Every Picture Tells a Story - Exploring Personal Branding Communication Activities on Social Media

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Abstract. Social media has significantly transformed the way we communicate with each other. It is now possible to let the whole world participate in one's own life, thus having the opportunity to easily create one's own personal brand. In this study, we aim to explore the factors of successful personal branding activities on social media. The present paper aims to find out which aspects of personal brand identities are communicated on social media and how they affect user interaction. More particular, we look at the communication activities of five popular female musicians on the social networking site Instagram. Due to its emphasis on visuals (images and short films), Instagram is particularly suitable to analyze personal branding activities to find out why some individuals excel in creating their personal brand. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the fields of personal branding and social media. From a practical perspective, this study provides important insights for social media managers, artists, and everybody who is interested in building a strong personal brand on social media.

Keywords: Social media · Personal branding · Brand communication · Personal brand identity

1 Introduction

Social media has significantly transformed the way we communicate with each other [1]. It is now possible to let the whole world participate in one's own life, thus having the opportunity to become one's own brand more easily. Although the concept of personal branding is not entirely new [2], it has become increasingly relevant in the digital age. Once considered a marketing tactic especially for celebrities [3] or personalities from business and politics, social media applications have allowed personal branding to become a significant opportunity for anyone willing to fascinate the online community [4]. Moreover, for a long time the creation of an appealing personal brand as well as the communication of it was associated with great effort and with high financial expenses. Today, social media offer a fast and more cost efficient opportunity to create and maintain a personal brand [5].

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Similar to the more widespread idea of product branding, self-branding begins by defining a distinct brand identity before actively communicating it to the targeted market in order to achieve a specific goal, such as gaining employment, establishing new friendships, or as a way for self-expression [4, 6]. Despite the growing importance of the self-branding phenomenon –especially on social media– there is surprisingly a lack of studies that deal with the *how* of personal branding and that consider the special circumstances of the fast-changing online environment [5].

Thus, in this study we aim to explore the factors leading to successful personal branding activities on social media. The present paper aims to find out which aspects of personal brand identities are communicated on social media and how they affect user interaction. More particular, we look at the communication activities of five popular female musicians on the social networking site (SNS) Instagram. Due to its emphasis on visuals (images and short films), Instagram is particularly suitable to analyze personal branding activities to find out why some individuals excel in creating their personal brand.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein [7] define social media as Internet-based applications that provide users the opportunity to create, exchange, and share content using the technological foundations of Web 2.0. Social media includes a variety of different formats, such as blogs, corporate discussion forums, and chat rooms, product or service reviews from users and various social networks [8]. Individuals do not only interact with each other, but can also directly reach out to companies or other organizations [9]. The inherent interactivity of social media applications thus offers individuals and newly formed interest groups the opportunity to share, develop, discuss and modify content they have created themselves [10].

Of course, companies have already recognized the enormous potential of social media for their marketing purposes, [1] such as brand communication [11], customer relationship management [12], or product marketing [13–15]. Felix, Rauschnabel and Hinsch [16] define social media marketing as an interdisciplinary and cross-functional concept, which mainly (often in combination with other communication channels) uses the platforms of the social web to achieve corporate goals by creating value for various interest groups. SNS like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter have become particularly important for companies since they accumulate a huge amount of potential customers [17]. SNS allow companies to create an online presence to reach out to their target audience at relatively low cost to provide them with information about their products and to develop a strong relationship with their customers [7]. However, the possibilities social media offer to create a strong brand are not only limited to companies or organizations. On the contrary, it is now more than ever also possible for “regular” individuals to seize all the opportunities social media offer in the same way.

2.2 Personal Branding

The traditional notion of branding mainly focused on organizations and/or products [18]. Contrary to this traditional view, Peters [2] introduced the idea of personal branding. He describes a person's personality as a 'human brand' that can be formed and communicated to others [2]. Montoya and Vandehey [19] see personal values, skills, and actions as the core of the personal brand. Similarly, Schwabel [6] understands the goal of personal branding as the expansion of one's own existing personality into a brand rather than the change of one's own personality to correspond to a desired brand image. Rampersad [20] describes personal branding as the sum of personal marketing activities to create a consistent external image with the ultimate goal of creating publicity. Accordingly, Hood, Robles and Hopkins [21] define personal branding as the dissemination and promotion of one's own abilities and individual strengths in the sense of a classic product using integrated marketing communication.

