

ARTICLE

You are your brand: Self-branding and the marketization of self

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Abstract

Personal branding was popularized in the late twentieth century through a spate of self-help literature which enjoined workers to take responsibility for themselves by taking an entrepreneurial approach to the self, seeing themselves as products to be marketed as a means of managing the risks of an unstable labor market. Self-branding discourse frames the “authentic self” as a source of material value which workers can leverage to build a reputation, which they can later capitalize upon in their attempts to remain competitive as workers. This article examines the literature on self-branding to trace its origins as a framework for conceptualizing the self. The discourse of self-branding proposes a singular, profitable self which is at once authentic and consistent. In this review of self-branding literature, I explore what thinking of the self as a brand does to the way individuals relate to themselves. I examine the social construction of authentic self-brands, how branding the self on social media impacts the process of self-presentation, and how workers experience the imperative to self-brand.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 1997, *Fast Company* published Tom Peters' “The Brand Called You,” an article which is commonly attributed with popularizing the idea of personal branding or self-branding. In the article, Peters extolled readers to take responsibility for making themselves stand out in the labor marketplace. As he described it, “We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.” Self-branding entails that individuals think of themselves as products to be marketed to a broad audience in the hopes of becoming more economically competitive. The discourse of self-branding directs self-presentation in a very specific, instrumental way, requiring constant self-reflection and evaluation in constructing a “strong brand”

which will be consistent throughout all interactions (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Wee & Brooks, 2010). As Wee and Brooks (2010) put it:

In the case of personal branding strategies, the actor is expected to present a self that is constantly working on itself, to better itself and its own relationships with others, all the while demonstrating that its behaviours are reflections of an authentically unique personality. (p. 56)

The logic of self-branding pre-dates Peters's article—Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017) trace the self-promotionalism undergirding, self-branding practices to the 1920s, and the blurring boundaries between self and market can be found even earlier (Featherstone, 1991; Illouz, 2007; Pooley, 2010). However, since the late 90s, the idea of thinking of the self as a brand to be packaged, marketed, and sold has taken off (Vallas & Cummins, 2015), becoming a near imperative for aspiring professional and creative class workers—and those hoping to stay in the professional and creative class (e.g., Baym, 2015; Duffy, 2017; Gandini, 2016; Marwick, 2014; Neff, 2012). Even activists are encouraged to, “Brand yourself a change-maker!” (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013), replacing collectivist visions for social change with an ethic of self-promotion (see also: Pruchniewska, 2017).

The popularization of self-branding as a mode of self-presentation is a product of a particular set of economic, social, and cultural influences which have led to the valorization of individualism, reflexivity, self-promotion, entrepreneurialism, and self-governance. These factors were at play long before the current spate of self-branding gurus began capitalize on individuals' insecurities and aspirations, but with the increasing marketization of public life, rising precarity in work, and the spread of information and communications technologies, self-branding has become more dominant as a framework for understanding the self (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2014; Khamis et al., 2017).

The self-branding literature is diffused across a number of disciplines. Drawing on this rich, interdisciplinary field of scholarship can help sociologists to theorize questions of how micro-level processes of self-presentation and identity construction are shaped by the macro-level economic and political changes. Drawing on symbolic interactionist theories of the self, I explore the social context in which the idea of the self as a brand arises. Symbolic interactionist theories of the self are grounded in pragmatist ideas of the self as a reflexive process (Cooley, 1902; James, [1890] 1990; Mead, 1934). As Callero (2003) describes, this has led to an emphasis on the development of the personal self, but literature on the self as a social construct frames the self is not only a private, subjective experience, but a public object as well (see also: Cahill, 1998). Within this review, I examine literature on the context in which the concept of self-branding developed, the experience of presenting self-brands to a public audience, and the social construction of authenticity within self-branding discourse. Although self-branding is largely practiced among professional and creative class workers, the rise of self-branding as a framework for understanding the self speaks to broader issues within contemporary Western society.

2 | SELF-BRANDING AS A FRAMEWORK FOR THE SELF

Branding with regard to products was originally a means of differentiating mass market products—a brand could stand in as a signifier for quality, and make an otherwise unremarkable product unique. However, as Arvidsson (2005) described, branding changed in the mid-twentieth century, when consumer markets became more fragmented and products began to be valued as much for their capacity to signify identity as they were for their utility. In this context, brands became less about the products themselves and more about the emotional connection between consumers and brand identities.

