



Reinventing Personal Branding Building a Personal Brand through Content on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

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The study explores the phenomenon of personal branding on social media and in particular, examines how YouTubers create their personal brands online. The explorative and inductive approach has involved qualitative content analysis of a total of 72 videos produced by four successful YouTubers during several years of their social media presence. The findings reveal three major stages of the personal branding process, which are not sequential, but rather, were found to run in parallel over time: loyalty to personal brand profile, promotion of multiple social media accounts and addressing the audience and encouraging co-creation. The personal brand content is found to comprise such elements as the personality of the YouTuber, typical topics, the tone of voice, environment (setting) as well as product brands. Among its key features are clarity, consistency, and authenticity, resembling those of a product/service brand. The study proves the applicability of classical principles of product branding and typology of consumer-brand relationships as well as brand meaning co-creation to the personal branding phenomenon, while at the same time highlighting the complex nature of this phenomenon as being "born global", purposeful and highly interactive. Thus, personal branding might be seen as a re-invention of the traditional branding but on a completely different level of interaction and visibility. Among managerial recommendations is the need for managers to closely monitor and analyze what is being said about their brands by the famous personalities on-line as these individuals are capable to influence the consumers' perceptions about brands and companies.

1. Introduction

The globalized world we live in today has created pressures such as fiercer competition in most aspects of our daily lives, which require people to 'stand out' from the crowd (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016; Shepherd, 2005). Hence, the idea of differentiating ourselves is becoming a more common notion. As a response to these pressures, personal branding has taken hold among professionals. Most of the personal branding literature suggests that branding yourself is the key to personal and professional success (Gehl, 2011; Khedher 2013; Gandini, 2016; Harris & Rae, 2011; Schwabel, 2011; Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005). Moreover, the argument that "if you don't brand yourself, others will" (Kaputa, 2003, cited in Shepherd, 2005, p. 590) seems to have led to the increased interest in personal branding that we have seen over the past two decades.

Personal branding has traditionally been the domain of celebrities, politicians or professionals who strive to succeed in their careers (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011). However, with the introduction of Web 2.0 and the concurrent rise of social media, personal branding has evolved into a phenomenon not exclusive to professionals and celebrities. Social media has enabled personal branding to take a new form, in which people brand themselves through the content that they share on their personalized profiles. One platform on which personal branding is especially evident is YouTube - the currently leading video sharing

website. According to Fortunelords (2017, n.p.), more than 400 hours of videos are uploaded to YouTube every minute and interestingly, some of the most popular YouTube channels are not maintained by corporate brands or celebrities, but by 'ordinary people' online. YouTube allows its users, also known as YouTubers, to promote their personal brand via their channels, which include the YouTuber's name, avatar, and videos. All these features make YouTube a relevant platform for self-presentation (Pace, 2008).

The literature on personal branding on social media draws on both the pre-social media studies by Peters (1997), arguing that every person has the possibility to be a marketer for himself/herself and post-social media authors, such as Shepherd (2005) and Arruda (2005), contending that personal branding is similar to product/service branding. As far as the studies in the social media context are concerned, the focus is on conceptualizing the branding process (Khedher, 2015) and identifying the motivations for engaging in personal branding (Gandini, 2016, Lair et al, 2005; Nolan, 2015). Moreover, in most studies, the context is the professional domain. Hence, the major focus is on professionals deliberately using social media to achieve successful careers.

However, the rise of social media has made it possible for virtually anyone with internet access to brand oneself. In fact, most famous YouTubers have risen to popularity for other purposes than career

advancement and their material success is an outcome, rather than the initial goal of their self-exposure on social media. Moreover, many of them are neither unique nor particularly creative in the topics they highlight in their videos. There is clearly a need to increase our understanding of the type of content they are creating and sharing with their followers and the actual process of content creation. What can we learn from these "ordinary" people who have built themselves into successful personal brands about the "winning content formula"? The purpose of this paper is to identify the key features of the "branded" content and the process of content creation that allows for "ordinary" people to be successful on social media. The focus is on YouTubers and the process of creating the "branded" content and succeeding with it online.

