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Eden Litt

For more than a century, scholars have alluded to the notion of an ''imagined audience''—a person's mental conceptualization of the people with whom he or she is communicating. The imagined audience has long guided our thoughts and actions during everyday writing and speaking. However, in today's world of social media where users must navigate through highly public spaces with potentially large and invisible audiences, scholars have begun to ask: Who do people envision as their public or audience as they perform in these spaces? This article contributes to the literature by providing a theoretical framework that broadly defines the construct; identifies its significance in contemporary society and the existing tensions between the imagined and actual audiences; and drawing on Giddens's concept of structuration, theorizes what influences variations in people's imagined audience compositions. It concludes with a research agenda highlighting essential areas of inquiry.

In today's media-saturated and performance-driven society, social and cultural factors related to consumerism, aestheticism, and narcissism, as well as the advent of communication technologies have led to the hyper-sensitization of the self, performance, and the imagination (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). We have come to think that ''life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time'' (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998 p. 73). This obsession has led to the popularization of tools that afford people the ability to interact with many individuals at once vitalizing the performer/audience relationship. These popular sites and services encompass a variety of forms including social network sites, blogs, and microblogs, referred to collectively as social media (Smith, 2011).

While media studies have long explored many aspects related to the audience construct in general, as social media's importance and prevalence increases, recent research has begun to focus on the concept of audience within the context of

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everyday interpersonal communication on such platforms. Scholars have started to research with whom individuals interact, who users consider to be a part of their audience, and how they navigate the audience perception difficulties that social media environments produce. More recently, scholars have specifically called attention to the construct of the ''imagined audience'' (e.g., boyd, 2008; Brake, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2010). However, little work has theorized the imagined audience. What exactly is it? Why is it in the academic limelight now? Synthesizing scholarly research from psychology, sociology, and communication, as well as media studies research that has long studied many aspects of audience, this article provides a framework for the imagined audience's purpose in everyday mediated publics, emphasizing its importance and theorizing what influences its construction. Given the limited work that has explored the explicitness of the imagined audience, the article concludes by discussing related areas in need of more research.

Defining the Imagined Audience

To understand the imagined audience, it is helpful first to consider the influence that the actual audience typically has on everyday face-to-face communication. According to theories of self-presentation and impression management, to help control the impressions others form, individuals interact and adapt their behavior based on who is in the actual audience (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). As the audience and context change, so does one's behavior: ''We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club companions, to our masters and employers as to our intimate friends'' (James, 1890, p. 294). If the actual audience typically plays the most influential role on behavior, what happens when the audience is unknown or difficult to determine, such as during mediated communication? People tend to rely on whatever limited cues may be ''given off'' by the audience (e.g., tone of voice) (Goffman, 1959), as well as their envisioning of the audience (Ong, 1975). Enter the imagined audience.

The imagined audience is the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating, our audience. It is one of the most fundamental attributes of being human (Cooley, 1902). The cognitive guide is ''invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent'' (Freud, 1922, p. 1) as we fantasize about future exchanges, interact with large audiences, and communicate in mediated contexts. The less an actual audience is visible or known, the more individuals become dependent on their imagination. Therefore, people are typically more reliant on the imagined audience during mediated communication, such as letter and email writing or talking on the phone, than in face-to-face settings (Ong, 1975), because of the reduced verbal and nonverbal cues of audience members (Walther, 1996).

Researchers have concluded that the mere imagined audience can be just as influential as the actual audience in determining behavior (Baldwin & Holmes, 1987; Fridlund, 1991). For example, Fridlund (1991) found that participants smiled more,

regardless of their happiness, when they were either watching a movie with a friend or when they believed a friend was watching the same video in another room than when they were alone or thought their friend was partaking in a different activity. He concluded, ''solitary faces occur for the same reasons as public ones, if only because when we are alone we create social interactions in our imaginations'' (p. 238). In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (2006) also highlights the role and importance of our imagination arguing that because it is nearly impossible to determine all of a nation's members, it is the imagination of its existence that is important—an argument that has been extended to the media realm (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), as well as the social media platform Twitter (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011).

