PERSONAL BRANDING: THE MARKETIZATION OF SELF IN THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract*: The self-centric nature of today's society, along with the strong attraction chains of the celebrity culture favoured the self concept entering the dominant marketing logic. This paper aims to bring to the fore deeper conceptual grounds of today's personal branding socio-economic reality by turning to Goffman's impression management and Giddens' 'reflexive project of the self' concepts and discussing them within the new dynamics of the communication and identitary spaces opened by the digital world. In addressing these issues we lay stress on three embedded dialectical dimensions of the personal branding: control or lack of control over our Self construct, genuine or plausible authenticity; consistency versus contextualization of personal branding. On the one hand, we argue that in terms of control people are rather focused on the projective phase than on the corrective impression management one. On the other hand, when faced with an accelerated process of multiplication and fragmentation of identities, the problem of authenticity should be re-evaluated within a relativist logic. Moreover, coping with multiple audiences, as well as coping with multiple identities, brings out additional consistency challenges for the personal branding process. In this context, we think that approaching personal branding as a Self-network rather than a Self-monolith construct can help in overcoming these dilemmas by redefining them in non-conflictive terms.*

Keywords*: personal branding; impression management; self project; authenticity; digital word.*

Introduction

Even if we are now rather focused on the challenges brought by the knowledge society and the ever-changing digital landscape, the social imagery of the consumer society (Baudrillard, 2005) and the society of spectacle (Debord, 1994) continues to be defining for understanding our glocal practices and identities. The marketing logic seems to have conquered every social field, from politics, to education or culture. In this context, the dominant approach was to lay stress on the fact that "the pivotal social and personal experience of the modern age is to be a consumer" (Craig & Beedie, 2008, p.130), thus describing and anticipating the evolution of this new *homo consumus*. But consumption is not only about social practices, as it is also about social identities, "the global expansion of the consumption culture facilitating the display of new identities via the commodification of a diversity of identities" (Jafari & Goulding, 2013, p.66). Nevertheless, we are not only consumers, but also those who provide things to be consumed, and, even more important, those who are being consumed. Hence, the Self itself has entered the commodification radar becoming integral part of this over-marketization process.

Beyond the new labelling of this process of self-marketization, we argue that it reflects also the incremental interest in a wide spectrum of self-presentation social practices. Within a highly competitive marketing logic, people become more and more aware and interested in gaining advantage over the others and differentiating themselves from the others. "Called by the brand", we end up becoming a brand *per se*, as "we are CEOs of our own companies: *Me* Inc." (Peters, 1997, p.1). The market builds around and for selves required not only new practices, but also a re-contextualization of the marketing imagery, bringing forward new concepts like personal brand(ing). Thus, starting from the beginning of

the 2000, the concept of personal branding has become "the most effective way to clarify and communicate what makes you different, special, and valuable" (Arruda & Dixson, 2007, p.29).

The emergence and proliferation of "personal branding" practices was also favoured by the ascending wave of the celebrity culture, as we are now living in a celebrity-saturated world, where everyone seems to be involved in either producing or consuming celebrities (Rein, Kotler, & Stoller, 1997). This "make noise–make news–make change" model that is fuelled by the celebrity large-scale appeal (Thrall et al., 2008, pp.363-364) is no longer only about well-known public figures, but about a wider set of micro-celebrity practices that made ordinary people take over the self-centric logic of spectacularity and public exposure. The "demotic turn" (Turner, 2010) brought by the golden age of the celebrity culture came with both "ordinary people" becoming much more prominent in media content, but also with them being more interested in personal branding.

With a clear focus on the domino effect of the digital wave upon self-presentation practices, our analysis comes to reaffirm the importance of connecting the marketing nature of personal branding with the approach of personal branding as social construct, balancing out the role of the personal branding content with the role of the contextual factors involved in this process. Therefore, we turn to two conceptual anchors that we argue to be embedded in what "personal branding" is standing for in terms of self-presentation and self-management today: Goffman's impression management concept and Giddens' self as project approach. How far does personal branding go from impression management? Is personal branding more or less than an updated version for the management of Self as a reflexive project?