The concept of self-branding scales this process down to an individual level. Rather than promoting one's skills and abilities, individuals construct and promote a consistent, marketable, and ostensibly authentic self-image in order to develop relationships that can be leveraged for economic opportunities, thus instrumentalizing affective relations in the process of developing a “reputation” (Baym, 2015; Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2010; Kuehn, 2016). Although

branding practices have been common among public figures for decades (Gergen, 1991), reality television, webcams, and blogs expanded the ability of “ordinary” people to broadcast their personae to a wide audience, allowing personal branding practices to catch on a much larger scale than they had previously (Andrejevic, 2004; Hearn, 2014; Senft, 2008; Turner, 2010).

Self-branding is accomplished through careful audience management, the selective disclosure of personal information in order to give off a sense of the self-brander’s personality while remaining consistent and “safe for work,” or capable of carrying a promotional message (Marwick, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Thus, self-branders share their love of shoe shopping alongside their professional qualifications (Pagis & Ailon, 2017), or maintain a public social media presence on which they may interact with an audience of friends and “fans” (Marwick and boyd, 2010). As fashion blogger Elizabeth Morrow put it when giving advice to her own social media followers:

When I thought about my own branding, I thought about things I love. I love faux wood grain, vintage wallpaper, tacky 70's things, and avocado green. I am pretty sure it's not hard to tell that all these things that I love really influenced my branding it'd be really confusing for my readers if my branding did not match the content of my blog. The more they read my blog and saw my photos, the more they'd be perplexed by the incongruity (Whitmer, 2015, p. 93).

Morrow describes self-branding as a process of self-exploration and self-discovery. Her perspective is typical of self-branding discourse, which relies on the ideas that the self is a source of material value, that each person has some intrinsic quality that is not only valuable, but unique, and that success is merely a matter of effectively communicating that core being to as broad an audience as possible (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2014). This ethos is built on a particularly modern conceptualization of the self as an ongoing, reflexive project. As traditional referents for the self—family, place, religion—began to lose significance in a fragmented modern world, individuals had to essentially make themselves through a process of self-discovery (Cushman, 1990; Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991). Self-branding, too, offers the brander an invitation for self-discovery and self-knowledge on a public stage, proposing an affinity between the needs of the self and the needs of the market—that an authentic self is necessarily a marketable self.

3 | AUTHENTIC SELF-BRANDS

The concept of authenticity is used across the social sciences in a number of different ways, often to refer to an emotional, self-reflective experience which encapsulates both the knowledge of what it is to be true to oneself and the subjective experience of being true or untrue to that self (Erickson, 1995; Vannini & Franzese, 2008). However, although individuals experience authenticity as a feeling toward the self, Mead (1934) notes that the self never develops in isolation. Rather, the self is constructed in dialog with generalized others. Through this dialog, the individual comes to internalize others' views and expectations.

As both Taylor (1992) and Trilling (1972) described, authenticity is a relatively recently concept, developing alongside the enlightenment's valorization of self-determination. Although often equated with sincerity, Trilling argues that authenticity as a moral imperative is something else entirely. Trilling defines sincerity as “congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (p. 2). It is to avoid falsehood to others by being true to oneself. Thus, sincerity is inherently other-directed—to know oneself is a means to avoiding falsehood rather than an end in itself. As Trilling saw it, the other-directedness of sincerity lead to its downfall as a moral imperative. If we are true to ourselves so as to avoid falsehood to others, can we really be true to ourselves? In contrast, authenticity “is understood to exist wholly by the laws of its own being” (Trilling, 1972, p. 93). To know oneself is an end in itself, regardless of what that self may be.

From this view, commodification and commercialization represent an encroachment on the self, and a loss of authenticity, because commodification is necessarily other-directed, aimed at pleasing people to achieve an economic end (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Lamla, 2009). Thus, according to some critics of contemporary culture, the commodification of authenticity has led to an “alleged crisis of (in)authenticity” (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 1; see also Pooley, 2010). From this perspective, conflicting demands on the self, including demands that the self become a source of economic value, threaten the grounds on which authenticity is based. As Wernick (1991, p. 193) asks, “If social survival, let alone competitive success, depends on continual, audience-oriented, self-staging, what are we behind the mask?”