Understanding the Imagined Audience's Role During Social Media Use

While people have long engaged with the imagined audience, it is social media's characteristics in combination with its popularity that challenge the average person's understanding of communication, audience, and public (Livingstone, 2005) making the role of the imagined audience and our dependence on it so critical. During face-to-face settings, and even some one-to-one mediated communication, people typically interact with small and explicit audiences relying more on who they can see or hear in the actual audience, rather than their imagination. However, characteristics of social media platforms have altered the size, composition, boundaries, accessibility, and cue availability of our communication partners during everyday interactions making it nearly impossible to determine the actual audience. Such characteristics include the ease of sharing across the Web, the vast amount of available information, and the persistence and archivability of content (boyd, 2007) that make it difficult to tell who is out there and when. An individual may read another's Facebook status update immediately after it is posted, while others may not encounter the same post until months later while perusing through a user's timeline.

The popularity of these services has also given individuals the opportunity to interact with large and diverse audiences—dozens, hundreds, thousands, and sometimes even millions of people. For example, a Pew Internet report found that the Facebook users in its national sample had, on average, 245 Facebook friends (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012). Even on social network sites, where lists of potential audience members exist (boyd & Ellison, 2007), a cognitive limit may dampen the number of people that one can attend to simultaneously (Dunbar, 1992). Confounding the situation further, many social media platforms by default ''collapse'' contexts and audiences that were once physically explicit in the offline realm (boyd, 2010; Meyrowitz, 1985). Who does one attend to if friends, family, colleagues, and coworkers are all in the same actual audience? While media professionals and public figures have long experienced similar audience challenges

(Meyrowitz, 1985), it is now everyday individuals during everyday interactions who must navigate through these challenges and cope with such realities.

The Actual/Imagined Audience Tension

Without being able to know the actual audience, social media users create and attend to an imagined audience for their everyday interactions. The imagined audience construct is worth understanding better because, while we are dependent on the imagination as a guide during social media use, it is the actual audience on the other side of the screen reacting and judging the performance. Therefore, potential tensions between the two audiences may lead to consequential outcomes. The conundrum then becomes how do people's imagined audiences compare to their actual audiences? And what influences the alignment of an individual's perception of the audience with the actual audience? In contemporary society where people have a tendency to want to be well-received and so seek to act appropriately (Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tom Tong, 2008), and where the ''the ability to present oneself has become a critical economic asset'' (Sternberg, 1998, p. 5), a large enough misalignment between one's imagined and actual audience could lead to negative consequences. Take, for example, the repercussions that may result if individuals imagine their friends as their Facebook audience and alter their behaviors to this particular group, but in actuality their audience is broader and includes colleagues and bosses as well. While a misalignment between the imagined and actual audiences in more traditional mediated settings could also be troublesome, such misalignments on social media are even more dangerous since larger audiences means more eyes judging and ready to catch social faux pas. While additional research is needed on the prevalence of actual versus imagined incoordination, misalignments have been documented; many of which have resulted in psychological, social, and economic turmoil such as job loss, reprimands at work, rejections to universities, loss of health insurance benefits, and other life consequences (e.g., Lavrusik, 2010; The Huffington Post, 2009). If the imagined audience plays such a powerful role in determining how and what we communicate to our actual audience during these everyday interactions, it is necessary to understand better what influences its construction. A better understanding of the imagined audience could yield significant insight into peoples' behaviors, struggles, and desires, as well as lead to policies and tools to help everyday users better navigate such spaces.

