A Netnographic Study of Personal Branding on Instagram

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Abstract: Social media has transformed diverse human endeavors. It has afforded organizations and individuals the convenience of managing their routines. This study adopts a netnographic perspective to investigate how young female entrepreneurs create and use images on Instagram to engender personal brand development. A total of five research participants were recruited for the study. Images from the participants’ Instagram accounts were studied and analyzed based on Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) two-phase method for analyzing images. Findings from this study reveal that Instagram is essential in personal brand development. All the participants uncovered the gains of using Instagram in pursuing their entrepreneurial career respectively. Overall, this study ascertains that young female entrepreneurs effectively utilize Instagram in developing personal brands. The study concludes that young entrepreneurs should embrace the use of social media to create a niche for themselves in their chosen careers.

Keywords: Instagram, Netnography, Personal Brand & Social Media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology has made branding easier. The social media has made communication on different levels convenient and affordable. Individuals and businesses utilize social media for different purposes. Ayad (2017) social media submits are computer-mediated technologies that enable the propagation and disseminating of information, interests, thoughts and other forms of expression via online communities and networks. Kaplan and Haenlein (as cited in Udenze, 2018) argue that social media are a group of Internet-enabled technologies that depend on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that permits the establishment and exchange of user-generated- contents. Social media are not just platforms to spend free time and entertainment; it is also a tool for building and maintaining professional networks and spreading ideas (Gorska, n.d). The scholar further opines that social media afford people the medium to share their insights, opinions, and as well as their achievements and qualifications (Gorska, n.d). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) divided social media into: collaborative projects like Wikipedia, blogs and micro-blogs (eg.Twitter), content communities (eg. Youtube), social networking platforms (eg. Facebook), online game worlds (eg.World of Warcraft), and online social worlds (eg. Second Life).
Branding is not the prerogatives of corporate organizations (Peter, 1997). Personal branding is the management of an individual and influencing how others perceive and thinks of that individual (Lindahl and Öhlund, 2013). Instagram, a popular social media platform is mostly used by young people for editing and sharing photos, videos, and thoughts. Instagram was unveiled in 2010, and as of June 2018, it has reached 1 billion monthly active subscribers, up from 800 million in September 2017.

Instagram has made knowledge of taking and sharing images of more personal. Smartphones are powerful tools in the hands of their owners. This phenomenon has equally made newbie phone owners professional photographers. The act of taking pictures of day to day life happenings has become a latest strategy. Images give us the consciousness of places and people that we have never meet (Schroeder 1998). Hence, images are marketing communication tools. Instagram is significantly novel, and this is why it is pertinent to investigate its implication on the topic of personal branding.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the role of images on Instagram in personal branding. Also, the aim is to fill the knowledge vacuum in social media, Instagram and personal branding. In doing so this study ascertains the obvious way of communicating personal brand through Instagram. The primary research question of this study: Do people create and use their images on Instagram for personal branding, and are these images effectual in imparting personal branding?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media is a relatively new happening and because of the level at which it is growing increasingly, and its import on significant subjects, the social media has attracted the attention of researchers. Indongesit (cited in Udenze, 2017) describes social media as media for social interaction that adopts highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Okoro and Nwafor (2013) describe social media as Internet-based platforms and services that permit users to engage with one another, generate content, distribute, and search for information online. Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga (2009) argue thus, social media are digital platforms where individuals connect interact and communicate with one another. Haenlein and Kaplan (2010) claim that engagement in social media is propelled by a desire to engender an image that is congruent with one's personality. Instagram enables the construction of such images. There is a saying that pictures speak larger than words. Instagram allows individuals to create and display pictures on their profiles. The account owner decides what kind of images they want to portray. The pictures or images shared on Instagram may be “tagged.” Tagging entails attaching another account owner to the picture you intend to share. Similarly, words may accompany the picture to further describe the content of the photo. In the wisdom of Lindahl and Öhlund (2013) random simplicity is Instagram's huge affinity, and when communicating through words is difficult, pictures sometimes make it easier.

Social media and Instagram provide a platform for people to publicize their personal brand and image. Personality on Instagram is constructed through the creating and sharing of photos. This is synonymous with the symbolic interaction paradigm. People have an innate need for knowledge that propels them to search for content (Winston & Huaxia, 2010). With social media, User Generated Content (UGC) is playing a huge role in people’s life. Social media users are now the authors on their own rights. They publish whatever kind of contents at their own pace.

