

Privacy and Reputational Risk Among UK Self-Employed Professionals on LinkedIn and Facebook

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Section 1: Who I Was When I Started

My current research investigates how UK self-employed, client-facing professionals reconcile privacy and reputational risk with continued social media use. At Beatnik Digital Limited in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I found engagement figures, click-through rates and consumer surveys particularly convincing as evidence in digital marketing and business development. Figures helped me compare campaigns, explain performance to clients and make decisions. I trusted them partly because they worked in that setting, before considering whether they could answer my research question. This kind of environment emphasized information that could be acted on immediately over information that was valuable from an analytical standpoint over a longer period. A dashboard simplified complex activity into manageable indicators, and I learned to associate that simplification with clarity. But to select an indicator is already a decision about what matters. Engagement can indicate an account is still active, but it doesn't necessarily indicate whether the activity is driven by satisfaction, necessity, resignation or something else. I had allowed the usefulness of a measure to substitute for adequacy as an explanation. Schön's (1983) account of professional reflection helps me to see the practical reasoning at work in this habit, while Crotty (1998) makes its epistemological implications more difficult to ignore.

My professional preference for numerical evidence resembles Alien A, positivism, in the handbook's Seven Aliens framework. I valued measurable regularities and their potential to inform decisions. This describes a tendency in my professional reasoning, rather than the design of my first proposal. My tobacco retail proposal was already interpretivist and sought to understand lived experience through IPA. Kuhn's (1970) disciplinary matrix can help explain how shared values and examples can make a certain kind of evidence seem natural. Campaign reports were professional models; they showed me what a good answer looked like before I asked whether that answer applied to every research problem. The emerging social media study challenged the hierarchy of evidence. Continued participation with concern became a question of meaning rather than just a mismatch between measured variables. And my research thinking moved to how people justify continued use. I now think of interview accounts as situated interpretations made within the framework of a research relationship. Weber's (1949) focus on understanding meaningful social action underpins this orientation. This does not mean that quantitative data are deceptive nor that qualitative interviews are a direct entry into some inner truth. Each raises its own opportunities and limitations of understanding.

Moving away from the application of quantitative methods within my professional activity requires that I look at the ways in which knowledge can be created through research differently.

Specifically, I will have to consider the meanings that risk and disclosure take for the respondents and what effect my questions have on their answers. Context and credibility are the criteria with which Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide me with the means to make such an assessment rather than those used for campaign reporting. Nevertheless, one postulate holds true; research needs to help understand real professional practices. I still find the possibility to receive decision-making data useful although I doubt if useful data need to be represented through quantitative measures or advice. The useful data can be contained in an account of why the decisions are difficult to make and why a particular recommendation goes beyond the data. Being a marketer myself, I find recommendations attractive and should be critical in this regard.

As a professional, I always make sure to eliminate all the uncertainties to come to some conclusions. In this case, however, I should refrain from doing so, as my reasoning needs to take into consideration the limitations of my interpretation and put this issue under question. I need to be suspicious of the account of my personal development since the good story of changing paradigms may create a false impression regarding the completeness of the process. The practical application of the suggested approach would include my reaction to the situation when the interview does not result in making a clear recommendation. I might continue to believe that an ambiguous account is less useful because of the need to plan in terms of the client's expectations. It demonstrates my unspoken assumption, which cannot be used as a reason to make the account simpler.

Section 2: My Relationship with Theory and Literature

My engagement with theory has been shaped by what I could translate into marketing decisions. Theories related to consumer behaviour, technology adoption and rational choice were all appealing since they provided insights which could turn into segments or priorities. Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model is a good example of such theoretical knowledge which I found appealing in terms of its usefulness and adoption. Yet, explaining the adoption process does not mean that one can explain further participation in a situation where a person feels concerned about something. Primarily, Privacy Calculus Theory provided a good understanding of how to address this topic. According to Dinev and Hart (2006), people make decisions related to privacy concerns in terms of risk perceptions and expected benefits. This terminology appealed to me since it allowed considering continued use of services despite concerns. Also, the attractiveness of this theory can be explained by my preference to see a

problem as a choice between different considerations. Barth and de Jong's (2017) review of the privacy paradox examines discrepancies between expressed privacy concerns and online behaviour. This challenges my assumption that concern should lead directly to protective action. It does not establish that every participant is inconsistent or that privacy calculus is false. Eitiveni et al. (2023) extend privacy calculus to LinkedIn using questionnaire data and structural equation modelling in Indonesia. Their study provides a platform-specific example of model testing, but its context and purpose differ from my proposed UK interviews. I must ask about concrete disclosure situations before interpreting them through a calculus, rather than prompting participants to justify an assumed exchange. Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009) help me distinguish theoretical resources from my developing conceptual map.

