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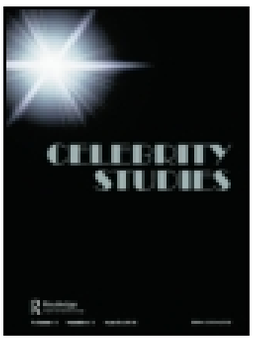

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Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers

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ABSTRACT

The notion of self-branding has drawn myriad academic responses over the last decade. First popularised in a provocative piece published in *Fast Company*, self-branding has been criticised by some on theoretical, practical and ethical grounds, while others have endorsed and propelled the idea. This article considers how and why the concept of self-branding has become so prevalent. We contend that it parallels the growth of digital technology (particularly social media) embedded in the current political climate: neoliberal individualism. Another objective here is to imbue the concept of self-branding with a marketing perspective and show how the 'celebrities' of self-branding manifest at a marketing media nexus distinct to the opening decades of the twenty-first century. Building on literature from mostly media and cultural studies, this critique sees self-branding as a distortion of key branding principles that has obvious implications for its practitioners and advocates. The article shows that, despite inherent tensions and problematic ironies, self-branding persists through the rise of Social Media Influencers; we consider three of these whose fame and following was achieved via the practices and phenomena under consideration.

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Introduction

Self-branding, which is sometimes called personal branding, involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital. The number of books, websites, workshops and seminars devoted to its principles and promotion is evidence of its prevalence and appeal (Khedher 2014, p. 30). Central to self-branding is the idea that, just like commercially branded products, individuals benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences. This idea has permeated business literature since at least the 1920s, with best-selling titles that extol the merits of self-improvement and a positive attitude, but its broader resonance over the last 20 years is significant. In terms of pushing the idea of self-branding from the margins of marketing literature to the forefront of mainstream media, a 1997 article published in the business magazine

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Fast Company bears noting. In the article 'The Brand Called You', Tom Peters argues that individuals must assume control of their own brand identity to stand out in the labour market, project a dynamic and memorable image, and consistently deliver value to consumers, employers and markets. Grafting the logic of branding onto individuals is not only possible or desirable, he argues; it is imperative and inevitable.

Lest individuals surrender their brand identities to others, for lack of initiative, interest or strategy, Peters believes that self-branding requires the same dedication and drive that saw the likes of Nike and Starbucks achieve prominence and loyalty. He writes: 'We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer of the brand called You' (Peters 1997). Peters thus encourages individuals to turn their résumé into a 'marketing brochure' full of 'braggables' for which they want to be famous (the term he uses): 'being CEO of Me Inc. requires you to act selfishly – to grow yourself, to promote yourself, to get the market to reward yourself' (Peters 1997). His message captured popular audiences with its clarity, simplicity and conviction; and, as argued shortly, its seamless consonance with the reigning tenets of a neoliberal ideology.

A problematic concept and practice

Branding is inextricably tied to marketing; however, the concept of self-branding does not fit neatly as a subset of branding, and scaling the branding concept down to the individual is problematic. Branding an individual raises conceptual, practical and ethical issues, which are either not acknowledged or are simply glossed over by its advocates. Moreover, there is an implicit assumption that everyone is expected to self-brand in order to realise his or her fullest potential. There is even a call for academics to build a personal brand in order to help sell their university online (Brandabur 2012), while one researcher has developed (albeit facetiously) the 'Kardashian Index' to measure the popularity of scientists by their number of followers on Twitter (Hall 2014).

The word 'brand' is derived from the Old Norse word *brandr*, meaning 'to burn', and referred to the practice whereby livestock owners would burn a unique and differentiating symbol into their animals' skins. In its contemporary use for marketing, a brand signifies a certain quality or idea associated with a commodity which ostensibly simplifies the consumer's decision-making. Ideally, a brand must be seen to possess strong, favourable, unique and relevant mental associations (Keller 2007), which helps differentiate the brand in an otherwise crowded and cacophonous market. Another function of branding is to imbue the product, service or firm with a personality. Presumably, personality dimensions such as ruggedness, sophistication, sincerity, excitement and competence (Aaker 1997) give a product, service or firm a human-like quality and thus make it more relatable. The brand's usefulness therefore rests on the promise of consistency, which mitigates risks for the consumer. That is, one can more or less know what to expect when they commit to a reputable brand: the Starbucks 'experience' varies little from Sydney to New York to Shanghai, and this holds more or less true for Nike, Apple, Coke and so on. The brand's consistency thus encourages repeat purchases (over space and time) and, most importantly, brand loyalty.