Personal Branding and Social Media

The phenomenon of personal branding probably emerged from Tom Peters’ article entitled ‘The Brand Called You’. Peters (1997) reiterates the opinion that a person has the ability to brand themselves, and that everyone engages in personal branding for them to create a niche for themselves in this unemployment era. Arruda (2003) opines that personal branding permits the individual to stand out and also differentiate oneself from the competitors. Labrecque, Markos, and Milne (2011) ascertained that personal branding is a conscious effort in an online platform. Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) opine that their study participants used Facebook to knowingly manage their self-presentation. Also, Belk (2013) found that the conscious management of online self-presentation is common today. Similarly, while Schau and Gilly (2003) discovered that their research respondents put in a lot of effort into
deciding what content to share on their personal websites. Labrecque et al. further argue that branding may not be avoided when one takes part in online environments. Khedher (2015) asserted that due to the increasing relevance of social media, there is a need to study personal branding in various endeavors like marketing, unemployment amongst others.

Shepherd (2005) gives a succinct explanation of personal branding. According to the scholar, personal branding is essentially an inside-out process that summarizes the strengths and uniqueness of a person vis-a-vis the targeted market. Personal branding can be likened to strength, weakness, opportunities, and threat analysis (SWOT analysis). The individual reflects on their strength and weakness in relation to the target environment and then aims to communicate it effectively to the target audience. Chen (2013) writes that personal branding on YouTube is the creation of brand personality via self-presentation on the video content uploaded on the website. The author coined his definition of personal branding in the clime of the video-sharing website, YouTube. Furthermore, Chen (2013) argues that the components on peoples' social media profiles such as personal information and other content that are revealed to the audience are elements of personal branding. Labrecque et al. (2011) suggest that personal branding entails managing social networking site profiles. However, Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) argue that self-commodification is one of the negative effects of personal branding. Persons that are engaged in personal branding are forced to turn themselves into a product or service. These definitions parallel personal branding on Instagram. It is careful self-presentation through the images uploaded on the individuals Instagram profiles as encapsulated in this study.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by the Identity Capital theory as postulated by Côté (1997). According to the scholar, “today persons embark on self-styled career/lifestyle trajectories based on their own personal preferences and choices” (p. 579). Recently, the significance of standing out, and being differentiated among the crowd is more emphasized. The drive to create an identity and a “self” has equally increased (Lindahl and Öhlund, 2013). Côté (1997) explains how all individuals are in possession of their unique identity capital, and this capital is both tangible and intangible. Côté believes that the more tangible assets are manifested in the behaviors of the person while more intangible assets are a part of the personality of a person. This model can be used when examining how young people, create an image of themselves and how well they initiate a personality or negotiate for social memberships (Côté, 1997). Furthermore, the theory reiterates which assets, embedded in their identity, individuals then use to succeed in their developmental stages.

Through social media, particularly on Instagram what images people post on Instagram is thus a result of what they desire to be and relates to their life aspiration. When using Instagram people do not just exhibit what intangible and tangible assets they have, but it is also a medium of solidifying the identity for the person himself. The identity capital model thus conveys the identity we portray through our Instagram profile for example; the images may be useful in terms of societal memberships, career advancement, relationships amongst others.

5 METHOD

Netnography is the research method adopted for this study. Netnography was introduced by a consumer marketing researcher, Robert V. Kozinets. It is the combination of “net” or Internet and ethnography. Scholars have used synonymous terms like online ethnography, digital ethnography, virtual ethnography, cyberethnography, Internet ethnography, computer-assisted webnography, and connective ethnography (Hine, 2000; Hine 2015; Ward, 1999; Dirksen, Huizing, and Smit, 2010; Horster & Gottschalk, 2012). Kozinets (2002) writes that netnography is based on the reflexive narratives that people publish online. Kozinets (2001, 2002, 2010, 2012 and 2015) is a prominent researcher who uses netnography in the fields of marketing and consumer research. The scholar explains netnography in terms of both product and process. As a product, netnography is “a written account of on-line cyber culture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology” (Kozinets, 1998, p. 470). As a process or research method, netnography is a “new qualitative research methodology that adapts and adopts ethnographic research principles to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). However, Belk and
Elgar (n.d) warn that netnography should not be confined to a particular method of data collection and analysis. Netnography comprises of multi-methods. The feature of netnography is like “a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representational research practices,” where a large amount of the data is collected through a very humanist participant-observational research stance (Kozinets 2015, p. 79). Netnography dissects the self—presentation strategies that people use to construct a ‘digital self’ (Schau and Gully 2003). In as much as netnography seems to be an all-encompassing qualitative methodology, online interviewing was equally used in eliciting the respondents’ opinions. Kozinets (2010) exemplifies guidelines for conducting netnography. The guidelines are discussed below:

