



APM2051 Promotional Cultures

Essay

"Is 'Self-Branding' a problem or an opportunity for young professionals? Why or why not?"

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## Is 'Self-Branding' a problem or an opportunity for young professionals? Why or why not?

The idea of branding the self is relatively new. The business writer and analyst Tom Peters is credited with widely popularising the concept of personal branding or self-branding. Peters (1997) defines self-branding as being the head marketer and CEO of the brand called YOU. Self-branding aims to market oneself as a "brand" or "product" to an audience to ensure stable economic competitiveness (Whitmer, 2019). Similar to marketing in a traditional sense, this is about selling; however, the product is a human being.

The aim of this essay is to explore whether self-branding is an opportunity for young professionals or a thread creating an environment where relationships come with an expectation for return on investment and where everyday life is being marketised and monetised. This essay will first look at the general view of self-branding. Then focus on the commodification of the self, its marketisation and monetising. Furthermore, evaluate possible problems for young professionals that originated from personal branding practice.

Individual self-branding has become a central concept of the knowledge economy within the past few decades, showing individuals' marketisation process for their empowerment and professional success. Nowadays, self-branding is exceptionally powerful, primarily due to the emergence of social media platforms used in the professional sphere (Liu, R., Suh, A., 2017). According to marketing research, self-branding is acknowledged as a powerful tool for both self-realisation and self-promotion. Gandini (2016) proposes that despite this, self-branding is still largely ignored as a contributor to the production of social value for individuals in terms of relationships. It is argued that social media activity can create a notion of performative practices of sociality used online, whereby society views social relationships as investments designed to reap a reward in return. Such as expanding networks of contacts, gaining individuals' social capital, or a commodity exchange (Gandini, 2016). In other words, an image is being used for profit. The core area of Personal Branding is where the three main objectives meet: strengths of an individual, distinction from competitors and their weaknesses, and what people demand (Pawar, 2016).

For decades, any well-known persona using marketing communications efforts has been defined as a human brand. However, with the expansion of social media, the human brand is now able to attract an audience, known as followers, and therefore create a fanbase that changes into customers bringing profit to the human brand. Such opportunities allow the human brand to progress and turn from a human being to the brand itself (Ang L., Khamis, A., Welling R., 2016). Building a strong personal brand from an early age has been argued to help young professionals in many ways. Initially, an individual gains an opportunity to position themselves as an authority in their field. Maltby (2018) suggests that being viewed as a strong leader gives a personal brand sense of credibility and influence, which mediate a

much larger scale of opportunities, choices and overall stability when controlling career paths. Moreover, gaining confidence and self-esteem alongside nurturing a personal brand can evolve into becoming a well-known persona or even famous, both in the field of interest or throughout social media, attracting a broader target audience. Such an opportunity could provide an individual with the privilege to be heard (Maltby, 2018). Arruda (2021) proposes that using the power to speak up can be motivated by many intentions. Firstly, the business point of view focuses on the further flourishing of personal brand growth while taking advantage of the audience to increase income. Alternatively, there might be a genuine intention to tell the world who you are as a person and introduce your brand positioning. Furthermore, it has been suggested that discussing opinions, enriching others with knowledge, and honestly communicating ideas can be motivation (Arruda, 2021).

One of the biggest challenges to face is the commodification of the self. According to Joseph E. Davis (2003), the commodification of a person can be possibly understood in two separate ways. The first view is that individuals identify themselves with things they intentionally buy to shape their self-definition. But more importantly, self-commodification cause the shift of personal lives and relationships to adapt to the model of market relations manipulated for economic gain. Consumerism and the commodification of the self are the key forces leading to weakening the importance of the fundamental institutions of identity formation used for decades. Such as education, church, or family. In the 1980s, there was a change in branding from only producing products to selling carefully created images. A similar shift is now happening in the self-branding spectrum. Nowadays, professionals are applying for jobs, working for companies, and representing themselves as complex products. Therefore, they provide themselves to the market where their personal brand can be exchanged for income (Davis, 2003).

Furthermore, it is essential to pay attention to the psychological switch of individuals' minds slowly starting to perceive not only themselves but other human beings, including their friends, followers, family, or colleagues, based on the quality of their personal brand, image, and lifestyle. They are intentionally seeking favours in exchange for connecting with them. "What advantages will this person provide me with?" Such mindset of young professionals is rapidly growing and could remarkably damage the general view on human interactions. Additionally, successful young people are becoming purely materialistic with the distorted notion of life purpose, including a former Love Island star, Molly Mae-Hague, a role model to many young girls. Hague recently stated that having friends is a waste of time while focusing on making money and being successful is more important than building and maintaining relationships (Hurst, 2021). Robert G. Dunn (ND, cited in Davis, 2003) commented on the problem of commodification of the self and others with words: "Self-formation is in fact exteriorised since the focus is not on an inner self but on an outer world of objects and images valorised by commodity culture."

