Concepts and Constructs for Personal Branding: An Exploratory Literature Review Approach

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Concepts and constructs for personal branding: An exploratory literature review approach

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Abstract

Personal branding is a new marketing concept related to the marketing strategies that a person adopts in order to promote his or her major personal characteristics. Personal branding is heavily used by celebrities politicians, and people who look for social integration, support or uniqueness. The personal branding phenomenon is a relatively new phenomenon for western societies, lately studied by sociologists as well as marketers. As a new social phenomenon and marketing construct, the academic marketing literature examining it is still under-developed. The present paper aims to present a literature review of the popular press and academic marketing perspective and attempts to define the construct and set a research agenda to identify the variables of the personal branding construct.

Introduction

Branding, one of the relatively recent additions to the distinct fields of marketing, was practiced but largely ignored by academics for a long time; was pronounced dead, or as good as dead in 1993 (Klein 2002) but it eventually survived. Despite the fact that it is growing as a discipline faster than ever, there is still a considerable gap in branding theory and application development (Hughes 2007). As Keller (2006) put it, academics take the 'small b' approach as opposed to the 'large B' one practitioners adopt.

So far, the personal branding literature has been summarily dismissed on the grounds of low quality and described as a "regimented diet of canned optimism and connect-the-dot formulas" (Conley 2008) backed by questionable quantities of substance and sold to "naive customers" by "experts [that] range somewhere between corny and culty" (Conley 2008). The branding of inanimate objects and corporations literature has also been found to have been built on paradigmatic examples more than theory thus resembling "mythology" rather than "science" (Kay 2006).

Personal branding as an activity has also been criticised on moral grounds and described as a blatant manifestation of the rampant cynicism of commercialism (Klein 2002; Rosen 2004; Lair, Sullivan et al. 2005; Conley 2008; Klein 2008) that equates "complex human beings" with "something like Kleenex" (Conley 2008) thus resulting in "a crude attempt to provide regulated forms of self-exposure" (Rosen 2004). The personal branding movement has also been dismissed as a valorized imposition of hyper-individuality and image over substance and self-awareness (Lair, Sullivan et al. 2005). Its product, the branded self, has been described as "one of the more cynical

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products" of labour in the post-Fordism economy and equated to "a form of self-presentation singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value" (Hearn 2008). Morality-bound arguments against mainstream branding have also been put forward. Branding has been aphorised as based on the assumption that "the customer is not intelligent or even human" (Bazos 2009), or in a more colourful way as the "industrial-strength Raid" with which evil multinationals spray innocent cockroach-minded consumers (Klein 2002).

At a first glance, the imagery and narratives of the popular personal branding literature point towards the easy conclusion that it is but a fad stemming from the frantic attempts of marketers to create jobs for themselves and their unemployed colleagues in a stagnant world economy which is being violently restructured without an obvious vision of the form that will emerge and the role marketing will play in the emergent plot. It is, indeed, hard to take a method of managing ones' self and life advertised as the one and only guaranteed way of achieving not only professional success (Aruda 2003; Flemings 2007; Glasscock 2008) but also happiness (Montoya and Vandehey 2002; Hodgkinson 2005; Al Reis in his Foreword to Kaputa 2006; Honaman 2008; Mobray 2009; Rampersad 2009; Schawbel 2009) seriously. What is here proposed, however, is that before throwing it out, the bathwater should be examined in case there is also a baby in the ever-expanding tub of marketing theory. This stance is suggested not only because the most ardent critics of personal branding join their voices with the loudest proponents in concluding that "[a]ccessible and affordable personal branding is here to stay" (Conley 2008) but also, because research has demonstrated that this "potentially crucial idea" (Shepherd 2005) already constitutes a "sociocultural institution" (Lair, Sullivan et al. 2005).

Review of definitions of personal branding: the construct's conceptual foundations

Nowhere is the conceptual foundation and theoretical grounding of a term clearer than in its definition; what Aristotle described as the statement of an object's essential attributes that form its essential nature (Aristotle 2007). When examining the - rarely provided - definitions of personal branding, however, it is easy to agree with Bertrand Russel's (2004/1946) description of the very essence they try to capture as a "hopelessly muddle-headed notion".

The predominant conceptual framework of the popular personal branding literature (being web- or paper-based) appears to be a concoction of psychotherapy-based personal development tactics mixed the popularised metaphysics of *The Secret* (Byrne 2006) and sprinkled with aggression of the *Art of War* (Sun Tzu 2002) spawned genre of management. This edifice is particularly apparent in the following definition offered by the "dubbed the personal branding guru by the media and clients alike" (Aruda 2010) whose personal branding methodology certifies 'personal branding strategists' in over 20 countries:

> *"[personal branding is] understanding what is truly unique about you (...) and using that to differentiate yourself and guide your career decisions. Through unearthing the true you and consistently and constantly living your personal brand, you attract what you need to achieve your goals without having to 'wrestle with the universe' to acquire it"* (Aruda 2009).

