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## LIFE, CULTURE AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE SOFTWARE INDUSTRY: THE DISCOURSE OF “FULL SELFHOOD” AMONG TECH PROFESSIONALS

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### Background

In the midst of rhetoric about the emancipatory, democratizing potential of online platforms that dates back to the founding of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee, my research investigates subjectivity among the people behind the platforms. Scholars such as Safiya Umoja Noble (2018; 2013), Rena Bivens and Oliver Haimson (2016), and Judy Wajcman (2010; 2015) have exposed the significant role that homogenous workforces play in inequities that materialize on platforms themselves. Additionally, Ruha Benjamin (2019) has revealed how workplace discourses about so-called neutral tech for “all” users are connected to decision-making that further excludes marginalized groups on online platforms. Considering the ubiquity of online platforms, and the power that many platform-based companies hold, little ethnographic research has uncovered precisely how inequities, or their common antonym inclusions, are negotiated by employees in these everyday settings. It should be noted that by “platforms” I refer to online spaces and services that “host public expression, store it on and serve it up from the cloud, organize access to it through search and recommendation, or install it onto mobile devices” (Gillespie 2017, 1). My research focuses on professional settings in the software industry involved in the development, maintenance, and/or optimization mobile applications. With the present study I investigate a specific industry discourse related to how professional contexts within software are addressing “inclusion” within their workforces. Specifically, it has become commonplace for software organizations in North America to celebrate the notion that individuals can bring their “full” selves to work, a sentiment echoed in cultural discourses about inclusion at work. Such discourses offer a particularly compelling promise about creating space for employees who are underrepresented within homogenous workforces, yet, I argue that these initiatives can have unintended consequences. Specifically, calling people to bring their “full” selves to professional settings can present multiple challenges in contexts that have largely been built for people who occupy a privileged positionalities. This topic is significant to examine in the North American tech industry. Not only does this sector wield considerable influence over its users, it has also celebrated informal, playful professional settings as that which help to

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facilitate bringing the “full self” to work. That is, having areas to play, relax, and rejuvenate oneself are thought help create space for people to bring their “full” selves to work. While perhaps well-meaning, I argue that this discourse has a range of consequences for everyday inclusions and inequities. The aim of the present paper is to begin to investigate how the discourse about “full selfhood” is negotiated among professional, salaried employees working at software companies.

## **Methods**

Using an intersectional framework, the present study draws from data from recent ethnographic fieldwork at professional software settings in Canada including at a workplace, large-scale conferences and multiple industry events, analyzing the discourse of “full selfhood” within the sector. The study applies thematic analysis to data collected from several months of participant observation and interviews in Toronto and Vancouver. My sources of data include field notes, interview transcripts, and a collection of various online communication among professionals working in the software sector. Please note that my specific field sites, interviewee identities, and related details will remain confidential, and I have altered certain details to protect the confidentiality of the people and sites involved. Moreover, the findings reflect my multi-sited fieldwork rather than a single site or group.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The push for tech companies to incorporate fun and leisure at work as seen in games rooms, health and wellness, and onsite exercise facilities encourages employees in the industry to celebrate work as a core aspect of their subjectivities, and purports to create space for them to bring their “full selves” to the workplace and other professional spaces. Yet, while the individuals I studied were often called to be their “full selves” in the online and offline settings of their places of work and throughout the broader industry, this could be a frustrating discourse, in particular for those who were underrepresented. Relatedly, several people reported feeling angst associated with navigating informal professional contexts, which I argue reflects a double bind for those who are not part of the dominant group within this sector. On the one hand employees were attempting to show that they were bringing their “full selves” to work, yet, at the same time, the selves that were most valued were those that tended to easily “fit in” within the industry. Moreover, the software industry includes professional settings in which people work at a phrenetic pace in an “always on” culture, and are at times expected to cultivate online profiles that include followers from public and private spheres of their lives. In such contexts, performing subjectivity can be an exhaustive process that involves continuous assessment, further complexifying how to perform the self. I argue that there is a deep, albeit unintentional, paradox within this discourse. Specifically, it calls subjects to perform “full selfhood” within spaces that are dominated by privileged identities, and in which “ideal” subjectivities often correspond to these positionalities. Thus, this discourse leads to tensions surrounding the subjectivities individuals are called to have, and those they are able to take up and sustain, which bears down upon self-understanding with political consequences.

Considering the retention issues found within the North American tech sector for underrepresented groups, discourses concerning subjectivity can have a meaningful influence

on the ways of being that are constructed as desirable within the industry. This relation between industry culture and subjectivity is a less widely understood aspect of “inclusion,” and one that could open up important insights for workplace (in)equities. Moreover, this topic also relates to how power circulates within online platforms. As Benjamin (2019) argues, technologists inscribe judgements into the platforms they work on, while the erroneous assumption circulates around these tech products being somehow neutral. What such an assumption overlooks is the fact that technologists are social beings working within societies structured by white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy, rather than being isolated actors free from judgements (ibid). Norms around subjectivity in professional software settings can influence the judgements that become coded within platforms themselves.

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