Exploring Personal Branding on YouTube

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Published online: 07 Dec 2013.

To cite this article: Chih-Ping Chen (2013) Exploring Personal Branding on YouTube, Journal of Internet Commerce, 12:4, 332-347, DOI: 10.1080/15332861.2013.859041

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15332861.2013.859041

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Exploring Personal Branding on YouTube

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Developing a personal brand in the social media world is now a rapidly growing trend. Existing literature examines how companies can utilize social media to build their brands. However, the phenomenon of branding online has rarely been examined from a personal perspective, despite its growing importance. This qualitative study seeks to address this peculiar absence and tries to understand how and what personal branding can be formed within the social media consumption (e.g., YouTube). The results reveal areas of potential development for personal branding and consumer-personal brand relationships as a result of consumer empowerment on YouTube. The key managerial implication shows that the dynamics of the business-to-branding and consumer-brand relationships have been transformed from a company perspective and a one-dimensional occurrence to a personal perspective and a bidirectional social bond on YouTube.

KEYWORDS consumer empowerment, consumer-personal brand relationship, personal branding, self-branding, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

The personal development industry has developed worldwide and encourages individuals to market and brand themselves. This industry is based on the obvious logic of applying the same marketing and branding principles originally developed for products and corporations to individuals (Schwabel 2009; Shepherd 2005). Nowadays, some authors argue that social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) have not only led to an era of consumer-to-consumer driven information that creates personal branding (O’Brien 2011; Vitberg 2010), but they might also establish relationships with
prospective consumers (Fournier 1998). In fact, self-branding or self-marketing has been taken up by an increasing number of leaders or celebrities in businesses, politics, and the entertainment industry (Shepherd 2005). In an academic context, self-marketing is most clearly seen by vocational specialists in educational institutions as support for graduates looking for a job or planning a career (Merdin 2011). During the past decades, self-marketing and personal branding did not compose a large part of the academic marketing literature. As technological advances fuel Internet growth, consumers have been empowered by social media to become more sophisticated, and new lifestyles and consumption trends have emerged (O'Brien 2011). Self-branding is now a rapidly growing business in its own right. Particularly, YouTube (www.youtube.com) has become the market leader among video sharing websites (Pace 2008). The ability to share videos with other users offers self-expression and self-presentation on YouTube that may contribute to self-marketing and personal branding (Labrecque, Markos, and Milne 2011). Existing literature examined how companies can utilize social media to build their brands (Harris and Rae 2009). Yet, the phenomenon of branding online has rarely been examined from a personal perspective, despite its growing importance. This article seeks to address this peculiar absence.

This article begins by providing a theoretical framework that includes personal branding and consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998; Vitberg 2010). After outlining the methodology, the author discusses the results regarding the following research questions: What is the process that amateur individuals use, explicitly or implicitly, to brand themselves? How do they brand themselves on YouTube? Finally, the conclusion and implications for managerial practices are discussed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Personal Branding

Previous studies suggested that online experiences such as online chatting, gaming, dating, and engaging in digital worlds empower consumers in free and open ways to explore parts of the self (Schau and Gilly 2003; Turkle 1995; Whitty 2008). Digital spaces allow increased open communication through the eradication of real world boundaries, such as appearance (e.g., gender, race, age), physical ability, and socioeconomic status, which may inhibit identity. With the explosion of social media, consumer-to-consumer driven information is becoming an important way to create personal awareness, establish credibility, drive differentiation on a personal level, and manage prospects into personal branding that can be transformed into a new business (Vitberg 2010). O’Brien’s work (2011) found that consumers are more demanding than ever before. There is an emerging
egocentrism among social media users as a result of their empowerment and control in the social media landscape. Particularly, YouTube has emerged as an important platform for self-presentation where amateur individuals understand and experience themselves as subjects (Pace 2008). Self-presentation, a way for an individual to convey information to others (Goffman 1959), is the mechanism that allows a person to create and market himself as a personal brand identity (Lampel and Bhalla 2007). This social performance can be compared to a theater; within each scene, the central actor chooses the appropriate props, wardrobe, and backdrops to project a desired impression to target audiences through complex self-negotiations and makes adjustments in an effort to maintain a positive self-identity (Goffman 1959). Elements within YouTube and social networking profiles (e.g., personal information, self-presentation ways, contents, and strategy choices) are akin to the props of the theatrical metaphor. This effect is a result of such power relations that encourage an (amateur) individual to conceive a self-identity and market himself as personal branding (Schwabel 2009).