Herein lays the obvious problem when the concept of branding is applied to a person: consistency is notoriously difficult to sustain. One needs only to consider the

numerous examples of celebrities caught doing or saying something that undermines the brands with which they are affiliated. For example, when news broke of Tiger Woods' extramarital infidelities in late 2009, several sponsors suspended their contracts with him almost immediately, including Accenture, AT&T, Gatorade, General Motors, Gillette and TAG Heuer. Their message was clear: Woods no longer embodied the brand attributes that they hoped to secure through his endorsement, and falls in their market value confirm that there was subsequent material loss (Knittel and Stango 2014). This is the risk every brand takes when a celebrity has been engaged for promotion: the celebrity must maintain at least a charade of consistently desirable, aspirational attributes – a quest bedevilled by not just the paparazzi industry, but also the average passer-by who can instantly capture every indiscretion on his or her smartphone. Of course, it is not just celebrities who go 'off message'. Political leaders suffer a similar fate when they deviate from policies and are then punished by voters for having abandoned their promises. The point is that consistency requires vigilance, authenticity and the absence of unexpected hurdles that would require amendments or negotiation, all of which are extremely difficult for humans to ensure.

Despite these issues, the concept of self-branding continues to be both popular and influential. However apart from the issue of maintaining consistency (and hence authenticity), the 'ordinary' person wanting to be famous faces another major hurdle: how to build and cultivate a large target audience. To make sense of this, we need to consider the interplay between marketing, media and celebrity.

Audience size and celebrity: where does the opportunity lie?

Marketing and media are mutually dependent. Media relies on advertising revenue for commercial viability, while advertisers have traditionally relied on media to address the audience (their potential consumers). To deliver an audience, media organisations create interesting, engaging content; this is their primary objective. One type of content that has been broadly popular with audiences is celebrity.

There is an obvious marketing relationship between a brand, media, audience and celebrity. At a basic level, the brand represents the identity of a commodity (a product, service or firm), and its main function is to convey a certain level of quality. But to reach the target audience (at an optimal frequency) with its message, the brand owners (or advertisers) have to pay media organisations for the advertising. When a celebrity, or a human brand, is introduced into the picture, the dynamics change slightly. A human brand is defined here as 'any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts' (Thomson 2006, p. 104). The biggest change is that the human brand can now bring his or her own audience into the equation. Of course, the human brand can still rely on traditional media to deliver the audience. But celebrities with a following can also use their own media (e.g. websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) to influence this audience (e.g. the Kardashians). Eventually, with consistent juxtaposition, the human brand can become synonymous with the brand and hence with the product, service or firm. This suggests that self-branding makes most sense if celebrities can lend their names profitably to major brands. Sports stars, for instance, can earn many times more from their endorsement fees than from prize money. This is because major sporting events command a large audience. This provides the endorsed

brand with massive exposure, and if the sports star also wins major tournaments, the 'halo effect' will flow onto the endorsed brand. While not all celebrities have an equal amount of marketing pull, the more successful have talent and personal agents to help convert their fame into lucrative endorsement deals.

Our interest here is in fame-seekers who lack both a strong public identity and the resources to self-promote on the scale of an established celebrity. What would they do? The opportunity may lie in social media (and/or reality television) to help build a strong fan base, sizable enough to interest advertisers. In other words, through social media, reality television and strategies of 'micro-celebrity' (discussed shortly), a modicum of even transient fame can still be achieved. However, given the challenges already discussed (lack of consistency and the challenge of building a sizable target audience), we now return to our original question of why self-branding has continued to grow in popularity. We contend that there are three main reasons for the rise of self-branding:

(1) Social media tacitly promises fame (and subsequent wealth) to 'ordinary' users and thus encourages practices of micro-celebrity.
(2) Within a political culture of neoliberal individualism, self-branding is encouraged with the promise of reward.
(3) The commercial viability of some Social Media Influencers (SMIs; to be discussed shortly), whose success depends on self-branding and practices of micro-celebrity, has proven to be both inspirational and seemingly replicable.

