Tweeting Like Taylor Swift?
Affordances, Status Production, and Online Platforms

Stefan Seidel
University of Liechtenstein
stefan.seidel@uni.li

Stefan Debortoli
University of Liechtenstein
stefan.debortoli@uni.li

Nicholas Berente
University of Georgia
berente@uga.edu

Nikhil Srinivasan
University of Georgia
nsrini@uga.edu

Abstract

This paper explores affordances of status production provided by Twitter as they are perceived and enacted under different institutional logics. We analyze tweets by IS academics (institutional logic of the IS academic profession) and celebrities (institutional logic of the popular music profession). We describe how the communicative features of Twitter are used to enhance identities and produce status in these two different fields. While we find evidence that both groups perceive and enact affordances of status production, we identify important differences in how these affordances are enacted: (1) certain affordances of status production are enacted under one institutional logic, while they are not under another, (2) the same affordance is enacted under different institutional logics with different intensity, and (3) different features afford the same opportunities of status production to different users. We explain the differences through the influence of offline cultural capital on online status production.

1. Introduction

A key reason that individuals engage with online social platforms involves “status production” [1]. Although status production is not the only reason for using social media, it is an important element of many online platforms, particularly in those fields where status is important [2]. Status production refers to the generation of a particular form of reputational, symbolic capital (i.e., “status”) in a cultural field [3]. Cultural fields are those domains of human endeavor where status is important—and include areas as diverse as popular music, professional sports, academic research, and literature critique—all of which now intertwine diverse online social platforms in the production of cultural capital in their respective fields.

We are beginning to understand the process by which users engage in status production through online platforms [1, 4]—and our understanding often stems from explorations of network structures of a particular community [e.g., 5, 6]. However, these network structures do not directly attend to the way people draw upon the different features (i.e., material properties) of a given platform in different ways. This is problematic, since one fundamental insight in the information systems research tradition is that different users will appropriate systems differently, but that this appropriation will have something to do with their group memberships and the social structures that users draw upon [e.g., 7, 8], and that there are thus some regularities across contexts and across time.

People invest quite a bit of time and energy in building their reputation through online platforms and it is in the best interest of platform owners to design ways for their systems to enable this status production through the use of “status markers” [1]. Status markers are features of the online platform that enable users to distinguish themselves from each other. Different online platforms have different features designed into the system to enable users to gain and display status, and different users will see these features and draw upon them in different ways. Different features thus “afford” different perceived opportunities for status production in a cultural field. One might expect—particularly in highly institutionalized fields—that these perceived affordances would vary across fields of practice [institutionally-embedded affordances, see 9].

In this paper, we explore how different users may draw upon the same features of an online social plat-
form (Twitter) to produce status. To do so, we draw on the notion of institutionally-embedded affordances [9], and analyze status production across two very different fields: the field of popular (celebrity) culture and the field of information systems research. It is important to note that this paper represents an exercise in theory generation. In drawing a very select sample from both fields, the goal of this effort is not to generalize in a statistical fashion about either of these fields (or any fields for that matter). Instead, we sample examples from these two fields to aid us in constructing a novel understanding of the situation, and potentially move our theorizing about the topic in novel directions. Future research would look to validate our insights more broadly.

We find that users in the two fields draw upon the same features in some similar ways, and in some different ways in order to engage in status production. Specifically, we shed light on how Twitter’s features afford self-promotion, providing news about self, peer promotion, event promotion, event engagement, community engagement, institutional promotion, and topic engagement, and we explain how these affordances relate to status production. Our analysis suggests that (1) certain affordances are enacted under one institutional logic while they are not enacted under another, (2) the same affordance is enacted under different institutional logics with different intensity, and (3) different features afford the same opportunities of status production to different users. In sum, we argue, there is a partial overlap between the platform as a field of practice for status production, and the way that offline fields of practice influence the appropriation of the online platform for status production.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on cultural fields and status production, followed by a summary of the notion of an institutionally-embedded affordance. We then report on our exploratory research, and conclude with a model of affordance enactment in status production with online social platforms.