Nevertheless, beyond this brief conceptual placement of the personal branding in a wider interdisciplinary map, in the present paper, our interest lies primarily in understanding the challenges embedded in the dialectic nature of the personal branding concept. Therefore, we will focus on three main dimensions: control or lack of control over our Self construct, genuine or plausible authenticity; consistency versus contextualization, laying stress on the impact of the digital in addressing these issues. As the digital landscape allows for high third party contribution in what is rather a co-construction process of our personal branding, to what extent can we control the ongoing (re)configuration of Self, and, moreover, how consistent and authentic is it?

Self-presentation and self-management conceptual anchors of personal branding

In this section we argue that personal branding is more than just a new colonization field of branding, laying stress on two conceptual approaches that come to enrich the marketing logic of defining personal branding as the unique point of differentiation for yourself as commodity. In a consumption culture where branding is merely omnipresent (Olins, 2005), personal branding was not a distruptive new concept, nor a simple conceptual transfer from producs and services to persons. We, thus, briefly address two components of the personal branding, self-presentation and self-management, that social scientists had already discussed before the actual personal branding concept came to light.

The first one, *impression management*, can be places within the wider framework of the performance studies, being the core concept of Goffman's social dramaturgy theory. Building its conceptual map around the "life as theatre" metaphor, Goffman (1959) defines impression management as the main aspect of a performance, referring to the way an actor succeeds in controlling and directing the audience reactions towards accepting and validating a certain self image projected by him(self). Our self-identity thus comes as an output, as "a dramatic effect: the self is an effect of a performance, the way in which we present ourselves in everyday life" (Clarke, 2008, p.511).

Caught up in this process of performing in front of a public, the social actor has to cope with this permanent swing between "to be" and "to seem to be", between self as performer and self as performed. Thus, impression management, as both strategic and normative regulatory process of self-presentation, can be seen as "the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are real or imagined in social

interaction" (Schlenker, 1980, p.6). But what is at stake in this type of dramaturgical engagement in self-presentation acts? What purpose does this management of impression serve?

There are two main dimensions that we can find embedded in the impression management process: one related to an aspirational self-presentation purpose or our attempt to provide an idealized self-image in front of the others, and the other one related to a form of social conformity, that is performing your role "in order to fulfil societal expectations" (Urick, 2014, p.405). Nevertheless, impression management is not only about desirable self-image and strategic manipulation of the impression we leave upon the other, but it is also about a tacit acceptance of this self-presentation game, as "impression management not only happens, it is (also) expected to happen." (Goethals, 2008, p.4).

Nevertheless, Goffman (1959) laid stress on the strategic nature of impression management in terms of self-image gain and brought to the fore the need for expressive consistency and credibility in performing one's role. All aspects of our social performances are thus "designed to enhance the audience's sense of <realness>" (Fine & Manning, 2003, p.46) and to assure our control over the act of performance itself. Therefore, dramaturgical "*discipline*" and "*vigilance*" (Goffman, 1959), are meant to minimize the unpredictable component of social actors' performances and maintain the expressive control. Impression management is thus as much about building and projecting your desired self-image as it is about controlling it, moving the focus to the impressions you leave in your public's mind though your social performances.

The main challenges that impression management has to overcome are related to a) the performance regions (Goffman, 1959) and the vulnerability of unrevealing the backstage activity, b) the fact that role performance is highly context-dependent, and c) the "dance of identification" (Goffman, 1961, p.127) that social actors are force to cope with, as they are subject to a "composite of multiple selves, each of which projects a set of claims" (Manning, 1991, p.77) attached to that particular role. Due to these multiple identities, which can be complementary or even competitive, the self-concept ends up acting as a "product of the scene that comes off" (Goffman, 1959, p.252), thus highly context-dependent.

