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Self-Branding on Social Media: An Analysis of Style Bloggers on Instagram

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Abstract

The concept of self-branding is prevalent in society today due to the emergence and growth of various social media platforms. In particular, this new digital media environment has empowered especially women to market themselves as brands. Despite increasing scholarly and practical attention being paid to the influence of social media on individuals' self-branding practices, little empirical research has systematically examined how people use social media as a tool to establish their branded-selves. Using a content analysis method, we analyzed 243 posts from the top 10 style bloggers' Instagram accounts according to a systematic coding scheme. The results of our analysis indicate that although most leading style bloggers still adhere to traditional beauty and hierarchic criteria, social media provides great opportunities for women to establish their branded-selves and allows them to market themselves in line with the increase of awareness of women's rights. Results also show that a huge number of the style bloggers' followers are influenced by the way the bloggers use technological functions along with their modes to present themselves, through which they become emotionally attached to the bloggers. Based on these findings, we discuss academic and practical implications for self-branding via using social media.

Keywords: Self-branding; Social Media; Postfeminism; Instagram; Self-presentation; Blogger

1. Introduction

There is an increasing trend on social media platforms of users trying to market themselves as brands to gain attention and cultural and monetary value, especially among the subculture of personal style bloggers. These bloggers

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are primarily young women who post pictures of their outfits and their possessions and comment on fashion-related issues and products [1]. Due to their large numbers of followers, some well-known style bloggers are influential and attain fame in both online and offline worlds. They enjoy such popularity because social media platforms have established a public persona [2], where the individual choice, autonomy, empowerment, and independence of women are emphasized.

Evidence shows that style bloggers who use social media as a platform to establish their self-brands enjoy high levels of creativity and self-expression; they do not have to follow the conventional fashion mold—i.e., thin, tall, white, and rich [3]. This seemingly upends the traditional fashion realm, which includes fashion magazines and runways shows. Nevertheless, the obsession with investing time and finances into new technology with revolutionary potential, such as social media, obscures the fact that style bloggers who promote themselves online are still firmly contextualized in a neoliberal capitalist framework and reinforce the existing hierarchies of class, gender, aesthetics, and tastes [1]. This study seeks to address this controversy by investigating style bloggers' self-branding practices on Instagram. Specifically, we address the following questions:

(1) How do people establish their branded-selves on a social media platform?
(2) What are the distinct technological features of social media as a tool for self-branding?

To answer these questions, we examined style bloggers on an image-based social media platform, Instagram. Instagram is a rapidly growing visual self-branding tool; it has become the most popular and largest photo-sharing social media platform in the world, with 600 million monthly active users [4]. Furthermore, Instagram users have the highest scores for showing affection for and following fashion trends compared with three other mainstream social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat) [5]. Given that the Internet is increasingly turning into a visual medium and more and more individuals are using images to express themselves, we believe that Instagram is an appropriate platform for examining individual users' self-branding practices.

This study contributes to both the academic and practical fields. For academia, this study extends the use and gratification theory [6-10] by explaining how women use social media to satisfy their need for information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment [11]. Regarding the practical significance of this research, the findings of this study can help marketers understand audiences' preferences for and interests in fashion and style-related products.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self-branding on social media

Research on self-branding has flourished in recent years due to the development of various kinds of self-marketing platforms online. The literature on self-branding encompasses various disciplines, including business, marketing, media and communication, and computer sciences [12-19]. The term self-branding was first coined by Tom Peter [20] in his article titled "The Brand Called You." He argued that the main promise of self-branding is that everyone has the power to be their own brand and that a person's main job is to be their own marketer. In recent academic research, self-branding has been mainly reviewed as a set of practices, a mindset, and/or a way of remaking the self as a salable commodity to attract attention and acquire cultural and monetary value through social media platforms [16] [21].

Both statements imply that the self-branding practice provides social media users with enormous autonomy. However, the concept of self-branding is inherently contradictory and is contextualized in the neoliberal capitalism [1] [13] because it promotes both authenticity and business-targeted self-presentation [17]. This means that the rewarding branded-self has to cater to the taste and need of the mainstream market. As Hearn [13] pointed out, "Self-branding involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries". Marwick [22] also confirms the connection between self-branding practices and the mainstream market, arguing that those people who have a famous branded-self on Instagram reinforce the traditional hierarchy of fame by attracting their audiences using the strategies similar to those employed by traditional celebrities, such as disciplined bodies, sports cars, and clothing from high-end brands.

Research has identified authenticity as a very unclear concept in the field of self-branding. Although authenticity is defined as "something real, something true, something moral, something apart from the crass, commercial, social