The concept of personal branding was first virtually introduced in 1997 by Tom Peters’s *Fast Company* article, “The Brand Called You.” He saw personal branding by saying, “We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketers for the brand called You” (Peters 1997, 83). Once considered a strategy only for celebrities and leaders in businesses, politics, and entertainment industries (Rein, Kotler, and Shields 2006), nowadays, online tools have allowed personal branding to become an important marketing task for consumers (Shepherd 2005). The premise for personal branding is that everyone has the power to be his/her own brand, and a person’s main job is to be his/her own marketer (Peters 1997). Theoretically, Aaker (1996) considered the brand as (1) a product, (2) an organization, (3) a person, and (4) a symbol. The brand-as-person perspective suggests that a brand is like a person who owns his/her self-identity, having a unique personality. Arruda (2003) further claimed that the personal branding process mirrors the product or corporate branding process and should follow three broad stages: extract, express, and exude. First, the individuals are encouraged to look inside themselves to discover their key identifying attributes: “their unique promise of value.” They then construct a compelling “personal brand statement” around this attribute set. Finally, they create a strategy for making the brand visible to the outside world.

For amateur individuals in social media, personal branding becomes a very important business concept because it demonstrates self-performances and presents a sense of individuality that can help to differentiate a personal brand from its competitors. It reflects the sense of essential character, since each personal brand has its own personality and uniqueness. Going one step further, Shuker (2010) suggested that personal branding is an art consisting of impression management and more or less strategic practices for the purpose
of projecting a desired impression which will be consumed and affected by external others, resulting to a formation of a social relations exchange.

Consumer-Brand Relationships

The brand as a relationship partner has been seen as the conceptual acceptance of the marketing actions' behavior significance (Fournier 1998). The premise on which the framework of consumer-brand relationships is found is the assumption that consumers translate a brand's behavior into trait language from which the brand's personality is constructed. Fournier argued that the brand embodies personification and can therefore become an active partner in consumer-brand relationships. Fournier characterized consumer-brand relationships as "qualified not along symbolic versus functional product category line...but by the perceived ego significance of the chosen brands" (Fournier 1998, 366). Thus, consumers seek and maintain those relationships that add meanings to their lives. Researchers have shown that consumers are particularly likely to adopt the traits of anthropomorphized brands when the brands are liked and when they are portrayed as partners with the consumers (Aggarwal and McGill 2011). Truly, creating brand personality refers to the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. Aaker's study (1996) released five brand personalities: sincerity, excitement, sophistication, competence, and ruggedness. Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004) further investigated whether the role of consumer-brand relationships varies based on brand personalities. They argued that relationships with sincere brands present characteristics that are similar to friendships, where relationships with exciting brands resembled short-lived flings. Furthermore, one form of consumer-brand relationship in the digital world is receiving attention in online brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Online brand communities are consumer-centric because the existence and meaningfulness of the community revolves on consumer experience rather than the brand around which that experience is built. Online brand communities are seen as complex entities with their own cultures, rituals, traditions, and codes of behavior. McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) commented that through online brand communities, consumers share the creation and negotiation of meanings. More recently, there has been a shift toward understanding the emotional makeup of relationships in the consumer-brand relationship literature (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Chernatony, McDonald, and Wallace (2011) suggested that a successful brand aims to develop consumer-brand relationships in which consumers feel a sense of commitment and belonging.