If the whole process of *impression management* is rather external-oriented, focused on what and how you can leave the desired impressions on the public you perform in front of, the second approach we want to discuss is rather internal-oriented, as Giddens (1991) finds *reflexivity* to be defining for the late modern age. Self-identity becomes, thus, a reflexively organized endeavour (Giddens, 1991, p.6), which is object to constant redefinitions. We are no longer speaking about passive entities, but about a responsible engagement in building this self-identity as reflexive project of the self. On the one hand, it is thus more about self-concept and self-management than self-presentation, a process that we continuously work and reflect on. On the other hand, consistency is less about maintaining a certain impression on the others', according to the self-image you want to leave or the social expectations connected to the role you perform in a particular context, but mainly about continuity as a "product of the person's reflexive beliefs about their own biography" (Giddens 1991, p.53).

The *self-identity as a reflexive project* is a long-time process of self-actualisation and control triggered by the changes and uncertainties that define the dynamics of the late modern society. This embedded planning and investment in self as project is also an adaptive answer, individuals having no choice but to change themselves in order to adapt to changing social circumstances. In terms of self-construct, people have to cope with this never-ending process of defining and redefining themselves, accepting the fact that we are not what we are, but rather what we do with ourselves (Giddens, 1991, p.75). Moreover, if social dramaturgy was first of all about "dramaturgical loyalty" (Sharma & Grant, 2011, p.8), for Giddens the "first loyalty" of the individual becomes a loyalty to himself (being true to himself in the self-actualization process), as "the project of the self remains one of control, guided only by morality of authenticity" (Giddens, 1991, p.225).

Approaching personal branding as an output of self-marketization, both self-presentation and self-management aspects become important in understanding it as a "process of establishing a unique personal identity" (Khedher, 2014, p.33). The impression management and the self as a reflexive project

brought to the fore three common issues that are constitutive in addressing personal branding as a particular form of the self concept: control, authenticity and consistency. Moreover, all these aspects had to face significant challenges brought by the digital world, as this came along not only with new contexts and means of self-expression, but also with high vulnerability in terms of exposure and control of self-image.

The dialectical nature of personal branding in the digitized world

Personal branding has been mainly defined as "a self-centered and highly individualistic approach to self marketing" (Arruda & Dixson, 2010, p.10), a construct aimed to provide us differentiation and, moreover, to make this differentiation marketable. Similar to how the branding laws work for products, personal branding involves identifying and promoting the individual's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Schwabel 2009). However, beyond this highly-market oriented approach on the commodification of self, personal branding is also about "reputation and identity" (Barlow & Stewart, 2004, p.17), attesting to the complexity and interdisciplinary of the concept. This, in turn, makes the personal branding process very challenging, in terms of understanding the self-presentation, self-actualization and self-management aspects.

The digital world brought important changes in personal branding, especially since it became a significant part of our daily life and an important platform for self-presentation. Moreover, it works as a "platform for identity construction, where different facets of the self, or multiple selves, may be explored and expressed" (Labrecque et al., 2011, p.38), thus, imperative for today's discussion on personal branding. It is not only about the accessibility and connectivity provided by the online world, but, in terms of personal branding, it is most of all about the exposure and the dynamic process of communication and self-communication that people are caught up in, which, in turn, require an appropriate impression management (Shafie, Nayan & Osman, 2012).

We argue that, while becoming constitutive for the personal branding process, the digital landscape enhanced its dialectical nature, placing people under a high face management pressure. There are three main vulnerability dimensions that we want to lay stress on in terms of personal branding: one related to the degree of control, the second one related to the authenticity of the personal branding construct and, the last one, related to its consistency. Nevertheless, as we will show further, these dimensions are highly interconnected.

Control versus lack of control over your personal branding

The dominant approach in discussing the impact of the digital world in terms of self-presentation and personal branding is that people have been provided with both accessible means and platforms for public exposure. But becoming more and more visible is as much about the fact that visibility online creates opportunities (Schawbel, 2010), as it is about the fact that it brings greater challenges in terms of control, as "managing multiple online personas is increasingly difficult, and separating social and professional worlds appears nearly impossible without the proper mechanisms for control" (Labrecque et al., 2011, p.49).

To some extent you feel that you have control over the aspects you want to reveal and promote about yourself, over the channels and the moments you choose to do so, and, the online world seems, hence, to empower you with higher flexibility in this regard. Nevertheless, personal branding is not about a one-way process, but rather about a dynamic process of presentation, testing, validation and social negotiation of the self. It is about the way people react to the presentation and performance of self and the way you manage to integrate these reactions in the ongoing process of redefining, but, moreover, consolidating your personal brand.

