

# Online Personal Branding: Processes, Challenges, and Implications

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## Abstract

This research examines how people manage online personal brands in a Web 2.0 context. Using a novel mixed-method approach and consenting participants, the authors generated digital brand audits of 12 people and asked undergraduate students and a human resources professional to judge their profiles (made anonymous), both qualitatively and quantitatively. After comparing these evaluations with participants' own judgments of their online profiles, the authors conducted long interviews to understand how people manage online profiles and feel about others' judgment of the content they post. According to these results, people engage in personal branding, though their efforts are often misdirected or insufficient. They consider personal online branding challenging, especially, during life changes or when managing multiple audiences.

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Information found online provides a digital footprint that implicitly brands people (Lampel and Bhalla 2007; Madden et al. 2007). Some information is out of the person's control (e.g., what others write about him or her), but much of it is purposefully crafted and posted. The business world is beginning to recognize the importance of controlling personal brands and offering strategic advice about how to project a desired personal brand identity through the use of different social media (e.g., Safko and Brake 2009; Schwabel 2009). New applications enable people to manage their personal brand, fine-tune their profiles, and share their ideas through blogs, micro posts, and online discussions. Yet in rapidly changing online environments, many people remain neither aware of the scope of information available online nor fully cognizant of the long-run impact it may have on their reputations (Solove 2007).

Extant literature examines how companies can use the Internet to build their brands (Holland and Baker 2001;

Thorbjørnsen et al. 2002); other research notes consumer motivations for using the Internet (Ambady, Hallahan, and Rosenthal 1996; Cotte et al. 2006; Miceli et al., 2007; Schau and Gilly 2003). Yet the phenomenon of branding online has not been examined from a personal perspective, despite its growing importance. We address this research gap by investigating the following questions:

1. What is the process that people use, explicitly or implicitly, to brand themselves digitally?
2. What are the challenges that people face in attempting to create a personal brand, especially when considering market feedback?

This investigation also considers personal branding decisions online in light of their accompanying image concerns. We determine how people react to judgments of their online identities, which they have crafted to reach their personal branding goals through specific actions and information disclosure choices. Unlike previous studies of online expression on personal Web sites (e.g., Schau and Gilly 2003; Turkle 1995; Wynn and Katz 1997), we observe both the user (person posting content) and the viewer (person evaluating the information)

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sides of a dyad in a Web 2.0 setting. Furthermore, we examine not just judgments but also present these evaluations to the users, creating a feedback loop in order to assess the effectiveness of their personal branding strategies. In doing so, we extend the research on self-expression on the Web and research into how people judge the effectiveness of their public impressions and the effects of these assessments on their subsequent behavior (see DePaulo et al. 1987).

We begin by providing a theoretical and contextual background for this study, including motivations for creating an online presence, the Web 2.0 environment, and the role of personal branding. After we outline our methodology, we discuss the results within the structure of a branding framework and conclude with limitations and further research directions.

## Theoretical and Contextual Background

### *Motivations for Creating an Online Presence*

Pioneering research on Internet use suggests that online experiences such as chatting, gaming, and engaging in virtual worlds allow people free and open ways to explore parts of the self that are difficult or nearly impossible to explore in face-to-face communications. Digital spaces allow increased open communication through anonymity and the eradication of real world boundaries, such as appearance (e.g., race, gender), physical ability, and socioeconomic status, which may inhibit identity (Turkle 1995; Wynn and Katz 1997). This space provides a platform for identity construction where different facets of the self, or multiple selves, may be explored and expressed—as users become engaged, these identities may become just as real and important as the roles played in the physical world (Nguyen and Alexander 1996; Turkle 1995; Wynn and Katz 1997).

As technological advances fueled Internet growth, the personal Web site emerged as an important platform for self-expression and self-presentation, as well as a means to learn more about people (Vazire and Gosling 2004). Self-presentation, a way for an individual to convey information to others (Goffman 1959), is the mechanism that allows a person to create and maintain her brand identity. This social performance can be compared to a theatre where within each scene of life, the central actor chooses the appropriate wardrobe, props, and backdrops to project a desired identity to an audience through complex self-negotiations, making adjustments in an effort to maintain a consistent identity (Goffman 1959). Elements within personal Web pages and social networking profiles such as personal information, photographs, design, and layout choices are akin to the wardrobe and props of the theatrical metaphor.

Consumers use brands, institutions, and other commercial enterprises as vehicles to establish and communicate aspects of their identity to others through these online “visual collages” (Schau and Gilly 2003, p. 386). Oftentimes social motives are the impetus for their creation, as people use sites as a communication tool to reach friends and strangers alike (Schau and Gilly 2003), thus satisfying needs for affiliation and social connectedness (Zinkhan et al. 1999).

However, social goals are not the only major reasons for building personal Web sites—for some, the primary motivation is not centered on being seen by others, but for self-realization (Hemetsberger 2005). Other non-social motives include satisfying a need for power through skill development and mastery of technology and environment (Zinkhan et al. 1999), and as a stimulating way to pass time and provide entertainment (Papacharissi 2002; Zinkhan et al. 1999). Still, others are driven by advocacy and create spaces centered on information regarding a favorite band, activity, or social cause, as opposed to oneself (Schau and Gilly 2003).

### *Web 2.0*

Sophisticated technology, Web 2.0 applications, and accessible personal information offer new challenges for controlling online personal presence. Compared with the Web 1.0 environment, Internet usage has grown increasingly complex; instead of just posting content about themselves users also access third-party sites such as Facebook as platforms for social networking and digital branding. People are no longer in complete control of content, because parts of profiles can be exposed to known friends, as well as members of the general public, which gives others the power to add content, often without the profile owner’s explicit permission. When the information appears online, it becomes both permanent and widely accessible, such that the ownership of online information is ambiguous and difficult to control (Stelter 2009). Moreover, norms for posting information and interacting on the Web are changing, causing conflict across users’ different roles (Kang 2010). New tools and norms add to the complexity of the environment and concerns regarding personal information (Peltier, Milne, and Phelps 2009; Phelps, D’Souza, and Nowak 2001).

Despite these concerns, the creation of online personal Web sites and social media profiles have flourished as the Web 2.0 environment offers tools that simplify these processes and encourages user generated content. No longer does a person need to be familiar with complex coding languages or other technicalities to build Web sites, because virtually anyone can upload text, pictures, and video instantly to a site from a personal computer or mobile phone. With technological barriers crumbling and its increasing ubiquity, the Web has become the perfect platform for personal branding.

### *The Role of Personal Branding*

The concept of personal branding, first popularized by Tom Peters (1997) in his article “The Brand Called You,” has become increasingly important in the digital age. Once considered a tactic only for celebrities (Rein, Kotler, and Shields 2006) and leaders in business and politics, online tools have allowed personal branding to become an important marketing task for everyday people (Shepherd 2005). The premise for personal branding is that everyone has the power to be their own brand and a person’s main job is to be their own marketer (Peters 1997). This is surrounded by the fear that if you do not manage your own brand, the power is given to someone else and “chances are that their brand description

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