Even though the idea of product and personal branding may sound similar at first, they differ in various respects. The biggest difference between corporate brands and personal brands lies in their development process. Whereas product brands are developed based on an existing demand and identified target group preferences, the creation of a personal brand is predetermined by innate personal traits that lie within an individual. Personal brands are therefore more likely to change over time than if they were created from scratch [22]. Consequently, Leland [23] describes personal branding as a continuous stream of small developments instead of a series of drastic modifications.

And yet, the process of personal branding has a lot in common with traditional product branding. A comprehensive self-reflection and self-evaluation of one's own strengths and particularities are regarded as the starting point for the creation of a strong brand [24]. Subsequently, unique and valuable characteristics must be emphasized to allow differentiation from the competition. At the same time, however, these characteristics must also be relevant and important for a certain target group [25]. In summary, all successful branding activities include the core activities of analyzing and communicating individual strengths as well as highlighting their uniqueness for a specific target group [26].

A special category of personal brands are the so-called "celebrity brands". The idea of using the popularity of celebrities and tuning them into (human) trademarks is not new and has a long tradition in theory and practice. Due to their special role as individuals in the public eye, celebrities are admired by their fans and serve as "landmarks" for their own way of living [27].

Although celebrities have already been the subject of various scientific studies [e.g. 28–30], the concept of having a celebrity status, i.e. conceptualizing what exactly the characteristics of a celebrity are, have surprisingly attracted less attention. In an early study, McCracken [31] describes a celebrity as part of a social elite, which is gaining popularity primarily through public relations in the form of press articles or TV appearances. In the marketing literature, research mainly focused on the idea of using celebrities as brand ambassadors for product brands [32, 33]. Thomson [34], however, argues that public figures or celebrities represent brands themselves, since they (1) can be professionally managed and (2) also have characteristics of traditional product

brands. Similarly, Close et al. [18] as well as Rindova, Pollock and Hayward [35] do not see any differences between celebrities and traditional brands as they also can be at the center of planned marketing activities with the aim of attracting public attention.

More recently, studies have emphasized the importance of simultaneous self-presentation on a variety of media channels as a central element in creating celebrity brands [36]. Since the emergence of the Internet, communication possibilities for self-portrayal have changed dramatically, certainly making it easier to be omnipresent on a variety of different media formats. Thus, the number of people who are considered "famous" is steadily growing [37], because social media and better access to a wider range of communication channels in general have made it much easier to achieve "celebrity status" these days [38].

2.3 Brand Identity

The creation of a unique and recognizable identity as well as its authentic communication are considered central success factors for a brand [39]. Through direct interaction on social media, brands can build a strong identity and can therefore establish an emotional bond that makes consumers feel strongly connected to them [40]. Thus, it is worthwhile to investigate how individuals can leverage social media to create a strong brand identity.

Aaker [41] defines the personality of a brand as the set of human characteristics primarily associated with a brand. It was also Aaker, who, based on the Big Five personality traits [see e.g. 42], developed the Brand Personality Scale (BPS) with five core brand personality traits: *sophistication*, *excitement*, *competence*, *sincerity*, and *ruggedness* (later also *rudeness*) [41]. The first dimension of the brand personality, *sophistication*, refers strongly to the representation of outer beauty. A further expression of the brand identity is the category *excitement*, which generally describes the presence of energy and activity. *Competence* is described, among other things, by the characteristics successful, intelligent and trustworthy and, similar to sophistication and excitement, is regarded as a personality trait with positive associations [43]. *Sincerity* is characterized by the attributes down-to-earth and honest. Honesty has already been identified in various studies as a central factor in building trust between a brand and the consumer [44]. The last category, *ruggedness*, is described by the attributes outdoorsy and tough and is considered as less important compared to the other attributes of the brand identity [41].

