavily criticise the most famous artist for his lack of artistic skill, and for taking what has been created before, and effectively ruining it for the purposes of social media. The fact that he uses his social media follower numbers to get into galleries irks them even more.

So people like the most famous artist potentially complicate perceptions of aesthetic expertise in online spaces, but my work sets out to show more decisively what aesthetic expertise looks like on social media.

Artistic competence

"The previous knowledge of the strictly artistic principles of division which enable a representation to be located, through the classification of the stylistic indications which it contains, among the possibilities of representation constituting the universe of art"

Bourdieu (1993:221-222)

My idea of aesthetic expertise is influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who talks about how the artistic competence of creators is based on knowledge of existing aesthetic conventions and classifications, and the ability to appropriate that knowledge to create works of art. So, the ability to create works of art is not down to 'genius' as claimed by Kant, but is worked on over a period of time.
This cultural knowledge and skill is otherwise known as embodied cultural capital in Bourdieu's reckoning – it is embodied because it is learned and not directly exchangeable for other forms of capital, that is, until it is recognised as legitimate. When embodied cultural capital is recognised, it can then function as symbolic capital. So, we could say that aesthetic expertise is a form of symbolic capital, but only when it is recognised by others as legitimate.

Aesthetic expertise

Knowledge of aesthetic codes and classifications, and skill in mastering the tools and techniques to produce a work of aesthetic value. Recognised by others as legitimate.

So my definition of aesthetic expertise is:
Knowledge of aesthetic codes and classifications, and skill in mastering the tools and techniques to produce a work of aesthetic value. Which is recognised by others as legitimate.
And this recognition is key in how the cultural workers in my research signalled expertise on social media.

Signalling expertise

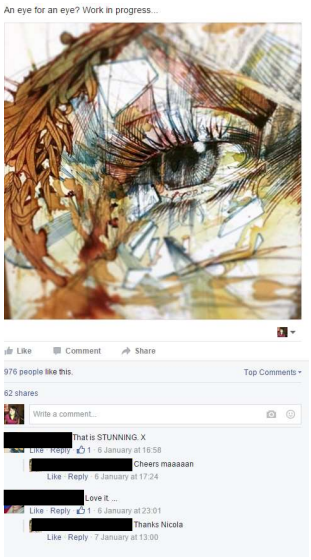
Based on Jones (2002) signalling expertise framework, adapted by Patel (2017)

- **Institutional context**
- **Signalling content**
- **Signalling strategies**

So briefly now I'm going to talk about the method I used to analyse expertise signals on social media. Candace Jones (2002) discusses how the project-based nature of work in the cultural industries means that being able to signal one's expertise is important. The process of signalling by the creative worker conveys information to others about their competencies, skills, relevant relationships, individual context and prior projects. She devises the signalling expertise framework to characterise expertise signals, and I used an adapted version of this framework (Patel, 2017) as a methodological tool, which focuses on three elements of signalling expertise online:
Institutional context - which focuses on the context of the user, their background and career trajectory
Signalling content, which considers the style of social media text and images, exhibiting the requisite skills in both their social media posts and videos and career relevant connections and interactions on social media
Signalling strategies, which includes using social media affordances such as retweets to enhance status, the type of relationships pursued and how they are manifest on social media, and strategic approaches to impression management on social media.
I used this framework to analyse samples of social media posts from the 19 cultural workers. The analysis, along with interviews, provided some insights into how expertise is signalled by cultural workers on social media.

Work in progress

First, one of the ways in which the more established cultural workers signalled their expertise was posting work in progress online. For example Gillian here, who is a pet portrait artist, posting the progression of her work. This demonstrates Gillian's artistic skill in reproducing a portrait of a dog for a client. It also serves a business purpose for Gillian because it helps to manage client expectations, and build excitement and anticipation for the finished article. It engages her audience, as you can see from the likes and comments, adding not only to Gillian's online presence and popularity but also her reputation and arguably, symbolic capital. This is a prime example of how aesthetic expertise can be enhanced through social media platforms.



- Risk of exposing process – evidencing aesthetic expertise
- Risk of comments, which he must manage

Posting work in progress is also risky, here are examples of Colin posting a work in progress on Facebook. This is risky because he is revealing his process, but it is also a useful way for him to evidence his aesthetic expertise – he is showing that he doesn't cut any corners and illustrating step by step what he does.
In posting on Facebook, he is exposing himself to potential criticism and comments, it is up to Colin to have the time and social media knowledge to keep an eye on comments and manage them. He often replies directly to them, demonstrating engagement with his followers and generating a positive vibe around his work. Colin needs to keep a constant eye on what he posts to make sure that doesn't happen.

Displaying recognition

Sharing associations

Another strategy is the display of recognition, which is showing that one's work has been recognised by others, and social media platforms can facilitate this. I'm going to talk about two of the ways in which the cultural workers in this research displayed recognition.

First, sharing associations. The use of social media platform features such as @ replies in Twitter and tagging on Facebook and Instagram were used frequently by participants to show their association with a particular company, client or fellow artist. For example, Phil here displays his recognition by sharing his work for some high profile clients including the BBC show *Masterchef* in the UK and the South African lottery. As well as mentioning the client in his Tweets, he also mentions the distributor, Zone Music. Showing that Phil has worked for these high-profile clients enhances his status and potentially his reputation, because he has associated himself with those companies and provided the evidence to substantiate it.

Displaying recognition

Sharing endorsements

Second, some of the cultural workers displayed recognition by sharing endorsements by clients or other companies they are associated with. For example, Gillian, a pet portrait artist, asked her followers on Facebook to provide testimonials for her website, which were posted on her Facebook page, there for the public to see, some of them are here.