The concept of digital resignation brings a challenge to this notion of freedom of choice. As Draper and Turow (2019) note, digital resignation is due to the conditions created by corporations, which allows me to think about the influence of the platform's architecture on the choices of users. But still, I should not simply substitute one preferred narrative with another one. People face restrictions in some situations and have an opportunity to make choices in other situations. Considering each situation of the willingness to share information in the future because of a lack of freedom of choice would be neglecting people's agency. However, my previous scepticism toward phenomenology and hermeneutics also requires attention. Their emphasis on contextual meaning opposes my desire to find patterns quickly. The corporate practice made me associate speed with expertise and small sample size with poor evidence. Evidence must be considered in the light of the research objectives as noted by Crotty (1998). The objective is to know how professionals interpret reconciliation. I believe that experiences of risks are multiple in their situated meanings and that knowledge is constructed through an interplay between participants and the researcher. Guba and Lincoln (1994) use the term constructivism. I use interpretivism as my research orientation, supported by constructivist assumptions, rather than attribute the label interpretivism to their framework. According to Crotty (1998), my research orientation is interpretive, while Lim (2023) gives guidance on interpreting differences between paradigms in business research. Aguzzoli et al. (2024) look at the assumptions underpinning paradigms of qualitative international business research and remind me to make my assumptions explicit rather than imply them from using interviews. These literature sources give legitimacy to my design reasoning, but without equating interpretivism to the maturity of researchers. A survey can answer questions of associations or prevalence; mine ask for meanings. As per Braun & Clarke (2006; 2019), I must take into consideration interpretation when developing themes.

A further alternative view was proposed by Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. Initially, I treated privacy concerns alongside continued social media use as evidence of dissonance. This interpretation was stronger than the evidence supported. Concern and continued use do not, by themselves, establish a psychological conflict. The subject might give different reasons or see no inconsistency at all. Literature also helps me consider who gains visibility through the preferred models. In this regard, the work of Berger & Luckmann (1966) draws my attention to social construction of meaning and Goffman (1959) makes me more aware of self-presentation. The two perspectives provide an understanding of professional disclosure as relational practice instead of individual action. Van Dijck (2013) further relates the performance of identity to the case of Facebook and LinkedIn. Yet, the distinction between professional and personal websites should remain tentative since participants may be using Facebook for commercial purposes and LinkedIn for social connections. The perspectives considered in my reading can be considered digitally vulnerable or marginalised perspectives only to a limited extent. This represents a problem with my reading rather than a lack of these approaches in the academic literature surrounding the topic. I am drawn to those people who are already established practitioners and to that literature that I find easy to use in my business activity. As Hammersley (1995) says, it is essential to examine the interests of the researcher. It is important for me to be able to justify my unwillingness to embrace certain literature. The reasons for refusing to use literature can be poor grounds or the different context or something that contradicts my views. Each case is special. Refusal to use certain literature simply because it does not provide any clear guidelines is an embodiment of my business standards. It is important for me to be able to differentiate between the application of the theory to understand some things and the application of the theory to understand the meaning of the story. Privacy calculus will be able to alert me to problems and opportunities whereas digital resignation will make me question control. None of these options will lead to a resolution. In the case where the respondent defines continuation of use as 'routine', I would need to first understand what is meant by routine here, before determining whether resignation or something else provides the explanation. It is critical that my conceptual framework be malleable enough to include accounts that are challenging to it. The IPA approach was chosen in the tobacco proposal because of its focus on experience. Reflexive thematic analysis is used in this pilot and main study to interpret accounts. This shift needs justification in terms of research questions.