2. Literature Review

Since the beginning of the 1990s, personal branding has primarily been the domain of self-help consultants, experts and practitioners (Peters, 1997; Shepherd, 2005; Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005; Chen, 2013), although the original idea of marketing people had already appeared in 1969 (Kotler and Levy, 1969). While much research has been undertaken on the phenomenon of branding on social media (Barware & Meehan, 2010; Holt, 2016; Gensler et al. 2013; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012), it is only recently that branding from a personal perspective has sparked an interest among academics.

Most practitioners argue that branding of humans is similar to the branding of products and services, which is also supported by academic research viewing this phenomenon through the prism of marketing theory (e.g. Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011, Shepherd, 2005). Accordingly, Arruda (2005) conceptualises personal branding as a three-stage process: "extract, express and exude", which involves: i) exploring the unique value or key differentiation the person has; ii) developing a strategy to communicate the unique value, and iii) implementing a strategy for making the personal brand visible to the outside world.

Another stream of literature (e.g. Nolan, 2015; Khedher, 2015) explores personal branding from a sociocultural perspective and argues that this phenomenon is much more complex. Khedher (2015) applies a multidisciplinary approach, arguing that personal branding is a three-stage process of 1) defining the brand identity, based on Bourdieu's (1983) theory of social and cultural capital; 2) brand positioning, based on Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, and 3) brand image, based on Schön's (1983) theory of reflexivity. What the abovementioned studies (Arruda, 2005, Khedher, 2015) have in common is the assumption that personal branding is motivated by career advancement and, for this reason, it constitutes a planned process through which individuals strategically manage their personal brand.

As far as the elements of the personal brand are concerned, many authors have highlighted the importance of emphasizing one's strengths, values, goals, and personality (Rampersad, 2008; Montoya, 2005). Moreover, Rampersad (2008) proposes that an individual should formulate a clear brand promise and a personal brand story in order to "produce a positive emotional reaction". In other words, similar to traditional branding, personal branding also entails the act of defining and communicating the brand identity (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; de Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). Additionally, the importance of communicating one's uniqueness is emphasised (Peters, 1997; Rampersad, 2008; Montoya, 2005) which can be related to the importance of a clear brand positioning (de Chernatony & McDonald, 2003) Lastly, a personal brand is also created based on the public perception of the personality and the abilities

of the branded individual to build up relationships with the audience (Rampersad, 2008; Gandini, 2016). For this reason, personal branding also involves the person's reputation, i.e. her/his personal brand image (Holloway, 2013, Gander, 2014).

Furthermore, according to Arruda (2009), there are three key qualities of a strong brand, whether it is personal or corporate: clarity, consistency, and constancy. Arruda (2009, p. 410) illustrates this point by referring to perhaps one of the most successful personal branded persons to this date: "One of the most successful, visible, and constant personal brands, both commercially and personally, is Oprah Winfrey. With her weekly television show, book club, magazine, numerous media appearances, and casual appearances in grocery stores and restaurants, Oprah is consistently visible and has maintained an incredibly strong brand over a very long career." Additionally, authenticity is considered an essential aspect of personal branding (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011, Rampersad, 2008; Arruda, 2009; Montoya, 2005). To summarise, it would appear that in incorporating all elements of personal branding and communicating them to the audience, this means that an individual manages her/his personal brand strategically (Rampersad, 2008).

Social media has enabled individuals to create personal profiles on various sites, through which they can construct and present themselves to broad audiences (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Holt, 2016). According to Labrecque, Markos and Milne (2011), this can then be understood as a way for individuals to build their personal brand identities. Indeed, they suggest that in an online context, personal brand identity relies on self-presentation as identities are created in computer-mediated environments using social networking profiles, blogs, and personal Web pages." For instance, politicians, celebrities, professionals on LinkedIn and even teenagers on YouTube are making a great effort to stand out by tailoring their social media accounts so that their voices are heard among various audiences. Thus, it is clear that the social online forums support the concurrent growing phenomenon of personal branding (Khedher, 2015; Chen, 2013).