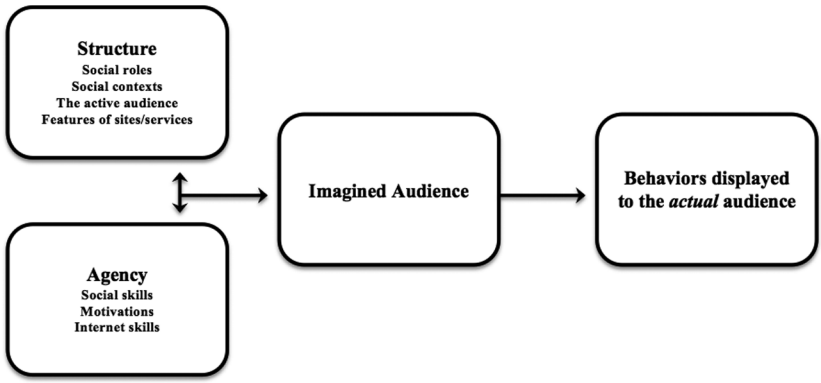
Influences on the Imagined Audience

While Anderson (2006) theorized a ''community'' as the way people think about a nation, research reveals the imagined audience is not a stable construct and varies from people envisioning specific individuals (Cook & Teasley, 2011; Marwick &

boyd, 2010) to communities of people (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Anderson, 2006) to masses or ''a heterogeneous collection of individuals'' (Webster & Phalen, 1997, p. 7). Using Giddens's (1984) basic structurational framework, the following section argues that the variability of an imagined audience and its alignment with the actual audience is generated based on an interaction of macro-level factors (e.g., social norms, roles, and technological infrastructure) and micro-level factors (e.g., motivation, attitude, social skills, and Internet skills). This argument utilizes this framing because of its synthesis of both structure and agent. Evidence reviewed below illustrates the interaction between the structure, or the social and technological environment, and the background characteristics of a social media user, providing support for what Giddens calls ''duality'' in which both micro- and macro-level factors are ''complementary and mutually dependent'' (Hagen, 1999, p. 133).

Previous work has endorsed this approach as a helpful way to understand aspects of the media environment (Webster, 2011), particularly as it relates to the influence on the imagined audience (Hagen, 1999). Ethnographic work on the television industry also illustrates both environmental and individual influences on how television producers imagine audiences, highlighting the use of ''their experiences with audiences from previous programs, their personal projections about who their audience is, and their knowledge of the industry they work in'' (Espinosa, 1982, p. 85). While the agent and structural forces are ''mutually dependent'' (Hagen, 1999, p. 133), I discuss each separately to allow for detailed hypothesizing. Since media professionals, such as authors and movie producers, have incorporated and taken advantage of the phenomenon for quite some time, prior literature focusing on their use of the imagined audience is also included. Figure 1 illustrates a visual representation of the imagined audience process and a synthesis of both macro- and micro-level factors.

Figure 1
Flowchart Identifying the Influences on and Impact of the Imagined Audience



Environmental/Structural Factors

The structural factors featured broadly refer to the social and technological environments related to social media use that may influence the imagined audience. Generally, the social structures help define who should be a part of one's imagined audience and also who could be in one's potential audience. Concurrently, the technological environments are partially responsible for limiting and exposing cues about who is in one's actual audience. These forces in turn then may influence the imagined audience by providing cues and cognitive shortcuts to help users, whether consciously or unconsciously, imagine their audience.

Social Norms Based on Social Roles.

Social norms may be influential because, in a sense, they assert whom one should think about as the imagined audience. For example, those in television programming are pressured to imagine an audience that is reflective of the actual television show audience (Ang, 1991). They in turn collect ''audience research'' through:

> Board meetings, informal conversation and interviews, discussions about programming ideas, scheduling principles, policy statements, research reports, and so on; practices that, in one way or another, ultimately revolve around one main objective: to come to terms with television's invisible addressee. (Ang, 1991, p. 16)

Similarly, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969) piece on argumentative writing emphasizes the need to know the actual audience, a norm that when not followed because of ''ignorance or an unforeseen set of circumstances'' could lead to consequences (p. 20). However, other kinds of writing, like novel authorship, breed a culture of imagining made-up audiences where a successful writer ''can fictionalize in his imagination an audience he has learned to know not from daily life but from earlier writers who were fictionalizing in their imagination audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers'' (Ong, 1975, p. 11). In the Web designer world, Massanari (2010) found that some designers thought of themselves as the prototypical audience while others envisioned made-up personas based on market research.