2. Conceptual Background: Online Platforms, Status Production, and Institutionally-Embedded Affordances

According to Bourdieu [10], cultural fields such as art, science, and literature are relational rather than substantive. That is, these fields are not defined by particular individuals, per se, but rather through the actions of those individuals in relation to each other. These fields are neither homogenous nor uncontested—but evolve over time through diverse interests and activities and can involve power struggles among those acting within the field. Positions of individuals within the field define their identities and reflect their actions over time in accumulating cultural capital within the field [3]. Thus, individuals within cultural fields actively engage in “position taking” [10] to form their identities and build their symbolic capital within the field.

In the online world, specific platforms have been suggested to represent “online fields of practice” which are social spaces involved with user-generated content production, consumption, and evaluation [1]. Individuals actively build and nurture their identities and the associated reputation (i.e. accumulate cultural capital) discursively [4]. That is, they use communicative features of online media to enhance their identities and thus produce status. These discursive moves are enabled by a variety of features of the online platforms—including those features (such as number of followers, ratings, or “likes”) that explicitly signal status that an individual has accumulated and thus serve as “status markers.”

Thus, individuals draw upon features of online platforms to produce status in particular fields. However, it is important to note that online fields do not exist in a vacuum. Status production in online fields is strongly influenced by offline cultural capital [1]. Technologies do undergird institutional fields of practice [11], but a single technology does not define an institution. Instead, different institutional fields can draw upon the same technology in different ways [12].

The same technology might provide different action possibilities to different user groups if perceived and enacted under different institutional logics, which is captured by the concept of an institutionally-embedded affordance [9]. The concept of affordance [13] originates from the field of ecological psychology [14] and is now frequently used in IS research in order to capture IS appropriation [e.g., 15, 16]. Importantly, affordances need to be perceived before they can be enacted [17]. Still, even if an affordance is perceived it does not necessarily mean that the affordance is enacted (or realized or actualized), thereby leading to actions and concrete outcomes [18, 19]. Affordances provide a theoretical lens for studying how online platforms can be appropriated across different institutional fields. However, to date there is no research on how, and whether, actors associated with different offline institutions draw upon the same functionality of online platforms differently. Do online platforms, as fields of practice in themselves, dictate appropriate use of features for status production? Or do offline institutions shape the way differ-
ent actors perceive the affordances of online platforms? At this point we do not understand the relationship between online platforms as fields of practice themselves and the influence of offline fields in the appropriation of online platforms. To rectify this situation, next we present an exploratory analysis of two much different fields of practice (popular “pop” music and information systems research) and a particular online field (Twitter) to gain better insight into this issue.

3. Research Method

Our unit of analysis was that of a single tweet. We purposefully selected 17 professional musicians (celebrities) and 16 IS researchers, and analyzed a total of 849 tweets (497 tweets of IS academics and 352 tweets of professional “pop” musicians). The list of musicians were drawn from top celebrity Twitter users, and the IS researchers were drawn from a list of the Association for Information Systems (AIS) member researchers who had consistently active Twitter accounts in recent months. The data was coded using the lenses of affordances and status production (Figure 1), and we were able to identify a set of affordances related to status production as well as the underlying features that provided those affordances. Through analyzing the tweeds, we observed the actualized immediate concrete outcomes of those affordances [18, 19].