The content plays an important role when building and promoting a brand on social media (Gensler et al, 2013), whereby it should be relevant to the target audience, consistent and valuable as well as including some call for action. For example, research has shown that the branded content that tends to create positive engagement among users in the form of "likes", "comments", "sharing" and increased sales (for product-related content) is informative (Ashley & Tuten, 2015), vivid and interactive (de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012).

In addition, the richness of the content, i.e. the inclusion of images and videos, has been found to have a positive impact on consumer engagement (Sabate et al, 2014) and sharing (Berger & Milkman, 2012). However, there is no real consensus in the literature as to what constitutes effective consumer engagement branded content. Regarding which, many researchers seem to agree that entertainment has a positive effect on consumer engagement online (Ashely & Tuten, 2015; Gensler et al., 2013; Barwise & Meehan, 2010; Aguilera-Moyano, Baños-González & Ramírez-Perdiguero, 2015; Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011). On the whole, the cited theories are used in this paper as a toolbox for a deeper understanding of the personal branding phenomenon as regards its essential features and process.

3. Method

The study is explorative in nature and involves applying a grounded theory design that advocates a comparison method, i.e. looking at a

phenomenon in different situations to find an arising pattern to develop a plausible theory (Glaser, 1965). The aim is to uncover the key elements of personal branding and based on these insights, build a conceptual framework.

Qualitative content analysis of online videos of four successful YouTubers was carried out in the spring of 2016. The selected YouTubers had at least 1 million subscribers and had been active on YouTube for at least 3 years. Among the featured YouTubers were: 1) Jenna Marbles, a comedian and entertainer with more than 15 million subscribers in 2013 (Marbles, 2016b); 2) Bethany Mota, a young girl talking about beauty, fashion and DIY, with nearly 10 million subscribers (Mota, 2016); 3) Tyler Oakley, talking about issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities, with 7 million subscribers (Oakley, 2016), listed as one of the most influential YouTubers (Time, 2015); and 4) Casey Neistat, talking about his hectic life as a husband, father, adventurer and filmmaker, with 2.7 million subscribers (Neistat, 2016).

A total of 72 videos, covering 2-3 years online, were viewed, transcribed (texts), described (gestures, appearances) and categorized in the period of March-May 2016. The themes related to brand identity, positioning, image as well as the brand-building process were identified and categorized with the help of an empirically-based coding manual. Finally, the specific themes or patterns related to personal branded content and process were identified and analyzed, thereby allowing for the subsequent conceptualization of personal brand content and process.

4. Analysis

The empirical material revealed three themes that were occurring in the content of all four YouTubers: Loyal to Personal Brand Profile, Promotion of Multiple Social Media Accounts, and Addressing the Audience and Encouraging Co-creation.

4.1 Loyal to Personal Brand Profiles.

Despite all the focal YouTubers' profiles varying in terms of topics, there is a common pattern among all of them: they are all very loyal to their profiles. They would appear rarely to stray away from the category of topics they talk about, the environment where they film the video, or the tone of voice used when talking about the topic. For example, Casey Neistat is consistent in being adventurous and sporty, while showing his love for New York City (Figure 1). Jenna Marbles (Figure 2) is consistent with being sarcastic and unconventional when sharing her opinions about men and women. Bethany Mota is unwavering in being positive and 'proper'. While providing tips related to fashion and beauty. Tyler Oakley, on the other hand, is consistent in being open and somewhat brazen while sharing detailed personal stories relating to being openly gay. In other words, they all produce content that is aligned with their 'brand profile', and they stick to it without exception. Even though the YouTubers have matured with age, the personality, values, and opinions that are communicated via the content have remained the same from the oldest to the most recent videos.



Figure 1: Casey Neistat – adventurer



Figure 2: Jenna Marbles – breaking the taboos

Moreover, by being consistent in the way they create content as well as with the content itself, all the YouTubers have been able to create certain 'trademarks' for themselves. What can be drawn from this is that by being consistent with their brand profiles, the YouTubers are also clearly able to showcase their brand personality, values and 'trademarks', thereby giving the viewers a clear idea of who they are, what they stand for, and perhaps more importantly, a good understanding of what to expect from their content.