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The main idea of this definition has been summarised as "unearthing what is truly unique about you and letting everyone know about it" (Schawbel 2009) with the purpose of determining if the person will "conquer" the professional arena or if she will be "defeated by it" (d' Alessandro 2004) to the point of achieving the most prized position in classical Athenian society, that of attaining *υστεροφημία* (posthumous fame) as "your brand is how you live in the hearts and minds of those in your market" (Hodgkinson 2005).

A conceptually and structurally very similar (only leaning more on Alfred Binet's measures of intelligence and extending into economics and theology) definition of personal branding is that of:

> "*[u]nlocking your inner genius and connecting it to your passion and addressing a specific problem that can lead to profitability - emotionally, mentally, psychological* (*sic*), *spiritually, and economically*" (Flemings 2007).

Another stream of definitions echoes marketing thought and adds support to Hearn's (2008) evaluation of a personally branded person as a "product, producer, and consumer (…) captive to and conditioned by the controlling interests of global flexible capital". This observation is best illustrated in the following definition:

> "*personal branding* [is] *all about delivering something of value to a customer, and delivering it in such a way that it creates an emotional connection with that customer* " (Thomas 2007).

Hughes (2007) simply equates people to goods or services and proposes that "the current American Marketing Association definition of a brand is simply be (*sic*) extended to include people" thus concluding that a "personal brand therefore would also easily identify a product or service and is a seller's promise to deliver consistently a specific set of features, benefits and services to buyers" through its "four important characteristics; attributes, benefits, values and personality". Such an approach implies that people have the means and the knowledge to define and research their markets to great detail as they will need to assess not only existing and explicit (as in a job advertisement) but also emerging needs and desired benefits. It also assumed that the person to be sold can easily be fashioned to display the attributes desired by a correctly segmented target market and clearly positioned as such in relation to all competing persons. The impossibility of achieving such a task is evident since the fundamental assumption of full information about the market and the competition, which is hard to meet with respect to products, is totally unsustainable in the fluid labour or fame markets for individuals. For these reasons, as well as on the basis of a moral objection (Conley 2008) to the "commodification" of humans (Lair, Sullivan et al. 2005), product branding appears to be an inappropriate framework to be applied to people.

To avoid setting such hard to sustain assumptions, some definitions are left purposefully vague and open to a multitude of interpretations. Personal branding has been described as:

> "*a proactive behaviour that influences your ability to be sought after, mentioned, valued and given a second, third and fourth look*" (Mobray 2009) and

"those varied activities undertaken by individuals to make themselves known in the marketplace, usually, (though not exclusively) for the purpose of obtaining gainful employment (Shepherd 2005).

It is this confusion of disciplines, the best-seller paperback vocabulary and the hype that gives the impression that personal branding is all about marketing the concept and its practitioners rather than the actual people that are to be become brands.

All these definitions (and the many that are fashioned on the same lines) fail to serve the only purpose of an explanation which is to "remove or to prevent misunderstanding" (Wittgenstein 2009).

Ordo ad chao[i]: Repositioning personal branding within the epistemological boundaries of marketing

Personal Branding has been described as an "arcane activity" (Shepherd 2005), a strategic process (Montoya and Vandehey 2002) "a programmatic approach" and a proactive response (Lair, Sullivan et al. 2005 quoted in Hughes. 2007) or an indeterminate kind of "proactive behavior" (Mobray 2009) and a "powerful tool" (Post 2005). It is here proposed that labelling it as just a 'process' (Schawbel 2009) is parsimonious. Like any process, it has inputs, a method and intended outcomes.

Towards an integrative theoretical framework of personal branding

The objective of this paper is to explore the conditions under which personal branding can be "reclaim[d] (...) from the enthusiasts" (Shepherd 2005). It is here proposed that a coherent theoretical framework can be based on corporate branding theory. As demonstrated through the preceding deconstruction and discourse analysis of the dominant streams of definitions of personal branding, it is the application of product logic that leads to irresolvable moral and methodological problems.

In the context of ketchup and automobiles a purely contrived signification process is perfectly achievable. The complete product experience package can be conjured up from scratch and then formed into an autonomous value set and staged-managed as a consumable experience. In the case of human beings this is simply not possible. When the brand consultant or self-help manual starts work on the brand the complete attribute and value set is already fully formed: a grown person with a face and body, a history, a personality, some affiliations and a reputation already established. The corporate branding stream, however, appears to be applicable and capable of resolving the ambiguities of the current theoretical mispositioning.