Although consumers may become emotionally involved with a brand through relationships in traditional media channels (i.e., TV commercials), they do not interact with the brand directly, thus the relationship is largely one-directional (Szmigin, Canning, and Reppel 2005). The present author
argues that current social media (e.g., YouTube) eliminates these barriers, allowing personal brands to develop stronger bonds with the consumers much like consumer-brand relationship developments as a result of a vast array of interests and social connections.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews was used in this study. An in-depth interview approach allows the researcher to release the subjective meanings of consumers' lived and mediated experiences and to explore the way that those experiences inform the consumers' sense of self (Fournier 1998). All of the interviews were conducted by the primary researcher in order to allow a holistic perspective (Fournier 1998). Basically, three types of data are examined in this inquiry: amateur individuals' YouTube videos; face-to-face, semi-structured long interviews with YouTube amateur performers; and electronic exchanges with participants. YouTube was used to generate a sample of amateur performers' videos. The researcher's judgment resulted in a set of 3,575 Taiwanese amateur performer videos from October 2007 to October 2010. Visual analysis of amateur individuals' YouTube videos was done in accordance with watching of consumer collages and treated as consumer-generated contents. Participant selection began with amateur individuals' YouTube videos. Every tenth individual on the list was called up; when possible, the researcher left research invitation messages on his/her YouTube comments board. In total, 11 female participants and 34 male participants with ages between 16 and 35 years old were involved in this study. All participants reside in Taiwan. A demographic profile of the participants is presented in table 1. For reasons of confidentiality, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms in this article.

Interview Participants

When interview participants were successfully identified and interviews were scheduled, the researcher downloaded their YouTube videos, coded the contents (e.g., audio, icons, images, gestures), and made initial interpretations of the data. The downloading and content coding of videos were repeated monthly on the participants' performances on their YouTube videos. Interviews regarding self-marketing or self-branding with others on YouTube were conducted in person by the researcher. Initial interviews were done between 2010 and early 2012, each lasting from one hour to three hours, using online resources. Participants were asked questions from a predetermined question set used for all interviews about the purpose of their performances on YouTube videos, what they communicate, how they chose
TABLE 1 Summary of Participants’ Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (yrs)</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Philip</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Russell</td>
<td>M2</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Bruce</td>
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<td>Denise</td>
<td>M5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>M6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Scott</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>M10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
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<td>M11</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
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<td>M12</td>
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</tr>
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<td>M14</td>
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<td>Andy</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Douglas</td>
<td>M16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Carpenter</td>
</tr>
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<td>Nick</td>
<td>M23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Editor of a fashion magazine</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>M24</td>
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<td>College student</td>
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<td>Anthony</td>
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<td>M26</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>M27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>M28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Assistant at work</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>M29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>M30</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>M31</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>Salesman</td>
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<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>M33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>George</td>
<td>M34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Salesman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Cosmetic clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>High school student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>F3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Rene</td>
<td>F4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>F5</td>
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<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>F6</td>
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<td>College student</td>
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<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>F7</td>
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<td>Specialist</td>
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<td>42</td>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>F8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Interior designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>F9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Assistant at a retailer</td>
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<td>44</td>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>F10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>College student</td>
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<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>F11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Saleswoman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

=23.9 yrs

materials and stories, and so on. Follow-up questions and discussions varied by participant and analysis iterations (McCracken 1988). During the interviews, a computer displayed the participant’s YouTube videos. The researcher also provided preliminary interpretations of YouTube videos to
the participant. Participants were encouraged to correct, augment, or otherwise interact with the interpretation of their YouTube videos (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988).

Participants were encouraged to update the researcher on the performances of their YouTube videos. Interpretation of YouTube performances was updated and e-mailed to each participant annually. In most cases, this communication resulted in an exchange between the researcher and participants about their YouTube performances. The electronic messages were added to the data set for interpretation. Follow-up interviews in 2010, 2011, and 2012 were conducted in person when possible. These participant-researcher encounters clarified issues that remained from the initial interviews, elaborated emergent themes through multiple revision efforts, and furthered the researcher’s understanding of the individuals’ self-marketing personal branding on YouTube.