4.2. Promotion of Multiple Social Media Accounts

One of the most visible patterns is in relation to the promotion of the social media accounts of all four YouTubers. All of them promote their multiple accounts at the end of each video either by saying it explicitly or by adding a textual form that encourages viewers to subscribe to their YouTube, Twitter or Instagram channel. Examples of how they promote their social media accounts via their content are shown below.

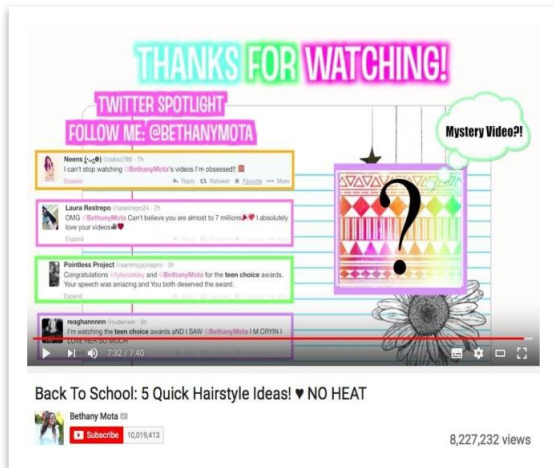


Figure 4: Promotion of Bethany Mota's Twitter Account (Mota, 2014a)

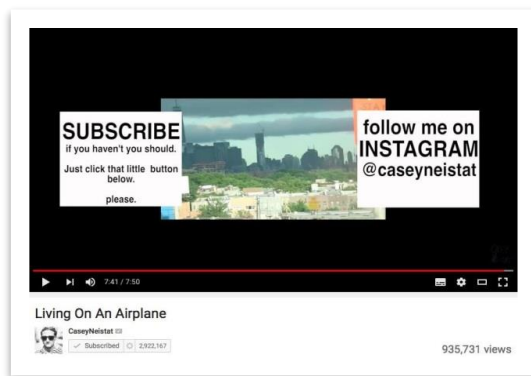


Figure 5: Promotion of Casey Neistat's YouTube and Instagram Accounts (Neistat, 2015)

Tyler Oakley and Jenna Marbles follow the same trend, however, in a slightly different style. For example, Jenna Marbles also promotes her YouTube channel explicitly in all her videos by saying: "Make sure to subscribe to my channel, I put up new videos every Wednesday." Moreover, three of the YouTubers - Bethany Mota, Casey Neistat, and Tyler Oakley also do so-called 'giveaways', which means giving away presents to their viewers. Lastly, all four YouTubers indirectly promote their social media accounts as communication channels, where their viewers can propose topics for their upcoming videos, ask questions and share responses to videos in the form of a picture or simple texts, often using several platforms at the same time.

4.3 Addressing the Audience and Encouraging Co-creation

The third pattern revealed that all YouTubers are frequently involving and addressing their audience in different ways. Firstly, all of them always give the impression of communicating directly with their audience by looking into and talking at the camera, while regularly saying 'you' and 'you guys'. This is illustrated with the following examples:

Jenna Marbles (Video no. 4, 2011): Sluts on Halloween

"So, what I want to say to all the girls out there is that I challenge you! I dare you! I double f***** dog dare you to go out on Halloween, see a girl who looks f***** cute and just go up to her and be like: You know what, you look hot. I appreciate the fact that you probably went on a diet and you probably exercised your tiny little butt off to fit into that. Congratulations!"

Secondly, all four YouTubers create videos that are made for the purpose of interacting with their viewers and they also often acknowledge the people who asked questions:

Casey Neistat (Video no. 9, 2015): My Biggest Failure

"John wants to know who you would love more than anything to get a compliment from. You know John, I have a rule. And that is to ignore praise and embrace criticism. So, I'm really not, I never tried to seek compliments; it is generally a dead end."

Furthermore, all the YouTubers address and involve their audience in other ways as well, such as showing the presents they have received from their fans or asking the viewers to share their opinions and tips with them. For example, Casey Neistat asks his viewers to give feedback on the quality of the video: "How does the picture quality look? It's a new camera; I just picked it up today." (Video no. 12, 2015). Additionally, all the YouTubers tell their viewers when and where they can meet them in person, thus inviting their viewers to have even closer interaction with them.