The visibility and accessibility you are provided with by the digital landscape come along with a comparable level of visibility and accessibility provided to the others, whose reactions become part of

the wider co-construction logic of the personal branding as output. It is no longer only about what you say about yourself or about the significant others you chose to make heard in enhancing your personal branding, but it is also about uncontrolled input about you, which is usually made visible through the online platforms. This input acts as both a challenge and a test for the projected personal branding concept that you feel you control. It is the Achilles' heel, revealing the strength of the entire process, as nowadays "it is more important what others have to say about your brand than what you can say about it" (Manea, 2011, p.11).

When discussing strategies for successful personal branding both theoreticians and practitioners imply a rather high level of control, building on this "self as project" logic, where intentionality and planning are the main coordinates. However, all of these seem to be "aimed at developing reflexivity because they encourage actors to engage in careful and critical self-assessment about their relative strengths and weaknesses" (Wee & Brooks, 2010, p.47). In other words, there seems to be a tendency to focus on self-knowledge and control, underestimating the process of coping with the uncertainty brought by what others have to say about you, as integral part of the personal branding process. Moreover, we argue that, in terms of control, people are more interested in the projective phase (*what I want to deliver as personal brand; my personal brand concept*) than in the ongoing corrective impression management one, where you have to adapt and reconfigure your actions according to the actual evolution of the whole personal branding process.

Genuine versus plausible authenticity of your personal branding

There are at least two aspects that can be looked into in addressing the authenticity of personal branding: one related to the real person-personal branding dyad and the other one related to the offline-online personas beyond the personal branding construct. To what extent do they overlap and to what extent do they reveal the actual/ authentic "self" of a person?

The marketing logic that personal branding as concept is build within, as well as the goffmanian impression management approach of the self-presentation process are rather related to the idea of "ideal self", a self-image that you invest in for receiving a certain type of reaction from the others (i.e. admiration, acceptance, support etc.). In other words, "the self is merely the mask one chooses to wear in a given situation" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.109), while trying to maximize its gains in terms of self-image. This marketable self as principle of the personal branding process it is thus more about what we call a "plausible authenticity", that is building a personal brand that seems authentic and is accepted as so by the others. "On the one hand, you have the individual, the person, and, on the other hand the marketing, the efforts that each one of us invests in being <different>, building an image that will make us picked out over the others" (Sasu, Ioan & Luca, 2013, p.166); and all of these are about persuasive instrumentalization of authenticity, which ends up becoming a marketing construct itself.

Nevertheless, in a more prescriptive terms, there are authors who lay stress on the value of what can be called the "genuine authenticity" (del Blanco, 2010, p.10), as "personal branding must be about your authentic self" (Salpeter, 2013, p.4). Adopting such a position enhances the reflexivity component of the personal branding process, moving the focus from the aspirational self-presentation purposes (dominant for the goffmanian impression management mechanism) to a form of self-acceptance and maxi-min efficacy principle of self-presentation - that is maximizing the strengths and minimizing the weaknesses. This principle is consistent with Arruda and Dixson's (2010, p.51) idea that the aim of personal branding is "to showcase your positive brand attributes, while diminishing your negative ones", while accepting that "your personal brand is about authenticity, not about perfection" (Bogdan, 2010, p.151).

Still, we argue, that, to some extent even this process of selecting what and when to reveal about you, making some aspects more prominent and others more silent in building your personal brand, is a form of "manipulating" the so-called genuine authenticity, since "the actor is expected to present a self that is constantly working on itself, to better itself" (Wee & Brooks, 2010, p.56). Overrating the positive

aspects is more about biased authenticity than genuine one although is less misleading than other self-marketization practices.

As for the offline-online personas beyond the personal branding process, the main approach is to question the authenticity of the online self(ves) relative to the offline one(s). To what extent is the online self an extension or a distinct self-concept in relation to the offline one? Since the online provides us with an "enhanced potential for editing the self" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.109), the duality of the digital landscape, as equally useful for revealing aspects about the offline person as well as providing opportunities for creating new personas, ends up challenging the authenticity of the online self-constructs.