However, professional norms have evolved based on a set of institutional goals ''often driven by market, rather than humanistic, concerns'' and such concerns and goals are likely different than the average person using the imagined audience to guide interpersonal communication (Massanari, 2010, p. 405). The norms of mainstream social media users and their impact on the imagined audience have not explicitly been studied; however, based on the role social media can play in the development of people's reputations and opportunities, users may feel pressure to present to whomever may actually be in the audience. This is discussed further in the section reflecting upon an agent's goals and motivations for using social media.

Social Norms Based on Social Contexts.

Social norms implicitly created by online services may impact the imagined audience as well. Some social media sites may encourage certain kinds of imagined audiences based on their policies. For example, certain social network sites have policies that encourage users to communicate using their real names, while other sites allow audience members to hide behind pseudonyms. The use of real names may help one's imagined audience to reflect actual potential members, while the use of pseudonyms may limit one's cues about audience members causing them to envision a mass as an audience. Additionally, some sites encourage relationships between members of offline networks of friends and family such as FamilyReunion, while others aim to sustain relationships between strangers connected through hobbies and interests, such as the knitting and crocheting hub Ravelry (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Boyd and Ellison (2007) highlight that sites like LinkedIn and Visible Path target professionals, while others such as MyChurch, Care2, and CafeMom help users find other people with similar interests. Implicit norms about who uses the site may then influence how one comes to think about the site's users. If a user posts content to CozyCot, a social network site and forum targeted at women, it is unlikely (though possible) that one's imagined audience would include a group of males.

The Active Audience.

While a social media user may have a hard time determining who is in the audience, the cues ''given off'' (Goffman, 1959) by the real audience, whether purposefully or unintentionally, may influence the imagined audience (Ang, 1991; Cook & Teasley, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). This feedback can result from analytic tools or sites which provide data on Web site visitors as well as comments left by online passersby. It may also come from offline feedback gathered from friends, family, and co-workers such as through phone calls or face-to-face conversations (Gans, 2004). Cooley (1902) hypothesized the imagined audience included people ''drawn from the accessible environment,'' who are ''likely to resemble the last strong character we have been in contact with'' (pp. 59–60). A qualitative study by Strater and Lipford (2008) involving interviews and observations found that some Facebook users saw the contacts they interacted with the most as their imagined audience. Research on bloggers also identified that active commentators were often included in their imagined audiences (Stern, 2008). Ethnographic work by boyd (2008) captures how audience feedback could impact the imagined audience when one blogger stated:

> What I have is what I think a lot of fiction writers have, which is a readership that I write for that is not the whole readership, and not even representative of the readership, but it's what I aim for. And some of them are actual people ... I know my mom reads my blog. I know SJ and JL read my blog ... I know my exes read my blog. I know my coworkers read my blog.... And so when I blog, I generally have one of those people in mind when I post. (pp. 35–36)

Features of Sites/Services.

As noted above, while the actual audience can provide presence cues, a site's technical structures and affordances, or the ''fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used'' (Norman, 2002, p. 9) can impact the audience as well as cue availability. While social media is a term to describe a wide range of online platforms, the focus is not the different types of platforms. Instead, the focus here is on the features available, or lack thereof, that may impact the actual audience as well as provide or hide clues about the actual audience. For example, each site offers a landscape differing in ''curators'' or algorithms that mediate why, when, and how content gets presented (Hogan, 2010), which can impact who is in one's actual audience. Some services, such as Twitter, broadcast users' posts to all of their followers. Other services, such as Facebook, influence the potential audience by using an algorithm that ultimately decides which contacts will receive users' broadcasted posts.

Each site also has its own unique set of ''audience-feedback mechanisms'' that can share clues about who is in the audience. Such features include, for example, the display of one's connections (e.g., friends lists), analytic or statistical tools that explicitly identify facts about the actual audience, and feedback capabilities for audience members (e.g., the ability to comment). Each site's unique affordance combination may impact how the users of the site imagine their audience. If a technological system does not offer signs about who is in one's audience because it does not provide an outlet for commenting or any analytics on who may be visiting one's content, then the lack of cues may encourage one to envision the audience as a mass. On the other hand, an abundance of cues may lead one to see the audience as those utilizing the feedback mechanisms the most, such as those who comment frequently (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Stern, 2008).