However, Taylor (1992) argues that authenticity as a moral ideal is a social construction, and one which is only meaningful within social context. Although counter to the enlightenment ideal of the inner directed “authentic self” (Trilling, 1972), the marketization of self is the product of the long-ongoing blurring of boundaries between economic and affective life in which social and cultural capital are leveraged for economic opportunity (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Illouz, 2007; Wernick, 1991). Pooley (2010) refers to this ideal as “calculated authenticity,” and it entails a merging of two ideals of authenticity, a 19th century ethic of self-denialism and a 20th century therapeutic ideal of expressivism—or, as Pooley summarizes, “Be true to yourself; it is to your strategic advantage” (p. 71). Self-branding thus promises not only self-fulfillment, but increased control over one’s economic prospects by capitalizing on one’s affective resources (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2010).

As Gill (2010, p. 249) describes, self-branding arose in a context in which neoliberal economic shifts have made work increasingly precarious, even for professionals who have historically been insulated from the “conditions of radical uncertainty” that have long plagued working class laborers (see also, Neff, 2012). Du Gay (1996) described this cultural valorization of individual self-reliance and personal responsibility as reflecting an “enterprise culture” in which the decreasing stability in the labor market pushed workers toward greater flexibility, capable of remaking themselves as the market required. Within this context, more professional workers began striking out on their own to sell their skills on a contractual basis as a “company of one” (Lane, 2011). As the market became flooded with these high-skilled contingent workers, workers’ social and cultural capital became more important assets to draw upon in order to stand out and remain competitive (Lair et al., 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2010). In using social media platforms to promote a personal brand, individuals are told that they can take control over their image and their employment prospects (Lair et al., 2005; Marwick, 2014; Wee & Brooks, 2010). However, a body of research drawing on symbolic interactionist concepts of the situatedness of selves suggests that the qualities of presenting the self on social media can complicate the process of self-presentation in ways that decrease the kind of control individuals have over their self-image (Davis, 2014; Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2010).

4 | THE PRESENTATION OF SELF-BRANDS

A fundamental concept in symbolic interactionist theories of the self is pragmatist idea of the self as an embodied, situated experience derived through mundane activity. Writing in the early 1990s, Kenneth Gergen (1991) predicted that communications technologies would enable a proliferation of possible selves by allowing us to interact with more and different kinds of people (see also Meyrowitz, 1985), but self-branding discourse runs counter to this idea. The discourse of self-branding directs self-presentation in a very specific, instrumental way, requiring constant self-reflection and evaluation in constructing a “strong brand” which will be consistent throughout all interactions (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Wee & Brooks, 2010). As Van Dijck (2013) quotes Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg as saying:

You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly. ... Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity. (p. 199)

The ideal personal brand is thus framed as consistent, produced through an individual process of self-discovery, comprised of a continuous stream of personal information that constitutes a distinct, recognizable whole. However, research on self-branding practices finds that self-branders do not treat themselves as this way, but rather tailor their self-brand to the platforms that they use, putting forth different information on Facebook than LinkedIn, for instance (Scolere, Pruchniewska, & Duffy, 2018; Van Dijck, 2013). Recent reporting has found that some individuals even maintain multiple accounts for different audiences (Williams, 2016).

Due to the situational quality of self-promotional practices, some scholars have drawn on Goffman's theory of impression management in order to understand the presentation of public selves online (Davis, 2014; Hogan, 2010; Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2010). As Goffman (1959) suggested, social interactions include performers and audiences—individuals expressing an image of themselves or the organization they represent and those on whom these expressions are meant to impress. The success of the performance depends on an alignment between the actor's intentions and the audience's reception, which in turn depends on the actors' capacity to keep information which may discredit their front stage performances backstage, away from the audience's attention.