However, despite the fact that the digital platforms, especially the social network ones, "provide ample opportunities to fashion desirable and even misleading impressions"(Hall, Pennington & Lueders, 2013, p.959), we argue that there are also embedded regulatory mechanisms in the digital world. One is related to the uncontrolled input brought by the others - especially through social media platforms, and another one to the quest for personal branding consistency, that we will address in the end of this section. Given these aspects, more genuine the authenticity of the personal branding construct, less vulnerable it is, as it requires smaller face management efforts. Thus, in a market-driven logic, it is more efficient to capitalize on your authentic self-concept than invest in a idealized personal branding that is not very well reality-anchored.

Consistency versus contextualization of your personal branding

As we have already mentioned, personal branding is a complex process that covers a wide spectrum of self-presentation and self-management practices, "a reflection of who you are and what you believe, which is visibly expressed by what you do and how you do it" (McNally & Speak, 2012, p.4). Nevertheless, the wide repertoire of social roles we play, as well as the myriad of communication situations and channels that have been significantly enriched by the digital landscape, bring into question the consistency of the personal branding construct.

On the one hand, everyone aims to provide a consistency in terms of the core-elements that speak about their personal brand, looking for "an approach to transmit a single perspective" (Labrecque et al., 2011, p.49) upon themselves. Moreover, this consistency is build around that point(s) of differentiation that work as personal branding anchors. On the other hand, when marketing is more and more about segmentation and customization in terms of brand communication, personal branding is facing this challenge of finding the perfect balance between the need for consistency and the need to adapt each component of the personal branding process to the profile of the audience and the specificities of the communication channels. Between the two extremes (that are both object to high criticism), the undifferentiated monolithic approach and the competing alternative self-concepts that are hard to gather under the same personal branding framework, we argue that personal branding is rather about a *self-network concept* performing within a multi-channel environment.

Therefore, whether we speak about online-offline, personal-professional, rational-emotional, formal-informal dualities that are enhanced in our self-concept matrix, personal branding is primarily about bridges, not boundaries, about connecting them in the most coherent manner. The digital word itself made the connectivity logic more suitable for this type of multilayered ongoing process of self-presentation and self-management. And, to lay stress on the interconnectivity between the three dialectical aspects embedded in the personal branding process, we should add that this consistency balance requires, in turn, an active engagement in controlling as much as possible when it comes to creating, managing and redefining your personal brand.

Conclusion

To understand the complexity of the personal branding concept we have argue that it should be approached as more than just a mechanic extension of the branding process from products and services to people. In line with this broader conceptual framing, we have laid stress on the insightful perspective provided by the goffmanian "impression management" concept in terms of self-presentation practices, and by the "self-identity as reflexive project" (Giddens, 1991) approach in terms of self-management. Both of them bring to the fore aspects regarding the control, authenticity and consistency of the self-concept in relation to the significant others. However, they are limited in explaining the dynamics of today's self-presentation and self-management aspects embedded in personal branding, as the first one is rather offline interaction-oriented and mainly interested in the idealized self-image, while the second one is too focused on the reflexivity of the self-concept, underestimating the strategic engagement into a market that is now build around and for the Self(ves).

Within this accelerated marketization of self, the digital world brought not only new opportunities in terms of visibility and self-presentation means, but also new challenges that laid stress on the dialectical nature of personal branding. From the vulnerability that comes along with the co-construction of online self-image, questioning the control over your personal brand, to the degree of its authenticity and consistency, the online world contributed to the overall process of multiplication and fragmentation of identities and (self)communication contexts.

Nevertheless, we argue that approaching personal branding as a monolithic concept is both a theoretical and a practical trap, as we are not looking for a stable, invariable construct, but rather for a dynamic multilayered and omni-channel self-network. This, in turn, means that the dialectical nature of personal branding is not something that needs to be overcome, but is actually constitutive for the social actor who is actively engaged in this market-driven self-presentation and self-management process. These theoretical aspects should, however, be further discussed and linked to empirical studies that might bring insightful input for an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the personal branding process.

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