Section 3: The Evolution of My Research Focus

My first proposed topic concerned how UK tobacco retail employees understand and enact ethical responsibility while balancing sales expectations, regulation and customer relationships. The interpretivist approach was taken for this topic along with the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to capture the experience. As such, even at the start, the search for meaning rather than the compliance rate was taken. This is because my research journey cannot be simply explained as a shift from quantitative to qualitative research. Despite my familiarity with numbers in my professional environment, my first suggested topic has already raised doubts about the possibility of measuring the experiences of people.

The subsequent pilot shifted the context to social media users who continue using platforms despite recognising risks. Across these topics, I can see a continuing interest in how people interpret competing pressures and explain their actions. The setting and participants changed, as did the proposed analytical approach: the pilot used reflexive thematic analysis rather than IPA. Social media also connected the inquiry more directly with my digital marketing background. This connection helps explain what I notice but does not establish participants' motives. The tobacco proposal provides the starting point for this reflection, rather than evidence about social media users or a finding transferred to the current study. My pilot study involved recruiting six adult social media users via professional and social networks, conducting interviews using a semi-structured approach, as well as including a follow up on what changes would need to be made. The data from the interviews was transcribed, and then I applied reflexive thematic analysis where I created participant audit trails prior to comparing accounts. The difference is that the pilot study involved a wider pool of users as compared to the self-employed professional population in the UK that I want to target for Part 2.

There was a particular issue in the coding process of P01's answer to the question of benefit-risk assessment. The individual switched the discussion back to political voice and justified the continued participation by hope and moral commitment. Despite the request to provide a calculation, the account stressed the significance of the meaning behind public speaking. Instead of treating the issue in terms of cost-benefit balance, the new code emphasized the moral motivation and privacy boundary. However, it does not mean that privacy calculus cannot explain the phenomenon, as my question may lead to a preconceived explanation before the individual defines the situation. The task for Part 2 is to first ask about the incident and its importance and then see if theory applies to that story.

The revised study will be conducted among self-employed professionals in the UK, with their practice being related to clients and having to depend on online visibility. In such a way, the concept of professional dependence becomes more concrete without being treated as already well-known among the target population. I plan to select 15 to 20 participants in a purposeful way through my professional connections and LinkedIn and Facebook communities. Screening will ensure that all three criteria will be met for all participants. Interviews will be held via Microsoft Teams. Concentration on LinkedIn and Facebook allows giving clearer boundaries to the study. Van Dijck (2013) enables me to explore identity across platforms; however, names of platforms cannot replace description of practice. Thus, I should ask how the participant is using each platform and if there are any overlapping audiences.

This openness must also be reflected in the research questions. Research Question 3 could be altered to read, ‘What insights into existing theories of continued social media use does the evidence provided by participants’ accounts reveal?’ Both privacy calculus theory and digital resignation may direct my analysis without precluding any findings. Research Question 4 will continue to concern itself with the types of reconciliation which may provide the basis for a provisional typology. I must interpret the accounts of participants before making any theoretical linkages and allow one individual to present differing reactions under different situations.

Assessing the prevalence of privacy issues is a separate research strategy altogether. The interview methodology that I have suggested is not going to tell us anything about the prevalence of these issues in the population, nor about any prediction of behaviour or validation of activity on the platforms. This approach will allow me to conduct contextual analysis of the accounts of the participants and generate a provisional typology. This typology will help organize the ways of reconciling oneself rather than place people into boxes and predict their future behaviour. It does not mean that questions of prevalence do not matter for other kinds of research. My remaining challenge is to distinguish curiosity from confirmation. Marketing experience makes me attentive to persuasion and habitual use, but it does not establish why a participant continues using a platform. I will keep a record of revised questions, discarded assumptions and interpretations I retain. Finlay (2002) supports examining my influence as part of the inquiry. The value of this reflection depends on whether it changes how I listen and analyse. The term reconciliation itself calls for critical analysis as well. The interviewees might talk about a compromise between concerns and uses that is an unsolved tension or normal functioning that does not constitute a problem for them. I should not insist on there being a

reconciled interpretation at the end of the interview. Dependence on online presence should be analysed as well.