Analytical Procedures

The methodology employed was guided by the systematic approach to qualitative research in grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Willig (2001, 33) stated that “grounded theory involves the progressive identification and integration of categories of meaning from data. Grounded theory is both the process of category identification and integration (as method) and its product (as theory).” Although strictly speaking grounded theory puts aside any previous theories in order to develop new theories (Strauss and Corbin 1998), this analysis did take into account previous work on personal branding and consumer-brand relationships when considering the data. Previous studies have also conducted qualitative research in this way (Willig 2001). Therefore, the interviews in this research were coded, and themes were distilled. The analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts followed the interpretation process as prescribed by previous research (Thompson 1996). Transcripts were initially read to develop a holistic understanding and were improved by later readings, documentation, and systematization. Once the process of noting key phrases and patterns of meaning were developed, the transcripts were further analyzed to develop thematic categories and identify holistic relationships among the meanings and categories participants used to describe their YouTube experiences and actions. These interpretations are outlined in the themes that follow.

FINDINGS

This section shows the key themes through which participants expressed critical dimensions related to the process of personal branding on YouTube acts. The process of personal branding on YouTube mainly consists of the three stages: extract, express, and exude. Furthermore, a consumer-personal
brand relationship has emerged between the individual self (the brand) and viewers (other consumers).

Creating a Personal Brand

The findings show that consumers on YouTube are empowered and gain control over issues that concern them. In many instances, participants view such freedom as essential acts of empowerment on YouTube. As a result, such power relations encourage participants to be head marketers for personal brands (Schwabel 2009). As Bruce (17 yrs, male, high school student) explained,

> My big dream is to film a movie by myself. It gains more freedom for me to make this movie and then upload it on YouTube. In other words, nobody can limit me without my permission. It can be made by my own ideas. . . . Once I become a famous movie star on YouTube, I can be easily recognized, or some production agencies will pay attention to me. Then, I might get a chance to promote myself.

More importantly, the data echo the previous literature that the personal branding process follows as extract, express, and exude (Arruda 2003).

**EXTRACT**

First, the researcher found that the amateur individuals on YouTube were encouraged to look inside themselves to dig out their key identifying attributes (Arruda 2003; Schwabel 2009), that is, create a unique promise of personal brand value. It shows that individuals selected ideals or perfect gestures as well as behaviors to be shot (Schau and Gilly 2003). They planned in advance and uploaded the results on YouTube. To give an example, Charles (24 yrs, male, graduate student) clearly looked inside himself to discover his key identifying attributes: his own personality and uniqueness (Arruda 2003).

> I am so picky. The film I uploaded on YouTube should satisfy me first. Otherwise, it would not be shown. If someone disagrees with my performance, I am unwilling to reply to his/her comments. I know what’s important to me. I’m satisfied with my own identity. I don’t care about their thoughts.

Some participants, like Jack (27 yrs, salesman), use technical skills to revise their appearances on original YouTube videos in order to control their personal branding and further manage a specific personality as a positive image (Shepherd 2005). As Jack stated,

> I have revised my appearances and posted certain gestures learned through the mirror to show the “ideal me” on my YouTube videos. I want
to be seen as a perfect man. I used to revise my photos on my blog. Now, technology has been improved and I can do it on videos, too.

**Express**

The second stage of personal branding on YouTube is to construct a compelling “personal brand statement” around an attribute set (Arruda 2003). Profoundly, most participants like Adam (22 yrs, male, college student) claimed, “Everyone wants to be famous…even my father wants to be famous, too.” Allen (27 yrs, working man) happily described what he has presented as his unique identity and how his personal brand personality has been recognized by online viewers.

Presenting my identity makes me feel that I am a movie star. Particularly, it is amazing when I upload my performance onto YouTube. Everybody watches me and recognizes who I am. This makes me feel so good.