Another way, in which all YouTubers involve their audience, is by encouraging content co-creation. For example, the YouTubers frequently ask the audience to leave a comment containing the wishes for topics in subsequent videos or they explicitly mention in the video that the topic they are talking about has been requested by the audience:

Bethany Mota (Video no. 15, 2015): Desk Makeover: DIY Organization + My Essentials!

"Hope you guys enjoyed that fun little organizational desk makeover. If you guys want me to do another one of these, but focused on a different part of my bedroom, whether it be closet, bookcase ... a different area of your room you want me to focus on? Also, thank you to everyone who requested this video. I always read you guys' tweets and comments, especially when you request a video because I love knowing what you want to see." [In the video appears the text and screenshots with some of the people's comments] "If there is some video you want to see in the future, just let me know and I will do it."

Moreover, the YouTubers frequently ask their viewers to comment or create a video response relating to the topics they are talking about and to share it with them. Tyler Oakley says: "So this week on Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook I asked you guys if you could add a ridiculous rule to how to be a man to this list, what it would be? And these are some of my favorite responses. [A collage of different comments from Facebook and Tumblr shows on the screen] (See Figure 6).



Figure 6: Followers' responses to Tyler Oakley's Tattoo Question (Oakley, 2012)

There were also multiple examples of consumers collectively praising or criticising particular product brands featured by the YouTuber, although only three of the four have directly promoted product brands in their videos. In summary, the empirical findings clearly illustrate that the YouTubers are conscious about engaging their viewers, whereby they actively encourage co-creation, request feedback from their viewers and address them directly by talking to the camera. Moreover, the examples show that there is an ongoing interaction between YouTubers and their audience.

5. Discussion and Contributions

The findings show that YouTubers are actively involved in personal branding and they undertake the stages similar to those deployed by conventional product or service brands: building the brand, enforcing the brand and maintaining the brand (see Figure 7). However, for personal brands on social media, these stages are not distinctively separated in time, as suggested in the literature (Arruda, 2005, Khedher, 2015), but instead, overarching. In other words, when a personal brand is born online, its enforcement and maintenance become critical immediately. There is an interesting similarity between the personally branded individuals on social media and “born global” firms that develop a global brand from the beginning in contrast to the traditional firms that build theirs gradually (Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2006; Altshuler and Tarnovskaya, 2010).

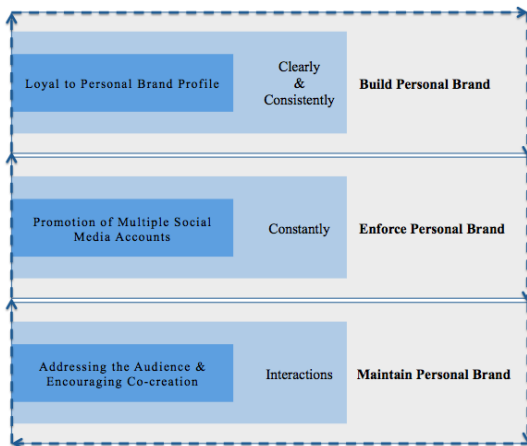


Figure 7: The stages and key features of personal branding on social media

In each of three stages, the key features of brand content were identified (highlighted in italics below). In the first stage of building the personal brand, it is essential for the person in question to have a clear brand profile and stay loyal to it. The personal brand profile comprises such elements as a personality of the YouTuber, typical topics, the tone of voice, environment (setting) as well as product brands being used by some of them (see Figure 8). The content is aligned with the profile and communicated in a clear and consistent way to the audience. Thus, YouTubers are not building brands by just “being themselves”, as some literature suggests (Labrecque et al., 2011), but rather, via a planned and strategic decision to build a clear identity (Arruda, 2005), thus drawing close parallels between individuals as brands and product (service) brands (de Chernatony and McDonald, 2003). Moreover, by investing in their social (networks) and cultural (knowledge, experience) capital (Khedher, 2015), YouTubers increase the probability of standing out from the crowd. Among other factors facilitating the identity, the building is authenticity achieved via the disclosure of personal stories and personality traits. While authenticity has been pointed out as being a key

factor for successful online branding by many authors (Fournier and Avery, 2011, Barwise and Meehan, 2010), some of them (e.g. Chen, 2013, Shepherd, 2005) have warned that whilst branding in this manner their authenticity might be purposefully manipulated by the individuals.