To illustrate how the affordances might impact the imagined audience, consider the features a site may offer when it comes to privacy settings. To an extent, the ability to limit one's audience is dependent on a platform's offerings. Facebook, for example, provides the ''lists'' feature in which users can transmit communication to specified individuals or groups. If a person utilizes this functionality, he or she may be more likely to envision specific audience members or types of users. Or if a user has the technical ability to send a private message to one's significant other, the imagined audience is likely to be the selected individual. If users are not given the ability to control who can access their content, they may be more likely to feel ''constantly visible'' and imagine the audience as a mass (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). In an ethnographic analysis of young girls' blogs, Bortree (2005) found that while teenagers imagined their closest friends as their audience, they also had a vague awareness of a general public beyond this group when they posted content. Other homepage owners whose sites are potentially public spaces have also mentioned a ''mass audience'' (Schau & Gilly, 2003, p. 391). However, it is worth noting that even though some users are aware that anyone can access their posted communication, their imagined audience does not always reflect this

(boyd, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Stern, 2008). While the environment can substantially impact the imagined audience formation, there are other factors at work not explainable by the structural forces presented above. The next sections showcase how the agent can both limit and liberate the ultimate imagined audience outcome.

Individual/Agent Factors

This section describes how an individual's social and psychological characteristics impact the imagined audience. That is, how differences in attitudes, motivations and goals, as well as social and technological skills, may also influence the outcome.

Motivation and Skill for Socially Acceptable Behavior.

The level of concern one has for social approval (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964), how self-aware one is in public (Fenigstein, 1979), and one's ability to notice and interpret the behaviors as well as thoughts and emotions of others (Ickes, 1993) all may play a role in the composition of one's imagined audience. Snyder (1974) theorized that individuals differ in their motivation and ability to appropriately monitor and modify their self-presentation. Snyder (1974) described high self-monitors as individuals who are sensitive to and motivated by external social cues, such as status, moods, and norms. In comparison, he described low self-monitors as those less context-attuned and those who have difficulty interpreting social cues. Low self-monitors are more likely to act based on internal dispositions and personal beliefs.

It may be helpful then to consider how motivation or ability to interpret social cues might impact the imagined audience. Theoretically, high self-monitors' imagined audiences would more likely be reflective of potential audiences; they would be highly attuned to online service norms and any online or offline contextual clues they could garner about the actual audience. High self-monitors who have many contacts or open privacy settings, whether by choice or default, may implement a lowest common denominator strategy (Hogan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2010) in which they envision their ''broadest group of acquaintances'' as the main audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 9). In comparison, low self-monitors and those less concerned with social desirability, may lack the motivation and/or ability to identify and interpret the cues that are available from their environment. Their imagined audience might be a fictionalized ideal group of like-minded individuals, fans, or even themselves. It is worth reiterating here that not everyone has the desire or skill to know who is in the actual audience. This echoes similar findings from Brake (2012) that identified that some bloggers had no ambition to know who was in their actual audience. In fact, they were not even conscious of, or did not articulate an imagined audience, but instead viewed the blogging ''as an end in itself'' (p. 1062). Regardless of the availability of features or social information, there are some users who may be more inclined to visualize an audience independent of the actual

audience. Since social media environments fundamentally obscure actual audience members, such conditions may provoke or entice individuals who tend to, or even wish to, ignore the real audience. For better or for worse, the imagination can then more freely fill in or make up the audience. While the desire or ability to self-monitor was not taken into account in Marwick and boyd's (2010) study on Twitter users, or Cook and Teasley's (2011) work on online photo sharers, both had participants who identified their imagined audiences as containing oneself as well as ''ideal'' members.

Social Media Motivation.