- **Planning an Entrée /Defining Research Question:** The netnographer must be abreast with the research question he/she intends to answer. Knowing the research question will determine what online platform the researcher would be investigating. Planning an entrée entails identifying the online platform most relevant to a researcher’s research interest and also learning much about the platform.

- **Data Collection:** There are three types of data collected when conducting a netnography research. Firstly, the written communication that occurs between and among participants in the online platform. Secondly, the researcher’s self-authored field notes, in which they describe, reflect and analyze what they observe during the research processes. Thirdly, the netnographer would need to approach the research participants for interviews. The netnographer may use email, chat or instant messaging apps for the interview.

- **Data Analysis:** Scholars recommend the use of multiple techniques in analysis netnographic data. The scholars suggested approaches that take advantage of online interaction’s contextual richness. Content analysis is also recommended (Kozinets, 2010).

- **Ethical Concern:** Ethical standard in netnography is concerned with the environment of the cyberspace; is it private or public space? What constitutes informed consent in an online community? The netnographer should dissect these questions in order not to breach the ethics of the method.

- **Reporting Findings:** The final guideline is reporting the research findings.

  The research participants of the study have been followers of the researcher on Instagram for at least a period of one year. Though the researcher took time to study the contents of the research participants’ Instagram pages, the researcher is privileged to be abreast with updates on their pages from the early days of their connection. Consequently, the researcher is knowledgeable about the images of the participants. There is no exhaustive method of qualitative data analysis. However, the images from this study were studied and analyzed based on a two-phase analysis approach formulated by Kress & van Leeuwen (1996). According to the scholars, the two-phase approaches are structure and process. Structure encompasses the conceptual pattern of images represents participants in terms of their class, structure or meaning while process entails the symbolic pattern of images. Symbolic patterns are salient in representation in one way or another. They are pointed at by means of a gesture or intuition which cannot be interpreted as an action other than the action of ‘pointing out the symbolic attribute to the viewer.

5.1 **Study Population**

The population for the study is young females that are within the ages of 18 to 34. The researcher identified five of these participants as the sample size for the study. They were purposively selected from the researcher’s Instagram handle.

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Údenze, S. 2019. A Netnographic Study of Personal Branding
6. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data was carried out based on the online interview and visual analysis of some number of images on the respondent’s Instagram page. In analyzing the images on the respondent’s page, the researcher painstakingly adopted Kress and van Leeuwen method for picture analysis.

6.1 Participant Number One

After a thorough analysis of images the participant uploaded on her Instagram page, it revealed that the respondent portrayed a “fashionista” personality. On the conceptual view of most of the images analyzed depict her as a fashion entrepreneur and a model. There are different styles of female clothing she wears and uploads. Symbolically, her images connote a budding fashion personality. The writings that accompany the images on her Instagram apparently reveal she is searching working hard to be at the peak of her career. Her postings uncover the notion that she is searching for her moment of epiphany. In the interview, the participant confessed that Instagram is her vehicle to the world. …Of course, I am a fashion person, and Instagram has given me the opportunity to sell my brand to my audience. She further commented: the response is overwhelming. People like my posts, their comments encourage me and sometimes I get orders from clients.