In both face-to-face interaction and much of synchronous text-based computer-mediated communication, self-presentation is an unfolding performance. Actors respond to each other's cues and adjust their performance accordingly. Additionally, these interactions are relatively ephemeral—once the moment is over, it exists only in the memory of the participants. Therefore, any failures to uphold the interaction order can be forgotten or tactfully ignored. However, in her research on social media use among teens, boyd described interactions on social media as having a much longer shelf-life, due to the “persistence, searchability, replicability, and scalability” of these platforms (boyd, 2008, p. 2). The ability to orient one's self-performance in a socially desirable way requires control over one's audience. However, the technological affordances and constraints of social media platforms complicate individuals' ability to exercise this control. Years-old websites, comments, and social media posts which contradict the image one is trying to project may come back to haunt users, and even if one deletes an embarrassing or socially unacceptable social media faux pas, one may not be able to do so before one's audience screenshots the moment for posterity (Hess & Waller, 2014).

Hogan (2010) therefore argues that the kind of asynchronous self-presentation individuals engage in on social media is more akin to a premeditated display of virtual artifacts connoting social and symbolic capital than an unfolding social performance attuned to reacting others (Hogan, 2010), necessitating impression management through the display of personally meaningful artifacts *before*, and not *during*, the performance, as is traditionally the case (Hogan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Rather than altering their self-presentation *in situ* in response to the audience's responses, the individual needs to consider how others in their audience may potentially react. This process is complicated by the fact that in constructing a brand, the individual may have little information as to who comprises their actual audience, and thus may not be fully aware of how best to present themselves to elicit the desired response (Brake, 2012; Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2010).

As Litt (2012) describes, when one lacks information about the actual audience, one constructs an imagined audience. But while we may consciously present an image with a particular audience in mind, but we cannot guarantee that our imagined audience is indeed our actual audience, and that either one will interpret our message as we intended (Baym & boyd, 2012; Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2014). Although actions on participatory web platforms may be accessible to a broad audience, research suggests that users do not anticipate their behaviors will be seen by people outside of their imagined audience (Davis, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2010). The publicness of participatory web platforms can lead to a collapse of situated social contexts as one is less able to manage one's audience, resulting in an increasing risk of self discreditation (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Marwick and boyd (2010) describe the threat of the de-contextualized self as encouraging users to present a self that appealed to the “lowest common denominator”—a self that would be inoffensive to any relevant audience. However, for the brand to seem too self-consciously constructed and “staged” can be seen as inauthentic, thus discrediting the self-brand (McRae, 2017; Serazio, 2017; Van Nuenen, 2016). This suggests content producers are in a catch-22, in which the very actions they take to ensure their relevance can also make them irrelevant.

5 | THE BRANDING IMPERATIVE

Despite the risk to reputation, the pressure to engage in self-branding practices remain high, even among workers who are resistant to the idea of presenting themselves as a consumer object (Baym, 2015; Gandini, 2016; Scolere et al., 2018). Even in the face of barriers that may keep users from breaking through to an audience, workers still engage in self-promotional behaviors on social media, describing it as a necessary part of being a worker in today's labor market (Baym, 2015; Gandini, 2016; Hearn, 2017; Scolere et al., 2018). Self-branding advice thus encourages workers to be continually working at and promoting the self, ensuring the worker is always "on," leveraging their personality and lifestyle in the pursuit of producing branded value. In a context in which building a reputation is necessary to remaining relevant, self-promotion is non-negotiable. As Duffy and Pooley (2017) describe social networking sites, in particular capitalize on laborers' desire for visibility, "harness [ing] the content and immaterial labor of users under the guise of 'sharing'" (p. 1), encouraging consistent self-presentation and constant audience engagement in the hopes of achieving an uncertain set of rewards.

And to be sure—there is no guarantee that the affective labor workers put into developing and maintaining their personal brands will be rewarded. The spread of communications technologies initially led some to suggest that the media production process was being democratized—as the story goes, these technologies wrest power from media elites, allowing for a democratization of content creation that enables people outside of traditional spheres of cultural influence to break through and be seen, purely on the basis of merit and hard work (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). However, as Turner (2010) described it, while the tools of media production have become more widely available, the opportunities to break through to an audience and garner influence are still limited, and controlled by traditional cultural gatekeepers, representing a "democratization of communication opportunities, not a change in who exercises power." (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013, p. 154). Social media algorithms tend to lend the most visibility to users and content that drives the most audience engagement in the forms of likes, comments, follows, and shares. This privileges content produced by established experts and media personalities (Turner, 2010), as well as users who reproduce "preferred depictions of bodies" (Carah & Shaul, 2016, p. 70). Amateur content producers tend to follow gendered scripts for self-presentation (Banet-Weiser & Arzumanova, 2012), and users whose audiences do not validate their claims to having a right to visibility are subject to ridicule and harassment (Marwick, 2014).