Data was extracted from Twitter for a period of three months in 2014 for each IS scholar and celebri-

![Figure 1. Affordances of status production in different fields (extended from Markus and Silver 2008)](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User</th>
<th>Tweet</th>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>High-level affordance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katy Perry</td>
<td>Purposefully spaced out my consumption of OITNB so that I wouldn't starve till 2015 but den I came to AUS...no netflix zone #missupipe</td>
<td>Categorization using hashtag #</td>
<td>Providing news about self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Bieber</td>
<td>The old is gone the new is here. #workinprogress <a href="http://t.co/1nCzCzAF5u">http://t.co/1nCzCzAF5u</a></td>
<td>Categorization using hashtag, linking</td>
<td>Self-promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik Brynjolfsson</td>
<td>RT @mattglesias: A revenue neutral carbon tax is the free market fix to climate change people say they want: <a href="http://t.co/uogwuLAZbN">http://t.co/uogwuLAZbN</a></td>
<td>Retweeting, mentioning using @, linking</td>
<td>Topic engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ty, and imported into a database. The coding process evolved as follows. First the authors separately reviewed recent tweets of selected IS scholars and popular musicians from the list and generated rough topics around status production, then discussed these topics. From these discussions, the authors collaboratively generated an initial list of codes. Two of the authors independently coded a subset of the data, discussed their results, agreed on categories, and established inter-coder agreement. Table 1 shows some coding examples.

4. Findings

In this section, we first describe the affordances we identified. We then describe how specifically these affordances were enacted on the online platform as a distinct field of practice. Table 2 provides

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affordance</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example IS profession</th>
<th>Example music profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-promotion</td>
<td>Providing information about the tweeting person or their activities in order to foster their recognition.</td>
<td>Direct: Merryn Somerset Webb has advice on making money in an age of machines, referencing my work with @amcafee [link] #2MA #robots</td>
<td>Direct: MY Claire Bear helped me kick off my Australian tour tonight in the most PERTH-fect place. Where will, [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Backstage at #dellworld with @amcafee about to give out tagteam keynote. [link]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing news about self</td>
<td>Status updates etc.</td>
<td>still having issues with 1.0.2, but will switch to forum... thanks, @pkewisch! @googlecalendar @mozthunderbird</td>
<td>Watching a bunch of videos y'all are sending me singing to &quot;Heart&quot;! You make me blush. Send me some to post por favor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer promotion</td>
<td>Providing information about a person in order to foster their recognition, or the recognition of their activities.</td>
<td>RT @janvombrocke: 10 Principles of Good BPM on BPTrends - [link]</td>
<td>.@kathygriffin Great having you at the show. I'm sure that happens to you a lot Kathy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event promotion</td>
<td>Providing information on upcoming events.</td>
<td>looking forward to fireside chat at @Meetup Nov 24 6:30p w/ founder/CEO @heif cc @melalicous @obeniflah join us! [link]</td>
<td>Tickets still available for the #On-TheRoadAgain2015 Tour! [link] [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event engagement</td>
<td>Providing information related to a past or ongoing event</td>
<td>Attending lecture by Bob Brown (@BobBrownFndn) on sustainability at @UOW #excited</td>
<td>Incredible night at the LA #NoKidHungry dinner. Let's make sure kids have the food they need! [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community engagement</td>
<td>Providing and sharing information relevant to the community, but not directly related to the tweeter</td>
<td>Succeeded! - Notable Women in Computing Card Deck by Jessica Dickinson Goodman [link]; RT @eike b: Want to work at QUT and live in Brisbane? We have a job opening for a professor in IS: [link]</td>
<td>GUYS. Blank Space Music Video Directed by @JosephKahn Co-Starring @Seannopry55 [link] [link] [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture engagement</td>
<td>Providing and sharing information that are not necessarily relevant to the community.</td>
<td>RT @StanfordFBall: It's game day in the Desert! RT if you're awake and can't wait for kickoff. #GoStanford #BeatASU. [link]</td>
<td>Vote MOFOS! I know, I know... &quot;It takes too long.&quot; &quot;I don't know any of the issues.&quot; You can't have an opinion if you don't have a voice...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic engagement</td>
<td>Providing and sharing information, such as news, regarding a specific topic that is of interest to the community or specific members of the community.</td>
<td>Google Is About To Take Over Your Whole Life, And You Won't Even Notice By @ctrlzee [link]; RT @eike b: Want to work at QUT and live in Brisbane? We have a job opening for a professor in IS: [link]</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
an overview of affordances that were enacted in the sample we studied.

