

Chapter 42

Debranding Digital Identity: Personal Branding and Identity Work in a Networked Age

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the rhetoric of empowerment surrounding the recent phenomenon of personal branding and calls into question the idea that personal identities can and should be managed through corporate marketing processes in a Web 2.0 world. Starting with an examination of the historical basis of the personal branding movement and a critical analysis of the branding metaphor, the article then proceeds to show how the three stages of the conventional branding process on which most personal branding advice is based on, provide an inadequate framework for understanding the complex nature of identity work in a networked age.

INTRODUCTION

For better or worse, the social web has enticed most of us to live our lives more openly than any other generation before us. This phenomenon has led to an increased blurring of the line between our personal and professional identities. Our every online behavior; our blog posts, tweets, and status updates now all leave behind a digital footprint – an electronic trail capable of shaping how others come to see us (Madden, Fox, Smith, & Vitak, 2007). In recent years, scores of career advice and self-help books have been published extolling the virtues of turning this haphazardly created footprint into a strategically designed and managed brand. An entire industry of personal branding experts, coaches, or gurus has emerged, offering training workshops and one-on-one counsel on how to create an identity narrative aimed at promoting oneself in a crowded labor market (Kheder, 2015). The common thread that runs through all of the advice dispensed in these books and by these consultants is the idea that the need for a personal

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brand is an inevitable feature of life in the hyperconnected 21st century. This idea of a personal brand as an unquestionable necessity has become so embedded in our thinking that colleges now offer classes on the topic (Sacks & Graves, 2012; Wetsch, 2012) and university career service departments all over the country are encouraging students to craft their own brands. Even Fortune 500 companies are bringing in consultants to teach their employees the tenets of good personal branding (Friedman, 2015).

In light of the pervasiveness of this discourse and of the wide-spread enthusiasm concerning the benefits of personal branding, the question that rarely gets asked is whether this optimism is indeed warranted and whether the need for a personal brand is indeed an inescapable consequence of participation in the labor market and the social web. Considering the increasing pressure placed on colleges and universities to demonstrate return-on-investment and the employability of their student body, it comes as no surprise that even institutions built upon the idea of critical thinking would have been quick to embrace this rhetoric of necessity without questioning its validity. But does a personal brand indeed empower individuals to stand out in the current market place? What are the assumptions underlying the idea that personal identities can be managed through corporate marketing processes? Are those processes even valid in a Web 2.0 world? This essay will seek to answer these questions by taking a critical look at the marketing tools and processes proclaimed to turn us into brands and by calling into question the rhetoric of necessity and empowerment that has become almost synonymous with the personal branding movement.

THE PERSONAL BRANDING PHENOMENON

Brooks and Anumudu (2015) consider personal branding “the deployment of individual’s identity narratives for career and employment purposes” (p. 24). Vallas and Cummins (2015) similarly argue that the discourse of personal branding “invites employees to reconceive themselves as capitalist firms in their own right, establishing their own personal “brand” as a means of creating and managing demand for their own services” (p. 295). Schawbel (2007), a self-proclaimed millennial career and workplace expert, links the concept to a person’s online reputation and explains that it allows entrepreneurs to present “themselves as brands that communicate different values, personalities, and images to their audiences” (p. 62). It is important to note that in all of these definitions, personal branding is portrayed as a means of establishing a professional identity specifically designed to improve one’s employment prospects. Personal branding is thus understood as a response to a volatile labor market, high unemployment rates, and increased job competition (Brooks & Anumudu, 2015). In other words, the era of the personal brand is seen as having been ushered in by a series of detrimental external economic forces.

Interestingly, Peters (1997) who is widely recognized as having popularized the concept of personal branding, never attributed the need for a personal brand to such unfavorable labor market conditions. On the contrary, Peters seems to locate the impetus for this concept in an opportunity rather than a threat. That opportunity, according to Peters, lies in the emergence of the Net and the realization that “anyone can have a web site” Writing in 1997, he argues that “the Web makes the case for branding more directly than any packaged good or consumer product ever could” What is important to note in this regard is the fact that Peters is referring to the static web sites of the Web 1.0 era, not the social sites which characterize much of today’s Internet experience. This means that the concept of personal branding was conceived in a pre-Web 2.0 world set in a vastly different media landscape and governed by dramatically different rules of message control. As the current popularity of the personal branding industry shows, this however, has not prevented branding advocates from applying Peters’ advice to the social web.

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