However, self-branding advice downplays the inequality endemic to social media fields, instead reproducing the myth of power sharing in digital spaces (Duffy, 2017). Self-branding discourse serves a rhetorical and disciplinary purpose—to provide an ideological drive for individuals to produce and engage with content (Hearn, 2017). The actual form that content takes matters little. Content-sharing platforms benefit from users' continual engagement, producing valuable data about consumer habits, which can be exploited by advertisers. As Hearn (2017) describes, "... the pursuit of meaningful individual identity, autonomous forms of self-presentation, and processes of self-valorization have come to function in an entirely different register; their actual intent, content, or outcome matter little—what matters is that they are pursued, and ceaselessly, relentlessly so." The fear of irrelevance and the hope of reward drives workers to market themselves, but ultimately, they do not reap the full benefit of their affective labor.

6 | CONCLUSION

The way we conceptualize the self is shaped by a confluence of social, economic, and cultural factors. In the late 20th century, a confluence of factors led to the popularization of the idea of the self as a product that could be packaged, promoted, and sold. Self-branding is a product of an unstable labor market which places the onus on individual workers to manage the risks of neoliberalism by taking an entrepreneurial approach to the self. Beyond simply promoting their skills, workers engage in an ongoing process of affective labor in order to develop their social networks and their own lifestyles for material gain. As such, one can trace the rise of personal branding to a point long before

its ubiquity in self-help advice books in the late 90s. Personal branding is reflective of an ongoing process by which social life is subsumed under market logic—and markets become embedded with emotional meanings.

Self-branding discourse frames the needs of the market as complementing the needs of the self—that through a process of reflection and self-discovery, one can come to a greater sense of self-awareness, getting in touch with an authentic core self, which one can then express to an audience for material gain. This discourse assumes that a worker's successes—and failures—are attributable to their own passion and hard work. The worker whose personal brand does not resonate simply is not presenting the right kind of self, or not doing so in the right way. However, research on workers' self-branding practices has found that the ideal self-brand—consistent, always “on,” authentic and marketable—is incompatible with the experience of presenting public selves. By encouraging workers to produce “strong brands” that remain consistent across contexts, self-branding discourse ignores the situated quality of the self. Living up to that ideal is impossible, and when branding themselves on social media, workers risk irrelevance, invisibility, and discreditation.

If anything, the circumstances which allowed self-branding to flourish have only become more exaggerated in recent years. Labor conditions are more precarious, as workers patch together a livelihood through the insecure “gig” economy, even working for free in the hopes of building a reputation (Gandini, 2016). Ubiquitous social media use is no longer the province of elite tech workers, but a mundane part of social life. Hearn (2017) suggests that the speed and amount of data being produced and shared about the self in response to these changes represents a new ideal type of self—an anticipatory, speculative self geared toward pursuing validation not for the content of the self, but for the amount of traffic and engagement one is capable of eliciting on social media sites. Whereas the self-brand is meant to elicit social approval, the speculative self seeks validation from the platforms for which it produces value, further alienating the content producer from the subjective needs of the self.

Future research can examine workers' experiences with self in this changing context, and how further changes in the economy may impact workers' relationship to themselves and to their labor. Additionally, although nearly ubiquitous among a certain populations of workers, Litt and Hargittai (2016) reveal that many people do not take such an instrumental approach to their self-presentation on social media. This raises a question: What is self-branding to those outside of creative and professional spheres? The labor of self-branding is certainly not the only kind of affective, emotional, poorly compensated work available under neoliberalism. It may prove useful to compare and contrast self-branding with the kind of emotion work performed by lower-income service workers. Although not universal, understanding self-branding can help us to understand the experience of living and working in a time when the boundaries between public and private have eroded, and workers are economically unmoored.

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