We found similarities, but also notable differences in the enactment of affordances of status production under different institutional logics (Figure 2). First, certain affordances were enacted under the institutional logic of the IS academic profession, but were not—or just barely—enacted under the institutional logic of professional artists: community engagement, topic engagement, and institutional promotion. Second, we found affordances that were enacted under both institutional logics, but with different intensity (e.g., self-promotion). Third, we found differences in the features that afforded the same opportunities to different users.

Figure 3 provides an overview of how the enacted affordances were distributed in the two samples we studied. Under the institutional logic of the IS academic profession, we found evidence for the enactment of affordances of topic engagement, self-promotion, culture engagement, community engagement, event engagement, providing news about self, peer promotion, and institutional promotion. Under the institutional logic of popular culture, we found evidence for the enactment of affordances of self-promotion, providing news about self, event engagement, peer promotion, culture engagement, event promotion, community engagement, and topic engagement. Under the institutional logic of the IS academic profession, actors predominantly acted upon the affordance of topic engagement (37% of all tweets), while under the institutional logic of the professional artist, actors predominantly acted upon the affordance of self-promotion (54% of all tweets). Altogether, our sample suggests that under the institutional logic of the IS profession there is more diversity in the enactment of affordances.

In what follows, we describe how the different affordances were enacted under the different institutional logics, thereby highlighting the features that
were used, and how they relate to status production.

**Self promotion**
Under both institutional logics, the key features of Twitter—tweeting, retweeting, categorization through hash-tagging, linking—afforded self-promotion. Consider the following example, where a professional artist promotes her new album, building on features of linking and categorization:

*The best people in life are free.* #TS1989 #taylurking http://t.co/ZFj3seauK3

Twitter also afforded self-promotion to IS academics, for example when @digitalarun is retweeted the following:

*RT @Linz_Shelton: Prof. @digitalarun’s cheat sheet on the "collaborative-peer-sharing economy" #L2Forum http://t.co/7ZqdLr1zts*

Interestingly, there is evidence that IS academics more frequently use the retweeting feature of Twitter in order to indirectly self-promote (in 74% of the self-promotion cases) than do professional artists, who tend to directly self-promote (in 53% of the cases). We can thus distinguish between direct self-promotion and indirect self-promotion, where the latter is afforded by the re-tweeting feature of Twitter.

**News about self**
From our sample we can see that Twitter affords professional artists frequent dissemination of news about themselves (15% of tweets), whereas this affordance is much less enacted by IS academics (7% of tweets). Consider the following example posted by the artist Adele, where this tweeter makes use of the features of mentioning (using the @) and linking:

*Just randomly met @davidblaine and he did some magic for us. Never seen anything like it! Blew my mind! http://t.co/40YELzsoAd*

**Peer promotion**
Twitter affords peer promotion, that is, enables users to provide information about a person in order to foster their recognition, or the recognition of their activities. In our sample, in only 4% of the academics’ tweets Twitter was used to peer promote, while 9% of the tweets of professional artists were about peer promotion. In the following example, an IS academic promotes another IS academic, thereby using features of mentioning, categorizing, and linking:

*My colleague @rodneyabrooks is not worried about existential threats from #AI any*
Event promotion

Under both institutional logics, we found evidence for the enactment of affordances of event promotion, that is, providing information about upcoming events, typically using features of mentioning and linking. For instance:

*Attending lecture by Bob Brown (@BobBrownFndn) on sustainability at @UOW #excited*

In this example, the actor promotes an upcoming academic conference. The following is an example of a tweet under the logic of a professional artist, where the artist makes use of categorization and linking features:

*Bay Area!! I can't wait to see you on Dec 3rd for the #TripleHoShow!! Tix on sale now at http://t.co/m4QUZYM4sv*

Here, event promotion is closely related to self-promotion in the case of this professional artist, as the event is an event of the artist.