Speaking about audience in relation to the media industry, Hartley (2002) argued, ''the audience is a construction motivated by the paradigm in which it is imagined'' (p. 11). In a news production process account, Gans (2004) found that professional journalists often listed their supervisors as their imagined audience. Their motivation for writing the article was not necessarily appeasing the readers, but instead was pacifying the people in charge of their careers: their bosses. While some everyday users participate on social media platforms to make money and sustain their careers, most people use it for interpersonal communication such as to maintain one's identity, self-presentation, and impression management (boyd, 2006; boyd & Heer, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Strater & Lipford, 2008), self-promote and share projects (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010), maintain relationships (Wohn, Lampe, Wash, Ellison, & Vitak, 2011), seek information about news, people, events, and places (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Madden & Smith, 2010), coordinate events (Wohn, Lampe, Vitak, & Ellison, 2011), raise money or awareness about social causes (Sen, Spyridakis, Amtmann, & Lee, 2010), build social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), find and apply for jobs (Joos, 2008), date (Gibbs et al., 2006), and so on. The context for using social media may then play a role in guiding the imagined audience. For example, a person who wants to promote his or her poetry may conjure up a poetry fan community whereas a person using an online service to communicate with friends may picture a community of friends. Marwick and boyd's (2010) study showed that those Twitter users utilizing the service to maintain ties tended to highlight specific individuals as their imagined audience, like one's friends, whereas others using the tool for a broadcast medium with larger followings sometimes envisioned their audiences as a ''fan base''—even though the tweets from both types of accounts could technically be accessed by anyone. They concluded in their study that one reason for the variation in imagined audience descriptions was because of the variation in uses of the tool as ''a broadcast medium, marketing channel, diary, social platform, and news source'' (p. 9).

Internet Skill.

This brings us to one final noteworthy individual characteristic that may influence the formation of the imagined audience: One's knowledge and ability to use the In-

ternet and social media platforms in particular (Eshet-Alkalai & Amichai-Hamburger, 2004; Hargittai, 2008; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). While the concept of imagined audiences is not limited to interaction on the Internet (after all, scholars have referenced the concept for more than a century), being able to imagine an audience for the online sphere may be influenced by one's technical expertise. Regardless of how socially savvy one is, or how motivated one is to know the actual audience, navigating the social web requires a specific set of knowledge and technical Internet competence. Communication via social media forces an interdependent relationship with the medium; users must have a basic understanding of not only which tools are offered, but also how to use them. Therefore, even if the service could provide all the necessary resources to determine the actual audience, users would be limited by their knowledge of where to find the tools, based on a site's design, and also how to use the tools.

Consider privacy setting use. One who is adept at adjusting settings and knowledgeable about the extent of information dissemination would arguably be more cognizant about who was in his or her potential audience. For example, if the settings are public, and one is aware of this, then he or she may envision a mass audience or the lowest common denominator; if the settings are such that content is shown only to family members, the user may instead imagine it to be family or even specific family members. Research evidences users' attempts to selectively control their potential audience by utilizing the site's privacy management tools (boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Cook & Teasley, 2011; Strater & Lipford, 2008). For instance, nearly two-thirds of social network site users have reported adjusting their profile's privacy settings to control who can access their information (Madden & Smith, 2010). By contrast, those without knowledge of what is available and how to find and use such privacy tools may have difficulty determining even the potential audience. A lack of knowledge in users' privacy settings could lead to an overestimation of audience reach, so that they believe their data are accessible to everyone. Or, arguably more dangerous, it may cause them to underestimate their information reach, exposing personal data beyond their imagined audience. Strater and Lipford's (2008) study on Facebook users' self-disclosure and privacy habits demonstrated the latter. One participant admitted he posted his phone number and address "for friends to stay in touch" (p. 115). However, when confronted with the fact that his entire network could view this information, he acted surprised and "immediately" altered his privacy settings to reflect better his imagined audience of friends.

The Imagined Audience Moving Forward

The goal of this article is to help articulate a framework for a construct that has significant impact on the way people use social media. While it has touched upon several areas worthy of investigation and incorporated applicable support, future work will need to expand on the relationships between the environmental and

individual factors on the imagined audience. Studies will need further inquiry into the variation in imagined audiences between people, as well as how an individual's own conceptualizations may differ as the context changes (Espinosa, 1982). Scholarly work can help identify whether the aforementioned variables influence the imagined audience with equal strength, or more likely, which variables may be more influential on the outcome. Similarly, researchers can help identify other factors that may be at work. A better understanding between imagined and actual audiences is also needed to identify the misalignment prevalence and any potential aids or obstructions to the imagining process. The hope then is that this framework will inspire or generate future studies.