6.2 Participant Number Two

This participant is a dancer that is based in Canada. The images on her Instagram page clearly uncover that dancing is personality. Though an Engineering graduate, she projects and builds the dance brand on Instagram. There are numerous posters of paid dance show on her page. This participant uses Instagram video a lot. Her dance images symbolize strong and athletic personality that is energy-filled. Similarly, these images connote a hardworking fellow that pushes her beyond limits in order to bring out the best. According to her, I try to use footage from my everyday life so that they a reflection of my life at a point. This participant asserts that she chooses the kind of pictures she uploads. I mind the type of impression I create on Instagram. I don’t just post any picture there because my career is very important. Though there are pictures that are not about dance but I try to be professional. Conceptually, the majority of her images portray a lady that has attained a moderate status in her career and family. There is equally some level independency in her personality.

6.3 Participant Number Three

Almost the generality of the pictures of this respondent is model-like; she makes up and strikes different poses. A careful analysis of her images shows they are all model inclined. She says: Modelling is my calling; I have always loved it from when I was small. My Instagram page has done a lot for me in terms of branding, and in fact, it has actually brought some modeling jobs for me. Apparently, Instagram is a veritable platform that drives the aspiration of this young fashion entrepreneur. The images she creates are professional. I make sure the images I post and create on social media, in general, are ok. … that the images portray my professional career.

6.4 Participant Number Four

This participant is a graduate of Management Sciences turned baker. Her Instagram handle has graduated from just ordinary pictures to images that portray her as a trained baker. It is equally pertinent to state that she explores Instagram video in describing her cake making. According to her, I have got a lot of client because of the videos and pictures I share on Instagram. Instagram is my own advertising platform. Of course, I also use Facebook link on Instagram to further reach many people on my Facebook account.

6.5 Participant Number Five

...I do “ankara” and bead designs, and Instagram has been an essential part of my entrepreneurial journey. Though I don’t post often on Instagram but the once I have done have been beneficial. I put out images that will enhance my craft. … the comments I get are very encouraging, it makes me feel I am on a part of creating something unique. This participant exudes excitement about Instagram, and it is apparent that she loves what she is doing. A careful analysis of her Instagram page
uncovers myriad of ankara and bead making pictures. Also, she usually organizes seminars for young persons that wish to learn the craft. Her assertion proves that Instagram has assisted in creating a brand for herself.

7. CONCLUSION

Scholars have always described the media as pervasive and persuasive. The rise of social media has even made this assertion more apt. Today, we are bombarded with contents from social media. We do not have the choice to join the social media or not to join. It has become an inevitable venture. The challenge now is, what kind of information to we put out in the social media, and how are we able to control? Social media is vast and bottomless. It has the capacity to accommodate unquantifiable number of information. Similarly, the social media has some level of permanence on information that is supplied, that is, the inability to erase contents that uploaded to it. Because these characteristics of the social media, users, especially young people have to be weary of the type of images or brand they create while using social media. Knowingly or unknowingly we create personals brand that may be detrimental to our careers in the future.

For young entrepreneurs, the first step to establishing personal brands on social media is creating a unique and professional profile on relevant platforms that would enhance your prospective careers. And Instagram should be considered a base for personal brand creation, but of course, other social media may be adopted for this purpose. Gorska, (n.d) argues that despite the imperative of using social media for personal branding, 30% of management student do not build their personal brands online. According to the author, students prefer Instagram over Twitter as a platform for personal brand building. Research also reveals that despite the discoveries that social media can significantly influence peoples’ career, the majority of students do not regard its gains in career development, still relegating social media to mostly socializing.

Important findings from this study reveal that Instagram is important in personal brand development. All the participants uncovered the gains of using Instagram in pursuing their entrepreneurial career respectively. Also, some of the participants are willing to update their knowledge on personal brand building and development. They believe their knowledge is insufficient considering the types and ways they upload images on their profile. Overall, this study ascertains that young entrepreneurs effectively utilize Instagram in developing personal brands.

8. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the discoveries from this study, the following recommendations were made:

- Young entrepreneurs should embrace the use of social media to create a niche for themselves in their chosen careers. Findings from the study show that Instagram has advanced the careers of the research participants.
- Social media users specifically the youth should desist from seeing the social media as a mere socializing platform. They should cultivate the habit of putting social media to productive use. The social media has enormous potentials which could transform the lives of our youths.
- This study recommends that individuals should endeavor to attend social media training seminars in other to update their knowledge of social media. There a lot of social media marketing seminars going on daily. We should seize these opportunities to better our understanding and use of social media.

9. REFERENCES


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