The participants further highlight that YouTube provides amateur individuals an opportunity to become international web stars without depending on traditional agencies. Kelly’s statement (26 yrs, female, assistant at a retail company) is a typical case.

We want to be famous…. Today, when you upload your personal performances or images onto YouTube, there are at least one million people in the world who can see you. The impact is more than any TV show in Taiwan could ever produce.

**Exude**

The final stage of personal branding on YouTube shows that the primary goal of most participants to attract worldwide viewers is to create a strategy for making their brand visible to the outside world (Arruda 2003). Given this, the participants attempted to achieve their goals while truly engaging in different strategies or a combination of strategies designed to promote their unique views, skills, or talents. Interestingly, some participants used a strategy of not revealing the important part of their physical image on purpose, keeping a mysterious identity to emphasize their personality as given talents. For instance, Adam (22 yrs, male, college student) impressed his online viewers by his special magic skills without showing his face and then created a specific personal brand personality as a professional magician.

To tell the truth, it will be effective to attract my viewers when my magic show is shot without showing my face to keep the mystery. Normally, if you are not a good-looking guy, your magic shows will attract nobody. It is invalid even when you work hard to show your magic skills. The
reason is simply because of your unattractive appearance. So not showing my face to keep the mystery is one of my strategies to maintain the viewers’ attentions on my skills. The professional image naturally emerges through my mysterious performances.

The findings also reveal that YouTube is seen as a place filled with masks for almost every aspect of identity to freely create a personality. Robin (22 yrs, male, college student) insisted his own personality as female features to adopt a gender-switching strategy, presenting “his” feminine personality on YouTube videos.

It should be said that I am a natural female-born man. No matter what my body language or speaking manner is, I look like a female. I love to play a female personality when dancing on YouTube videos. It is easy to present my female identity and specialty. If you asked me to play the male personality, the performance would be very dumpy.

What importantly emerged from this study is that presenting a sense of individuality (i.e., value, belief, and so forth) helps to differentiate a personal brand from his/her competitors (Vitberg 2010). The findings show that ego value-involved individuals on YouTube are driven to succeed by outperforming others, and their feelings of success depend on maintaining self-worth (O’Brien 2011). This was explained by William (22 yrs, male, college student):

Uploading my own work expresses my thoughts and ideas… YouTube changed my life so much. I used to live without any purpose. I am a nobody in this society… Who would have known that when I upload my project on YouTube, some unknown friends would give me feedback and comments… My performances are totally different from others. … It seems like I am somebody. It was an overwhelming influence on my life. Their care (comments) aroused my heart. They encourage me to fulfill my dream and make a self-actualization.

Interestingly, most participants enhance their personal brand personalities by adopting imitating strategies and claiming association with prestigious figures (Bolino et al. 2008). Imitating performances and personalities of celebrities can be seen as participants striving to capitalize their association with high profile celebrities in an effort to secure a strong performance appraisal. Jennifer (23 yrs, female college student) was proud of creating her personal brand personality by imitating some celebrities, thus showing her abilities. For this reason, not only was she famous on YouTube, but she also became a popular student at school.

I love to watch a talk show called “Everybody speaks nonsense” (in Chinese), which imitates the behaviors of some famous celebrities and
reflects upon special issues at that moment. I always like to imitate others, especially celebrities whom I love. I had copied from Jolin Tsai (a famous Taiwanese pop idol), presenting my dancing skills on YouTube. Most of my online friends love my identities and performances. Because of this, I became famous at school. So school parties or anniversaries often invite me to play in front of other students and teachers.