Section 4: Positionality Power and Research Relationships

My background in digital marketing and business development gives me some familiarity with participants' work, but it does not make me an insider in every profession. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) and Hellawell (2006) help me view this position as variable. Shared terms such as visibility, trust and professionalism may conceal different meanings. I need to ask what these mean in a particular situation rather than assume that commercial experience gives me immediate understanding. My Bangladeshi professional background and position as a doctoral researcher in the UK may shape how I interpret self-promotion and the boundary between private and professional life. England (1994) directs attention to the situated researcher. Cultural identity cannot explain every response or excuse my assumptions. I need to request context and notice when I treat a familiar business practice as universal. Power is unequal and may change during the process of interviewing. Participants get to choose what information they share, and they may have more knowledge about some aspects compared to mine. I am the one who can ask certain questions and interpret the information afterwards. Being a member of the university community, I also possess some power. This is when Berger (2015) comes in handy.

At the end of the P01 pilot interview, the participant highlighted that I had repeated information without asking for elaboration on the subject. They encouraged me to pay closer attention and ask follow-up questions. In this case, the participant exerted their authority by critiquing my interviewing skills, while I was in control of the interview guide and further analysis. It became clear that having a formal position does not necessarily mean being better at the task than another person. This feedback helped identify limitations of considering the interview process as one of completing items from the list. For Part 2, I will follow the participant's narrative through open probes and will refrain from asking repeated questions. Also, I will pay attention to the shift of direction in response to feedback or expertise of the participant. Professional networking for recruitment involves relational coercion. The reason a participant might respond is to assist a professional contact rather than be interested in being a part of the research. A professional mediator will be able to facilitate access but not give consent on behalf of other participants. My invitation will provide personal access without having the gatekeepers point out the person that has refused access. Mercer (2007) will allow me to analyse familiarity

apart from regarding it as an access tool. Interviewing may lead to professional performance. Participants may be inclined to provide responsible risk management since they recognize the fact that I have a marketing background that amounts to an assessment. Goffman (1959) will help me analyse the above performance as a part of the social interaction. I will pose questions that involve practical experiences and decisions without praising their response.

My industry knowledge can also lead me to translate an account into familiar terminology too quickly. Headland, Pike and Harris (1990) help distinguish insider and outsider perspectives. I will preserve participants' wording in notes, consider alternative readings and explain the movement from coding to themes. Their account and my interpretation need not be identical, but any difference requires justification. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize the need for transparency in analysis and sufficient description of context to allow assessment of transferability. These measures need to enhance my understanding rather than just show my compliance. Rose (1997) reminds us that reflexivity cannot ensure complete insight into my position. Discussion with the supervisor may question my interpretation, but agreement does not validate it. Reflexive thematic analysis requires me to justify my interpretation and consider how my professional confidence impacts the conversation and resulting account. This analysis process should also occur while writing. The excerpt may seem like evidence that confirms the theory that I was trying to prove because I took away the context in which the answer was written. Braun & Clarke (2019) can assist in analysing how these excerpts provide evidence for a particular theme. Context analysis, differences between stories, and avoiding overstating provisional types should be ensured. The participants can correct my facts or warn me about any risk of disclosing information. Agreement cannot guarantee objectiveness of any interpretation. I must consider disagreements and explain any interpretation that I still accept. My Microsoft Teams tool will determine not only the mode of access but also the nature of the research relationship. Participants might be able to join in from locations in which colleagues or relatives might hear them talk, and the recording process itself may impact the topics they feel comfortable talking about. I should clarify the setup and ask them to pick a proper one without taking for granted that all of them have some degree of privacy. My task will be simply to make room for them to talk without displaying my knowledge.

Section 5: Ethical Tensions in My Study

The proposed study brings out ethical issues since the data that will be used to analyse the reconciliation process of professionals can reveal things that they would like to keep secret.

While consent, pseudonymization, and secure storage are the commitments in the proposal, these measures do not resolve the dilemma. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) identify procedural ethics and ethical dilemmas in practice. In the process of recruitment, interviewing and representing the participants, the more one seeks to protect the participant, the less the data that one can use to analyse the problem. There are three dilemmas that I must consider.