As already mentioned, individuals can also have a distinct brand identity that can be professionally marketed [34, 45]. Moreover, a strong brand identity is generally regarded as an important factor in distinguishing oneself from the competition [46]. Based on the growing importance of social media for personal branding activities, two questions arise: (1) How can individuals use SNS to communicate their own personal brand identity, i.e. which characteristics of their brand identity are particularly highlighted; and (2) which of the shared content generates the greatest user interactivity?

3 Methodology

We chose the popular photo-sharing SNS site Instagram (www.instagram.com) for our study due to its increasing significance for modern marketing and its particular suitability for personal branding activities [47, 48]. In order to answer the research questions, we first analyzed the most popular Instagram profiles. The profiles were selected based on the number of followers indicating the status and impact of an artist on social media [49]. Our initial analysis revealed that ten out of the 25 most successful Instagram profiles were female musicians. After excluding profiles that were not active during our period of analysis or that showed unconventional communication patterns (e.g. posting identical pictures multiple times) and in order to ensure a manageable and homogenous sample, we based our analysis on five Instagram profiles of popular female musicians: Demi Lovato, Jennifer Lopez, Katy Perry, Miley Cyrus, and Tylor Swift.

All profile contents were collected, categorized, and coded over a period of three months from January to March 2018. Overall, data collection resulted in 470 posts across all analyzed profiles. From the 470 posts, 114 posts (24%) were contributed by Demi Lovato, 148 posts (31%) by Jennifer Lopez, 73 posts (16%) by Katy Perry, 122 posts (26%) by Miley Cyrus, and 13 posts (3%) by Taylor Swift. For each post, we first examined whether the post was an advertisement post (e.g. for a certain product or an upcoming tour) or a regular Instagram post (e.g. picture without any reference to a commercial product). We excluded that advertisements from our analysis and continued to explore the regular posts to further find out about the brand personality characteristics of the artists. In a first step, we conducted free analysis based on a short description of the shown picture. In a second step, we categorized the posts into the deductively derived brand traits based on Aaker's [41] brand personality scale: sophistication, sincerity, competence, excitement, and rudeness.

4 Results

From our analyzed 470 posts, 132 posts (28%) clearly communicated an invitation to buy or at least to use a commercial offering (for example the invitation to watch a TV program that features the artist or the invitation for the upcoming world tour of the artist). The remaining 338 posts (72%) contained cues related to the artists' personal brand identities and served as our final sample.

We found each of the five personality traits in communication activities of the artists. However, the occurrence of them differs considerably. For an overview of the different personality traits across the artists, please see Fig. 1.

In particular, our findings show that the most frequently communicated personality trait is sophistication (50%). Accordingly, the category sophistication highlights the physical appearance of the person. Figure 2 shows an example of a post that displays the personality trait sophistication. Moreover, our findings show that within the brand trait sophistication, the sub attributes *beautiful* and *attractive* are the most communicated