The affective language used by Gillian's clients – describing their 'joy', her work making their 'heart skip a beat' demonstrates how they have been affected by Gillian's work through the pet portraits she has produced for them, which hold some sentimental value. Some of them comment on her aesthetic expertise – her ability to capture the likeness of the subject, the detail, capturing the 'energy' and 'mischief' of pets. These are endorsements of Gillian as an artist possessing a level of aesthetic expertise. The display of recognition may not immediately seem as burdensome as presencing for the cultural workers, indeed the sharing of endorsements and associations will most likely generate a positive affect for them, as expressed by Gillian in her 'thank you' comment underneath her testimonial post.

Staging expertise – the 'studio' space

Another way in which cultural workers attempted to signal their aesthetic expertise was through the staging of their work in a studio space. The studio is argued by Alison Bain to be a marker of professional status, as a way of considering oneself a 'serious' cultural worker.

Michelle Grabner argues that the contemporary studio space can be defined by the practices which take place within it – this is much more than the act of creation – it can be learning, looking for inspiration, collaboration, discussion and contemplation. The display of the studio space on social media can demonstrate these other processes to some extent, in a similar way to which work in progress is shown step by step by other cultural workers. For example, Jason here posted a picture of his studio wall on Instagram, with the caption 'everything is becoming something'. This caption emphasises that Jason's work is not yet finished. Sjoholm (2013) observes that the act of hanging unfinished work in the studio allows artists to contemplate and absorb their work, enabling them to think about how they will proceed. The purposefulness of hanging the art and the space for contemplation is an important process of being an artist – which Jason shares in his online construction of 'being an artist'. The setting of the studio wall can be important for this – the light shining in, and the remnants of paint on the wall mirror the romantic descriptions of artist studios and serve as a marker of one's status as a 'serious' artist as opposed to someone merely

looking for likes and follows.

Staging expertise – the ‘studio’ space

Using Instagram also, Cherie has been able to showcase her work situated within her studio, without people needing to visit the studio to see it. The photo allows her followers to see the scale of her paintings. Like Jason, Cherie is showing her work in progress and the positioning of paintings for contemplation, as well as a display of her aesthetic expertise, mediated on Instagram with the affirmative comments which Cherie responds to. Posting her art on Instagram has led to some success for Cherie, as she described in her interview:

“I've sold two paintings on Instagram. They're big paintings, and they cost a lot of money. I find it just absolutely insane that people would want to buy something at that level off an Instagram. It's just nuts. The same girl contacted me again a few days ago on Instagram, wanting another painting.”

The paint splashes on the floor, materials and paintings visible, contribute to Cherie’s online construction of ‘being’ a ‘serious’ cultural worker. This isn’t a hobby or by chance, she is showing that this is her livelihood and what she does to make money.

What does an ‘expert’ cultural worker look like on social media?

- Revealing and describing their creative process – mastery of tools and techniques
- High profile associations
- Positive endorsements

So what does an ‘expert’ cultural worker look like on social media, as opposed to someone like ‘the most famous artist’?
Well first they exhibit a confidence in revealing aspects of their creative practice, showing work in progress, sharing aspects of their work, and they’re able to describe the techniques and materials used in detail, and these techniques are not just splashing paint on old paintings, there is skill, sophistication, and knowledge of aesthetic codes and conventions, involved. These people are not afraid to reveal this process because they own it, however they must be able to manage online feedback and comments effectively.
Second, as I said earlier in this presentation aesthetic expertise cannot be regarded as expertise until it is recognised as legitimate by others, and the display of recognition is a way for cultural workers to signal this. Associating with high profile companies and clients increases the status of the cultural worker and enhances their symbolic capital. As do positive endorsements, which contribute to a positive reputation for the cultural worker and can help them get their aesthetic expertise recognised more widely.

Questions of…

- Presentation of creative space
- 'Themostfamousartist' – cultural value?

However, what I've shown here not only raises questions about risk, such as managing comments online, it presents other questions too. First, the presentation of the creative space – Alison Bain's work importantly highlights the gendered dynamics of artists' studios – how women with families often cannot afford, or don't have the time to, have an external studio space of their own. Often, they worked from home, and were unable to concentrate fully on their art because they were interrupted by the demands of domestic life. I could say the same for the majority of the women cultural workers in this research, those with families needed to work from home and as a result, some struggled to create. They don't have the time to post work in progress, and aren't able to display an artistic, 'professionalised' space for contemplation. Essentially, their ability to signal their expertise online is compromised, and though social media is argued to open up barriers to participation and allow anyone to create - and in my thesis I do show ways in which the women cultural workers use social media to promote their work in other ways – the same inequalities and concerns around labour conditions in cultural work are apparent in my research.

Second, the fact that someone like the most famous artist can get into galleries based on Instagram follower numbers raises questions around how we value culture in the so called 'social media age'. UK cultural policies are widely criticised in scholarship for

increasing emphasis on instrumental measurements of cultural value in order to justify arts funding – could we get to a point where cultural value in the future is measured by likes and followers, rather than the aesthetic qualities of cultural objects and performances? I have shown how the affordances of social media platforms can enhance signals of aesthetic expertise, but they also run the risk of having the reverse effect.

From what I've shown today, it is possible to distinguish between the cultural workers who seriously pursue creative work to make a living and have developed a level of aesthetic expertise, rather than creating work to 'go viral'. But will that matter if social media measurements – which are so instant, so frivolous and can be bought - become a barometer for cultural value?

Thank You

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