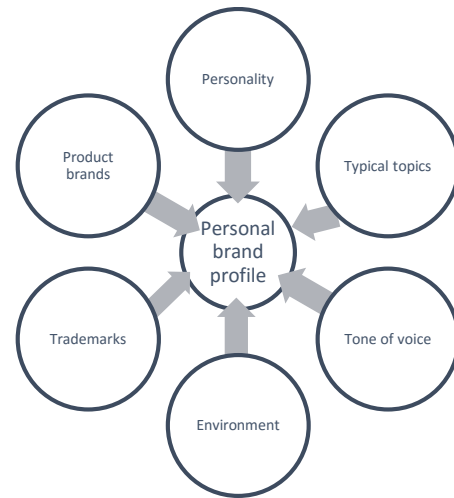


Figure 8: Elements of a Personal Brand Profile

In the second stage of enforcing the personal brand, it is essential to promote it via multiple social media accounts to increase the visibility of the individual brands in question. All YouTubers were promoting themselves on sites such as Twitter, Facebook and in this way constantly staying at the front of the minds of their users. Their striving constantly exposed to their target group resembles the attempts of product brands to maintain the “mind share” of their audiences (Holt, 2016).

In the third stage of maintaining the personal brand, it is essential to develop and maintain close and personal interactions with the audience to encourage the co-creation of new content. This is also essential for personal brands to remain relevant to their audience. Brand relationships are given much attention in the literature in relation to the complexity and multiplicity of brand-consumer relationships. According to Fournier (1998), four elements should be in place to foster relationships in the interpersonal field: mutuality, purpose, complexity and an evolving nature. The YouTubers have mastered their relationships with the users across all these dimensions, achieving what Fournier (1998, p. 362) calls “best friendships” (voluntary unions based on the reciprocity principle, characterized by the expression of honesty, true self, and intimacy). However, there are also multiple examples of different kind of “brand dependencies” developed by the users (obsessive, highly emotional, separation anxiety and high tolerance of relationship transgressions).

Through building close relationships, the YouTubers have managed to involve their audiences in the active co-creation of content, for example, by responding to their demands to include some topics in the show, calling on them for action and publicly thanking them online. These findings add to the literature on brand value co-creation in the online context (Healy and McDonagh, 2013; Payne et al., 2009). However, unlike brand communities, where value co-creation relies on the sharing of information and the making of social relationships, meaning and knowledge among members, and constitutes a somewhat democratic process leading to consumer empowerment (McAlexander et al., 2002; Merz et al., 2009), personal branding online by individuals is of a more totalitarian nature, whereby they act as the key “providers” of branded content, while users play the roles of “beneficiaries” mostly contributing

to the status and increasing the popularity of the branded persons. Hence, there is an implicit and explicit exploitation of users going on adding to their dependency upon the branded individual. This process has been featured in the literature (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Zwick et al., 2008) and requires a closer focus and attention.'

On the whole, the study advances our knowledge of personal branding in social media by uncovering the dynamics of this process and key features of successful content creation online. It provides evidence of the applicability of classical principles of product branding and typology of consumer-brand relationships as well as brand meaning co-creation to the personal branding phenomenon, while at the same time highlighting the complex nature of this phenomenon as being "born global", purposeful, and highly interactive. Thus, personal branding might be seen as a re-invention of traditional branding, but on a completely different level of interaction and visibility.

The outcomes of this study have multiple managerial implications, as managers are encouraged to stay aware of the increasing influence of successful YouTubers as personal brands on the Internet. It is important that managers monitor and analyze what is being said about their brands by the famous personalities online, as these individuals are capable of influencing consumer perceptions about brands and companies.

The study has involved focusing on just four branded individuals and hence, the findings cannot be generalized to other online individuals or brand communities. However, the identified patterns of personal branding online might be applicable to a broader spectrum of online brands.

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