One of the biggest challenges in exploring the imagined audience though, along with any cognitive or attitudinal measure, is assessing the concept. How does one measure an individual's imagined audience? Can people articulate such a phenomenon to researchers? What about those with unconscious conceptualizations? How can one determine if the imagined audience fluctuates between people, time, and spaces? How do users' imagined audiences compare to their actual audiences? These are the types of questions researchers will need to explore in more depth. Currently, the two most used methods for imagined audience inquiry are to (1) experimentally manipulate the imagined audience and measure its effects on participants' actions (Fridlund, 1991; Rader, 2010) and (2) explicitly ask subjects who was in the imagined audience (usually retroactively) (Brake, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2010). As with any self-report method, issues related to validity, social desirability, and memory should be treated with caution. The self-report technique may also prove problematic if the imagined audience has the ability to fluctuate between when the content was posted and how one might interpret his or her imagined audience during reflection. Relatedly, since most research now explores the imagined audience at one point in time and on one type of platform or service (Brake, 2012; Gruzd et al., 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Stern, 2008), future work should assess the construct across multiple services and platforms to see how envisioning audiences may alter between different environments and individuals.

Some scholars have suggested that one can get a sense of another's imagined audience by judging the style and content of one's communication (Berkenkotter, 1981; Strohm, 1983); thus, content analysis of one's digital traces, such as online posts, might provide supplemental support for imagined audiences. However, researchers must be careful not to wrongfully assume an individual's imaginings. Likely, future assessments will need to involve a combination of both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative methods, including observations of social media communication, content analysis, and interviews with users, are needed to identify general behaviors, perceptions, and strategies. These may also help us to understand better the relationship, and potential misalignments between imagined and actual audiences. Survey questions generated from this data can then be used to assess patterns of imagined audience outcomes on larger samples.

Harnessing the Imagined Audience

Future research in this area may provide insight into social training and/or technological solutions to help everyday people navigate through mediated publics—particularly for those who may be at risk because their imagined audiences do not match up closely enough with their actual audiences. Such solutions could build on established strategies that professionals have used to manage similar unknown audience situations in the past. Some industries have spent lots of time and money attempting to understand who is on the other side of the screen. While not all of these strategies may be economically feasible nor time efficient for everyday social media users, such as focus groups, there are many other industry-learned strategies that people may be underutilizing. For example, Berkenkotter (1981) identified that successful publishing scholars were much more likely to ''internalize'' the audience than a layman or student writer (p. 395). These scholars were constantly asking themselves what the reader might think or ask. Likewise, some in the Web design industry create ''personas'' or fictionalized individuals based on empirical research to help them think realistically about their users beyond ''users'' (Massanari, 2010). One potential strategy then is to focus on making users more cognizant of their imagined audience and teaching them techniques to help them gain more insight on the make-up of their potential audience. This might include, for example, teaching users to take advantage of a site's analytics functionality or educating users on understanding and reviewing their privacy settings before posting.

Similarly, research on the impacts of the technological infrastructure and Internet skill could provide designers and developers insight into what information users need to know to better manage their performances (Hagen, 1999). For example, designers could create more tools to help bring awareness of the actual audience by providing more audience cues or reminders, making privacy settings more dynamic and user-friendly to fluctuate with the changes of users' imagined audience, and giving users more control in accessing their ideal audience. In the end, it is about empowering users to have more control by giving them the tools and knowledge they need to interact in these spaces in desired ways. If people have the right skills and the environment affords it, they can more accurately reach the ideal imagined audience, or they can at least manipulate their imagined audience to appropriately fit the specified context. While scholars have studied many imagined audience aspects, this framework provides a cohesive synthesis of the construct's characteristics identifying its role as a guide; highlighting its relationship to the actual social media audience; and showcasing how environmental and individual factors influence its ultimate composition.

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