Forming a Consumer-Personal Brand Relationship

Most participants developed a consumer-personal brand relationship in which viewers (consumers) and performers mutually felt a sense of commitment and belonging (Chernatony et al. 2011). For example, Adam (22 yrs, male, college student) impressed his online viewers by his special magic skills, and Clare (27 yrs, female, specialist) triggered her viewers by showing her dancing skills. Viewers with strong feelings who repeatedly interacted with the participants gained increased confidence about reciprocal commitment and belonging (Labrecque et al. 2011). Nicole (17 yrs, female, high school student) demonstrated,

Receiving feedbacks from online friends makes me feel happy. Of course, some comments are negative, making me frustrated. I always examine which part I did not play well enough. But sometimes I think that I do not care about what they said; I need to stick on what images I want to present in front of my audiences....Sometimes I review my films several times. If I think they are not good enough, I delete them and replayed my performances....Basically, I know that they care about me and my performances.

More importantly, the click rating of the YouTube videos becomes a critical metric which describes direct viewers feedback and virtually establishes a consumer-personal brand relationship. In this context, participants imagine that the click rating is how many viewers watch their performances and also reflects upon how personal brand is marketed and established. For example, Allen (27 yrs, working man) explained,

The higher click rate shows, the happier I am. Especially, the more online friends left messages to me, the more famous I felt. People who support me on YouTube make me feel self-actualization. This power makes me keep going to do something special. It sounds I am different from others. You know this kind of feeling likes people gave me an affirmation. I am so happy.

For most participants on YouTube, the rating sounds like imagining intangible viewers, which they are able to gain the confidence from. George
(35 yrs, salesman) and Margaret (21 yrs, female, college student) confidently claimed, “The click rating is getting higher...It means more people are watching my film.” Margaret further elaborated about the symbolic meaning of the rating. This also supports McAlexander and his colleagues' (2002) claim that people share essential resources: the creation and negotiation of meaning in online (personal) brand communities.

Especially, the higher click rate shows, the more famous I am. I feel self-actualization. This makes me keep creating my identity. It means I can do something different from others....It gained my confidence to keep presenting my ideas. I wish I can do better.

The findings further uncover that YouTube eliminates traditional one-directional brand relationship developments, allowing personal brands to develop stronger bonds with target viewers (Szmigin et al. 2005). The participants recognize that some fans have formed consumer-personal brand communities to support performers' ideas, abilities, skills, talents, or performances. Eric (16 yrs, male, high school student; switched his gender to be a female role on YouTube videos) really cherished this kind of stronger bond development and learned how to develop strong bonds with “her” fans.

Once I went to a temple for worship, someone recognized me and asked “Are you the dancing girl on YouTube? May I shake hands with you? May I take a photo with you?” I admitted that it was weird at first and gradually I felt it is so good to become somebody’s idol. Now, the more people who want to join my fans online, the happier I feel.

It is also confirmed that consumer-personal brand relationships on YouTube are formed by a vast array of interests and social connections (Szmigin et al. 2005). For example, Rebecca (19 yrs, female, college student; Eric’s sister) emphasized, “Some fans want to organize offline club meetings....All of them enjoy dancing, too....They love my brother’s dances....We have never thought that this kind of outcome would happen.” Obviously, the developments of a consumer-personal brand relationship on YouTube are highly encouraged by social worldwide connections. Adam stated ecstatically how he generated a consumer-personal brand relationship with international fans who cheered him up. Their encouraging statements also broadened his views to virtually compete with other personal brands around the worldwide YouTube site. This was explained by Adam (22, male, college student) below:

Most online viewers were impressed by my magic skills. Some asked me to teach them, while others suggested that I publish a magic book. ...Gradually, they became my fans....They have always encouraged me to improve my approaches....My online fans are not limited within
Taiwan... You know YouTube is worldwide so some are foreigners. They sent messages saying, “Your magic show some day will be better than magic David Blaine.” Who knows? Maybe someday I will actually become the best in the world.

The participants acknowledge that YouTube contributes to personal branding as a consumer-personal brand relationship, allowing them to market themselves by creating a desired digital self-image. They also appreciate being empowered and learning from each other on their personal brand community. As Allen (27 yrs, male, working man) described,

It's a good thing that more people can watch my performances through YouTube, and I can watch others’ performances as well. We can learn performances and skills from each other. I think it a good way to learn and deliver our information and images. Technology advances change our lives; we can watch others’ performances at any time. We don’t need to go to a concert hall.