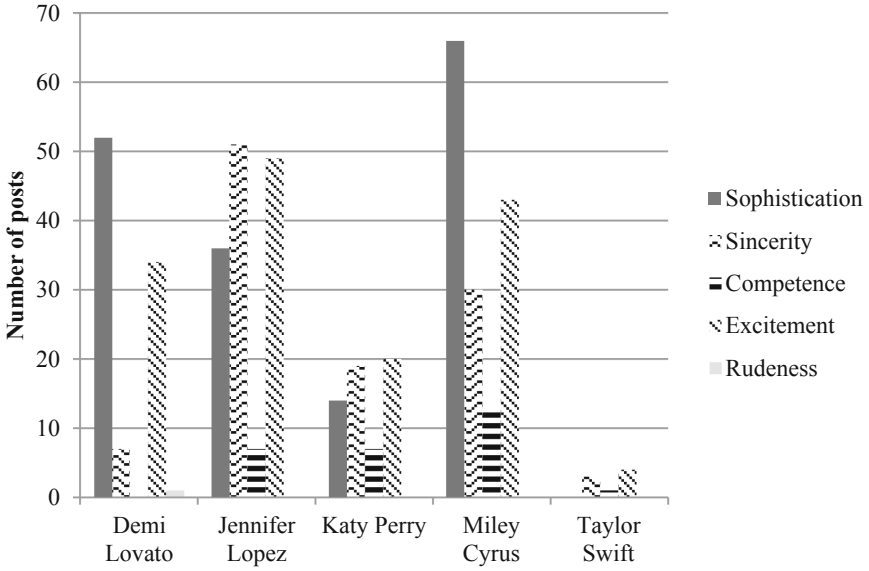

Fig. 1. Distribution of personality traits across the artists

ones (each 93%). Additionally, the artists also communicate the sub attributes *sexy* (71%), *stylish* (63%), and *glamorous* (52%). However, the attribute *cute* is hardly communicated by the artists (8%).

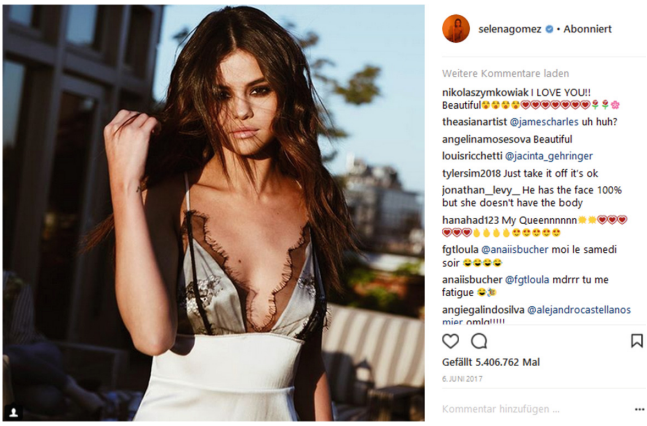

Fig. 2. Example for sophistication personality trait [50]

The second most communicated personality trait is excitement (45%). Findings show that the most communicated sub categories of the excitement personality trait, are *dynamic* (72%), *exciting* (83%), and *good energy* (93%).

Moreover, results show that 33% of the posts communicate the personality trait sincerity. The most conspicuous feature within the personality trait sincerity is the accumulation of the subcategory *can identify with* (100%). All coded contributions communicate this subcategory. This allows the conclusion that the representation of everyday activities, but also universal values such as family and friendship constitutes the most important component within this category. With 97%, the subcategory *compassionate*, i.e. the showing of compassion and sympathy, is also represented with above-average frequency. The attributes *sincere* and *good listener* can be found in 50% of all contributions, while the characteristic *trustworthy* (34%) plays a rather subordinate role. Figure 3 shows an example post of the personality trait sincerity.

Fig. 3. Example for sincerity personality trait [51]

The personality trait competence is communicated by 8% of the posts. Within this personality trait, artists most often communicate the subcategories *experienced* (96%) and *successful* (61%). The subcategory *intelligent* (43%) is also still presented very frequently, while the subcategory *interesting* is only communicated in 32% of the posts that communicate competence. Even though competence generally receives less attention, the presentation of professional competence or experience in one's own field as well as achieved successes are important for personal brands. Only one post contained the personality trait rudeness (0.3%).

To gain further insights which posts generated the greatest user interaction, we first analyzed the three most successful posts (measured by the number of "likes") for each of the five artists. Findings show that a clear majority of the most successful posts (ten of the 15) focus on "self-portrayal" (i.e. showing portraits or full-body photographs of the artists). Other communicated key themes, such as "family and friends", "backstage insights" or information about the artist's personal "interests and hobbies" have attracted considerably less interest and therefore achieved far fewer likes. Regarding containing brand personality traits, we find that 80% of the most successful posts contain the personality trait sophistication and 33% reflect the category excitement.

In addition, we analyzed the three most successful posts regarding their number of comments of four of the five artists (one of the artists disabled to comment function). Similar to our other findings, results show that 67% of the most commented posts fall into the category "self-portrayal". Moreover, 92% of the posts contained the personality trait sophistication and 25% the personality trait excitement.