Community engagement

Affordances of community engagement allow actors to provide and share information relevant to the community, but not directly related to the tweeter. For instance:

*RT @eike_b: Want to work at QUT and live in Brisbane? We have a job opening for a professor in IS: http://t.co/6LjSjDhvgZ*

This actor uses the retweeting-feature of twitter in order to share information that is relevant to at least parts of the academic community.

Topic engagement

Twitter affords users to engage into topics of their interest, that is, enables users to provide information regarding a specific topic that is of interest to the community, or specific members of the community:

*MT @dhinchcliffe: How orgs can develop #strategy for an operating in an environment of rapid #change & #uncertainty: http://t.co/F10Gb03nN2*

It is perhaps not surprising that we found evidence that academics communicate topics of their research interest—this is a form of status production as the user becomes increasingly associated with a certain topic. Examples from the sample we studied include topics like cyber security or open access. Topic engagement was by far and large the most prominent affordance enacted in the field of the IS academic profession (37%), while we found only one case for the enactment of this affordance in the field of popular (celebrity) culture.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we have set out to study how an online platform affords status production under different institutional logics. Specifically, we draw a sample from Twitter of two very different fields: the popular (celebrity) music industry and the field of
information systems scholarship. We found some evidence that Twitter is appropriated differently in these fields in terms of affordance enactment, the intensity of affordance enactment, and the relationships between features and afforded opportunities. That is, users in these two different fields use communicative features of Twitter differently to enhance their identities and thus produce status.

One explanation for the different appropriations lies in the influence of offline cultural capital on online status production [1]. For instance, there is evidence that IS academics build on their offline reputation when enacting affordances of topic engagement, or promotion of institutions, peers, and events (e.g., these academics have published scholarly articles related to a topic). We can thus conclude that actors associated with different offline institutions draw upon the same functionality of online platforms differently. This is consistent with the view that different institutional fields can draw upon the same technology in different ways [12], and that affordances are institutionally-embedded [9]. Figure 4 visualizes this model.

Essentially, we have two fields of practice present. First, there is the online field of practice associated with the platform [1] which has its norms and practices associated with status production. Second, there is the “home” institutional field of the researchers that shapes the way they approach the online platform.

There are a number of contributions of this research. First we identify and illustrate nine general affordances for status production on a popular online field—Twitter. We further link these affordances to specific features embedded in the system. We show how different fields do indeed appear to appropriate these features differently, and we theorize that it is the offline field that explains these differences. Although there are stark differences, there are also a number of surprising similarities between these diverse fields. We hope that our work will spur further research into the interaction of online and offline fields in the way individuals enact affordances associated with platform ecosystems.

6. Conclusion

At first glance, the field of information systems research could not be further from the popular music profession in terms of its substance. Digging more deeply, however, we find that although they are indeed different, the media for status production are increasingly converging in online spaces, enabled by online platforms such as Twitter. Both fields engage in the production of information goods, and status production is intertwined with these goods but also positioned in the different fields of practice. In this paper, we have set out to study how an online platform affords status production under different institutional logics. Although we sampled based on what we thought were much different institutional environments, we were surprised at the similarities. Could it be that online platforms and the related online fields that are generated around them could be driving the convergence of status production across fields? In the past, information systems researchers primarily engaged in status production through journals and conferences. Musicians drove their status production through musical artifacts, concerts, radio, and popular press. Now both often also use Twitter, as well as a variety of other online platforms (e.g., YouTube, Facebook). The question now becomes to what extent will the practices of status production converge across fields, and to what extent will they remain distinct? This points to a broader question of field convergence in general. As diverse fields increasingly appropriated the same technological substructure, to what extent will these fields converge? This cross-field homogenization due to widespread digital platforms is indeed an important area for future research.

References