DISCUSSION

To date, people’s knowledge of branding has been partial and mainly written from a product or corporation perspective. Therefore, research into amateur individuals’ performances within YouTube leads to an enhanced understanding of how and what type of consumers create personal brands through the specific social media consumption, and it is also of interest to marketing practitioners. The focus of this research has been to explore how and what type of personal brand can be formed on YouTube. Communication is truly changing as a result of YouTube utilization; thus, branding and marketing take on a new perspective. YouTube allows amateur individuals to freely market themselves and manage personal branding (Vitberg 2010). Not surprisingly, the current findings support that amateur individuals are getting familiar with social media such as YouTube to create personal awareness, drive differentiation on a personal level, and manage prospects into personal branding (O’Brien 2011). The three phases of personal branding on YouTube mainly consist of extract, express, and exude.

This study also highlights that YouTube offers amateur individuals an opportunity to become international personal brands through different strategies or strategies in combination designed to create a unique personal brand personality. While amateur individuals on YouTube acknowledge that their performances can be watched by worldwide audiences/viewers, they are not dependent on the traditional media agency systems. That is, they feel truly empowered to adopt different strategies to present and deliver their own personal brand promises (Chernatony et al. 2011). The findings further
uncover that YouTube eliminates traditional one-directional brand relationship developments, allowing personal brands to develop stronger bonds with target viewers (Szmigin et al. 2005). Therefore, this article contributes to theory building about personal branding and consumer-personal brand relationships by examining social media consumption in order to investigate changing consumer behavior.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

People as brands exist in pop stars, movies, sports, arts, and political industries, as well as educational institutions (Merdin 2011; Schwabel 2009; Shepherd 2005). Consumers do not exclusively self-brand for many social reasons including chatting, dating, gaming, establishing friendships, or simply for self-expression and self-presentation (Shepherd 2005; Whitty 2008). The results in this study further highlight the area of potential for developments of personal branding and consumer-personal brand relationships as a result of consumer empowerment on YouTube (Aaker et al. 2004; Aggarwal and McGill 2011; Fournier 1998). The evidence supports the idea that amateur individuals (consumers), both explicitly and implicitly branding themselves using contents they place on YouTube, develop consumer-personal brand relationships on YouTube or create their online fans communities. Uploaded videos are the primary mechanism that consumers use for self-branding and self-marketing (Arruda 2003; Kaputa 2005). Profoundly, the results in this study suggest that personal branding is an art consisting of creating a personal brand personality via strategic self-presentations to project a desired self-impression in every YouTube act, with varying purposes like disclosing a personal (brand) show or mutually feeling confident, belonging, and being comfortable at consumer-personal brand relationship developments (Shuker 2010).

In managerial implications, marketers must acknowledge how increasingly demanding YouTube consumers have become, which has in turn altered the dynamics of the business to personal branding and consumer-personal brand relationships, transforming it from a company perspective and a one-dimensional occurrence to a personal perspective and a bidirectional social bond.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this fast moving digital environment, social media such as YouTube have become more widely available for personal branding purposes since the study was conducted. Due to the participants’ usage and presentation, this research is mainly focused on YouTube, which was used by all 45 participants. In addition, the age of the participants in the sample varied only
slightly; most were in their twenties, with only five individuals over the age of 30 years (see table 1). This younger sample may not represent the personal branding issues faced by older participants. Similarly, the social judgments by the undergraduate and graduate student population reflected particular behavioral norms, on which they based their assessments and life experiences. Other populations of judges and experiences likely would produce different reactions and strategies. Therefore, future research should include more heterogeneous users and extend the framework to various cohorts and cultures. Basically, YouTube is a global medium, so understanding how cultural factors influence personal branding efforts varies according to an individual’s life phase, which suggests that a longitudinal perspective would be helpful.

REFERENCES