5 Discussion

5.1 General Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify how personality traits are communicated on social media by successful personal brands. There exist only a few studies examining brand identities of celebrities such as writers [52], athletes [53], or politicians [54]. Despite the growing importance of digital communication activities, there is still a lack of studies that deal with personal branding activities on social media. From a theoretical perspective, we therefore contribute to the fields of personal branding and social media by shedding light on how successful personal branding on social media takes place.

Our findings show that the analyzed artists mostly communicate the brand personality traits sophistication and excitement and that both characteristics lead to high user interaction. In that context, visual appearance and a positive attitude seem to be central factors in order to create a strong personal brand. These findings are consistent with existing research in the field of personal branding. For example, Lunardo et al. [55] see sophistication as the main characteristic of an attractive personal brand. Moreover, Choi and Rifon [56] state that external attractiveness (sophistication) is the primary determining factor for successful personal brands. Besides that, previous studies identified the personality trait excitement as one of the most valued personality traits of both product brands and personal brands (e.g. [57]). This study contributes to the ongoing discussion by showing that the personality trait excitement is also an important characteristic of successful personal brands on social media.

Moreover, we show that the personality trait sincerity can help to build a successful personal brand on social media. The analyzed artists often present themselves as compassionate, lovable, and approachable persons with whom the fans can identify.

Moreover, we find that the personality trait competence can be used to build strong personal brands. Compared to the already mentioned brand identity traits we however find that competence seems not so important for the social media personal brand identity. One reason for the low representation of one's own competence could be the artists' aim to be close to the target group instead of clearly distinguishing themselves from them. Fans may find it more difficult to identify themselves with attributes such as experience and intelligence, which is why they could play a minor role in the representation of the analyzed brand personalities.

Finally and not surprisingly, our study shows that the personality trait rudeness is not at all relevant for presenting artists' brand personalities on social media.

5.2 Practical Implications

Our study provides important insights for social media managers, artists, and everybody who is interested in building a strong personal brand on social media.

First, to build a successful personal brand on social media, users should primarily communicate the personality traits sophistication and excitement. Sophistication and excitement proved to be major aspects of successful personal brand on social media, which was also clearly shown in the high user interaction. Thus, in order to increase their popularity and user interaction, social media managers and artists should primarily focus on communicating sophistication and excitement. Through a high level of interaction, followers can become even closer and more emotionally attached to an individual (or his profile), thus contributing to the establishment of a long-term relationship with the personal brand.

Second, users on social media should avoid communicating the personality trait rudeness when aiming to build a strong personal brand. Our study shows that rudeness does not play a role in the representation of the artists' brand personality. It can therefore be assumed that this personality trait is largely connected with negative associations and is therefore avoided. Social media managers should also regularly review their clients' posts for potentially negative content such as rudeness, and amend them if necessary. Therefore, it can make sense to make a "brand personality map" for their clients in order to plan the content that should be communicated in their social media posts. Due to the fast pace of SNS' like Instagram, consistency and a clear brand identity strategy help to shape a personal brand in the long run.

Third, when developing a successful brand strategy and its communication within social media, users must be aware of possible damage to the image due to lack of authenticity. Authenticity is crucial for positive consumer and follower reaction and can lead to significant and irreparable damage to brand identity if insufficient attention is paid to it [58]. Thus, it is also important to constantly monitor the reaction of social media followers. Qualitative approaches could help to find out how communication activities are perceived by the audience. Solely focusing on likes and comments may not be sufficient to find out more subtle aspects.

6 Limitations and Future Research

Our study has some limitations that, however, provide possibilities for future research. First, we used a relatively small sample from a specific industry for our study. Thus, our findings from the music industry cannot necessarily be generalized for other industries or other settings. Future research should examine whether our findings can also be confirmed for other industries or whether they are also relevant for private, non-celebrity personal brands. Furthermore, as we analyzed only profiles of female artists, further research should investigate whether and to what extent the brand identity on social media differs between male and female individuals.

Second, we only considered the social media platform Instagram for our study. To gain a more comprehensive understanding on how to build strong personal brands on

social media, research should also consider other social media platforms (e.g. Facebook or LinkedIn) for their analysis.

Third, we focused on visual content in our study and neglected images' captions or texts. Here, future research should clarify how different types of information may influence the perception of brand identities.

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