The debate over corporate anthropomorphism dates back to the early 17th century and has recently been both legally resolved (Laufer 1996) and empirically demonstrated (Kusku and Zarkada-Fraser 2004). A few key points on the reverse argument of corporate-human equivalence however, need to be made to illustrate the applicability of corporate branding theory to the problem of theoretically grounding personal branding. A person can create products for sale and can offer services in exchange for money but is much more than these potential offerings to society and the market, and as such it functions in the socioeconomic system in a manner that resembles that of a corporation. A person has values and intrinsic qualities that may, or may not be evident in the context of production and is visible, relevant and interdependent with a set of individuals and organisations that extends

much beyond the confines of the actual and potential buyers of the products and services offered for sale – what is termed as 'stakeholders' in the case of corporations. Finally, both people and corporations have distinct histories, identities and reputations that can form the basis for branding but cannot be changed through branding.

It has already been ascertained that corporate-level branding can also be applied to countries, regions, and cities and that corporate brands are "fundamentally different from product brands in terms of disciplinary scope and management, (...) have a multi-stakeholder rather than customer orientation and [for them] the traditional marketing framework is inadequate and requires a radical reappraisal (Balmer and Gray 2003). Thus, personal branding would be defined in a manner similar to Balmer's (2001) explanation of a corporate brand as

> *the conscious decision to make known attributes of a person's identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition underpinning efforts to communicate in order to differentiate the person from other creators of similar products or providers of similar services and to enhance stakeholder groups' and networks' perception of the person's ability to fulfill the expectations the branding proposition raises.*

For these significations to be perceived in an engaging way (Sternberg 1995) that will form the basis of meaningful and permanent "associative representations" (Kay 2006) which will lead to successful exchange relationships what is required is communication through images, symbols and narratives. In the case of people, it is nature (aided by cosmetology and various medical specialisations) that provides the images, material possessions (such as clothes, cars and gadgets) and affiliations (national, religious, political or hobby-based) that provide the symbols and behaviour and life-stories that are provide the material of narratives. Narratives not only convey information but also position teller and listener in social space, forge bonds and uphold the values and order of communities (Kvale 1995). They are circulated and propagated by four different categories of 'authors': (i) the owner of the brand, (ii) the cultural industries, (iii) intermediaries and (iv) customers (Holt 2004). In the case of personal brands these are: (i) the branded person, (ii) the cultural industries that would, a few years ago, be involved only in the case of celebrity brands but are now within reach of anyone having access to the internet or the nerve to expose one's intimate life details on reality television shows, (iii) all those that know the person (what Montoya and Vandehey (2002) call 'audience') and (iv) the people with whom the branded person enters into the intended exchange relationships (loosely equated to Montoya and Vandehey's (2002) 'domain').

.Conclusions

In a stagnant world economy, with cost-cutting and downsizing hard on the corporate survival agenda and a job market for marketing professionals in the USA (where the bulk of the personal branding literature is produced and sold) expected to be increasingly competitive as job openings will, for the next decade, be strictly related to the replacement of workers who leave the occupation or retire (Bureau of Labour Statistics 2009) it is indeed a good marketing move by marketers seeking to market themselves to attempt to expand the target market for their skills and talents

by appealing to hard-hit by unemployment professionals and various categories of wannabes – that is practically everybody.

The deconstruction of the personal branding literature has demonstrated that there is a market need for it linked to the prevalence of identity crises and job insecurity. It is the social role of the marketer to identify needs and develop ways to fulfil them to the satisfaction of the parties to the exchange relationship. What is being turned into a commodity by the personal branding literature, however, is not really people but hope: the hope of standing out in the crowded spaces of urban modernity, the hope of being acknowledged, feeling unique and worthy of attention and most of all, the hope of finding meaning now that traditional values have been eroded and conspicuous consumption is fast losing ground as a panacea to obscurity and loneliness.

This paper has demonstrated that it is the product-based conceptual foundation of the personal branding literature that harbours inconsistencies and raises moral objections to the practice. To resolve these, personal branding has been repositioned as a process to which the input is a person's identity, the method is communication and the outcome is achieving career objectives and defined. It has also been placed within the corporate branding framework. It is obvious that this exploratory first step needs to be followed by more conceptual as well as empirical work in order to construct a coherent theoretical framework for this fascinating phenomenon that appears to be here to stay.

The issue of setting the epistemological boundaries of the marketing concept (Kotler and Levy 1969) is not relevant anymore. The issue of the 21st century is the framing of these boundaries in ways that allow the marketing concept to be effectively applied in order to make the world a better place. Marketers need to find new uses for themselves, but these cannot include haphazardly tackling existential problems and curing phobias. They can, however, seek the cross-fertilisation of marketing with other disciplines in order to develop a set of techniques that can help people position aspects of their identities, and most importantly, communicate more efficiently in the context of their working lives. At the end of the day, if there is a chance that personal branding could contribute to people's happiness or to their consciously improving themselves, then, it is the marketing academics' responsibility to embrace it and develop it seriously.

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