The first tension is about the interrelation between an insightful description and deductive identification. A combination of occupation, client conditions, and platform activity can lead to identification even without the name. An unusual quote can be found online. The reporting of a vulnerable account would repeat the reputational risk being studied, but the elimination of all contexts would make it harder to interpret the risk. I will make sure to avoid the collection of any unnecessary business or client information and determine the relevance of information in the reported accounts. When necessary, I will generalize a non-essential characteristic, remove content, or paraphrase an excerpt, while still providing its meaning and reason for reporting the account. I will not rely on the publicly available nature of the information as a good enough reason for the collection and use of social media data. The latter must be ethically justified within the study's design.

The second tension concerns access and voluntary participation. Professional networks make recruitment feasible, but a contact may feel obliged to help or expect marketing advice in return. I must make clear that participation is separate from business services. Private invitations and a right to decline without giving a reason will protect choice, even if this makes recruitment slower. Voluntariness should be sustained throughout the interview process. The person may agree in the beginning but may feel uncomfortable when talking about the client's conflict or a breach of privacy in the past. The option to skip a question, take a break, or to withdraw at a mutually agreed upon point will be explained using the information and consent process. Any sudden pause will need judgment rather than persistent questioning. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) have made such an observation of moments analytically significant. I should not presume that the polite respondent will say explicitly when he is feeling uncomfortable.

The third tension involves the role of DBA and representation of the participants. The suggested typology and professional guidelines can help in making the results clear; however, terms like “resigned” or “rationalising” can imply deficiency in the skills of the participants. Moreover, it will shift the locus of the problem from the circumstances of the platform to personal coping mechanisms. Hammersley (1995) highlights the need to ask whose interest the study serves. Having a background in marketing poses another problem: the insights into reconciling can be turned into tactics of retaining involvement despite concerns. It will need an

explicitly defined ethical path, not just improvement of platform performance. I will take the typology to be a tentative account of reconciliatory forms, leaving room for exceptions and overlap between responses. I must determine whether the proposed guidance offers more choice to participants or simply prompts further involvement. Where a strikingly labelled account distorts the account, I must stick to the whole picture.

However, even my development process can generate an ethical tension in the matter of time and depth. There is pressure from the dissertation deadline to recruit people quickly, conduct all interviews and present my conclusions, although the needs of the participants might mean more time or elimination of certain data. The problem arises when a professional provides me with a highly relevant example that would be perfect to back up my thesis but at the same time, would cause damage to the relations with the client. The academic relevance is not enough reason to keep it. It is impossible for me to predict every possible future use of the results. The agreed reporting guidelines mitigate certain risks but do not provide answers to all ethical questions. These decisions should be left open for review in the Part 2 ethics procedure of the university. P01 cases also illustrate the tension around reporting in this portfolio. An explanation of political influences, personal relationships and platform behaviour would add more clarity to the reflection but would also create more risks of identification. For the purpose of maintaining a balance between showing the context of the reflection and protecting my identity, I kept the code of the participant and those parts of information that were required for the description of my learning process.

Section 6: I as a Developing Researcher

From the pilot study, there emerge three important areas of development. Firstly, I need to slow down the process from going from an account to an explanation. From the P01 case, it is clear how quickly a question that appears to be a trade-off may lead my thinking. I will do my familiarization separate from the coding, develop a separate memo for each account and keep all contradictions while doing a comparison between the cases.

Second, I need to improve probing and being theoretical in my analysis. The feedback from P01 highlighted the fact that there were instances where I did not probe on issues which could be used to further explore the question. I will modify my interview guide based on specific instances, prepare my open-ended probes and theoretical expectations prior to conducting interviews.

Third, I need to examine positionality through specific interactions. After each interview, I will note assumptions of shared knowledge, changes in who directed the conversation and how my professional background influenced my responses. Rose (1997) reminds me that complete self-awareness is impossible. Progress will therefore mean making decisions open to scrutiny and changing them when an account exposes a limitation, rather than presenting professional expertise as a guarantee of understanding.

Before the process of recruiting participants, I will compare the issues identified above with the interview guide and ethics guidelines. Following the initial interviews, I will test the possibility of getting an unexpected account from the participants and the ability of my memos to explain interpretation shifts.

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