The powerful tools for self-promoting are social media. However, along with giving us the power to promote our brand to success, social media significantly contributes to the commodification of human beings. From the marketing perspective, the user is considered a commodity. The content shared by the user on social media is "the brand," and the audience consists of consumers and customers (Pinero, 2018). Along with non-professional social media like Instagram or Facebook, LinkedIn is a crucial professional platform for anyone looking for a prominent career. Over the past few years, LinkedIn changed from a job-seeking platform to an effective networking space, providing individuals with the opportunity to connect with potential followers, colleagues, or business partners. Building your community could graduate to becoming a micro-celebrity within LinkedIn and other platforms mentioned on your profile or linked to it. With a "brand community," an individual becomes remarkable for the job market, visible for employers, and profitable for brands (Geyser, 2021).

According to a recent report, around 70 per cent of brands use Instagram influencers as marketing tools providing them with free products or services to sway their audience, friends, and fans. Therefore, shaping their decisions about purchases to ensure their brand development and profit (Salpini, 2017). However, such an image-obsessed society we have created has become a threat to both the mental state of young professionals and the future economy (Maciejewska, 2022). The Prince's Trust eBay Youth Index (2019) shows the controversy of the rise of social media and its impact on young people. The study found that 57 per cent of 16 - 25 year old agreed that being present on social media put overwhelming pressure on them to be as successful as the users they follow. Along with that, 46 per cent of interviewed individuals answered that constant compering of their lives to others creates an illusion of being "inadequate" or less likely to succeed. Such feelings result in the deterioration of young people's mental state (Prince's Trust, 2019). According to Hogan (2010), the number of followers young people share content with is much larger than the circle of people they would ever know personally. Maintaining a network of hundreds of people could lead to a constant feeling of being overwhelmed, observed, and judged. Such feelings could lead to serious mental health issues.

Despite that the presence of young professionals on social media is likely to have damaging effects on their mental health, the demand for working online is significantly increasing. Additionally, the Prince's Trust report (2019) shows that 41 per cent of young adults are more comfortable with their image built online than interacting with colleagues, peers, and strangers in person. A current report created by Morning Consult (ND) is based on over 2000 interviews in the US and shows that 86 per cent of people on the scale from 13 to 38 years old are keen on posting sponsored content for money. Moreover, 54 per cent would take the opportunity to become an influencer either purely for business purposes and earning money or sharing the true self to inspire others (Locke, 2019). However, growing influencer marketing has a significant impact on the future career choices of young

professionals and kids. Research reveals that 17 per cent of interviewed kids and adolescents answered "Social Media Influencer" as their dream career, and 14 per cent of them would choose the path to become a "YouTuber". The only career taking place in front of the influencer/media industry is becoming a doctor with 18 per cent of answers. Those numbers are increasing every day, which creates a possible problem for future generations. Despite the glorification of being an influencer, the importance of educated professionals with degrees in the medical, law, politics, or education field is never decreasing, unlike the demand of young people applying for such courses at universities all around the world (Skeldon, 2019). Glamourised examples of pampered influencers conquering the world create a false impression of the lack of importance to study to be successful.

Lorenz and Horowitz (2021) examine a current example of the significance of using social media to build a personal brand. The story of Khaby Lama was circulating all over social media as he recently became the face of Hugo Boss. Young professionals on LinkedIn share his successful journey of "rebranding" himself from a poor factory worker in Italy who lost his job due to the Covid 19 Pandemic to a prospering micro-celebrity on TikTok with words: "Khaby Lama, take a bow" (Ogiste, 2022) or "No words needed," (Samba, 2022). Despite his studies at University, Khaby is one of many examples proving the possibility of decreasing the importance of higher education to become successful and wealthy in the social media led world (Tweedy, 2021). However, unlike Khaby Lama's TikTok platform, both David Ogiste and Elfried Samba actively use other social media. Professional platform LinkedIn serves their objectives satisfactorily to promote and strengthen personal brands and increase profiles' attractiveness. In both cases, there are many similarities in the notion of posts, including a celebratory post about the success of an Italian TikToker Khaby Lama (Ogiste, 2022, Samba, 2022)

Although this essay has shown that self-branding is a powerful tool essential to embrace to ensure the strengthening of a position on the market, it is clear that self-branding is predominantly negative. Its consequences can be damaging and dangerous to a young professional's social life and mental state. In the end, the practices of personal branding have the power to turn a person into a non-living brand or a commodity when used unethically. Additionally, it has adverse effects on the future economy and for degrees at universities. Despite this, the reality shows us that it is an almost inevitable practice in the current media-led world full of professionals of all ages craving a successful career with the highest possible engagement turning into income.

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