Our contention is that the increased ease of projecting one's image through social media coupled with the rise of individualism has made the notion of self-branding more popular. This in turn creates the illusion – often exemplified by the success of reality television stars – that anyone can be famous and hence become ostensibly successful.

Social media and the practices of micro-celebrity

Peters (1997) did not attribute the importance of self-branding exclusively to the Internet, but his central message has certainly been amplified and extended by others who see in the digital age a heightened need for the practices and mind-set that Peters encourages. At the very least, the (mostly) open platform of online media makes it highly amenable to the strategic and targeted packaging of users' identities, insofar as content production and distribution becomes a seemingly egalitarian affair. As Labrecque *et al*. argue:

> 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 phone. With technological barriers crumbling and its increasing ubiquity, the Web has become the perfect platform for personal branding. (2011, p. 38)

Online media is, moreover, an exceedingly consumer-centric space, because individuals actively and autonomously seek out the resources they are most interested in – and therein lies the 'need' for self-branding. In an environment and era of media surplus, where audiences are saturated with so much to choose from, the premium on

distinctiveness and visibility grows. For this reason, marketing personnel began to speak more of the 'attention economy' (Brody 2001, p. 20), wherein an unprecedented number of communicators compete across more screens for increasingly distracted, dispersed and privatised audiences. According to Fairchild, 'Regardless of its sociological vacuity or validity, the attention economy is by now an established reality for advertisers. It has inspired new thinking about how to create lasting, flexible, and evolving relationships with consumers' (2007, p. 359). With this in mind, and as Shepherd notes, self-branding is 'essentially an attention-getting device, and is frequently sold as the key to helping the aspiring professional to achieve competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace' (2005, p. 597).

By enabling ordinary users to assert strong identities that can underpin and animate high public profiles, self-branding makes fame and/or celebrity more attainable – indeed, this is often the *raison d'être* for self-branding practices since they are designed for maximising prominence, recognition and loyalty. While it is not pertinent here to detail the machinations by which fame and/or celebrity was achieved before the digital age, it suffices to note that, at the very least, it was a relatively rare experience generally enjoyed by those who had achieved something remarkable (like elite sportspeople, politicians and innovators), were hugely popular in the culture industries (such as cinema or music) or were born into the privileged echelons of society (like royalty or the extremely wealthy). Furthermore, such individuals usually had at least two things in common: they could attract attention easily; and, depending on the basis of their fame, each embodied a narrative of sorts.

From the early 2000s, self-branding was practised not just by those for whom a strong public image was expected (such as sportspeople, professional musicians and such) but also by 'ordinary' people who had shrewdly gauged the marketing possibilities of contemporary convergent technologies, particularly social media. Whilst it was possible to establish a strong online identity through personal blogs and websites, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram accelerate and accentuate the means by which users can package, perform and sell a lucrative personal brand across several online sites. In turn, the shift towards media convergence, as content flows across multiple channels with diverse access points accordingly, seemingly aids the (self-)branding process inasmuch as the narrative, the emotive and/or 'human' pull of an effective brand (Herskovitz and Crystal 2010, p. 21) is sustained more widely, and hence strengthens the bond between the brand and the audience (Granitz and Forman 2015, p. 5).

In this way, self-branding could benefit from the 'context collapse' of social media activity – that is, what Vitak terms 'the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one's social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients' (2012, p. 451). This has several consequences. First, 'context collapse' problematically inhibits the practices of selective self-presentation that Goffman (1959) described: the idea that individuals modify 'performance' (or the 'presentation of self') according to different audiences and expectations. Occasionally, social media users circumvent this through various tactics, such as decoy profiles, privacy settings or minimal disclosure of personal information (Marwick 2013b, p. 360). Second, however, for self-branding purposes, to further visibility and salience, 'context collapse' can be viewed as a promotional boon. To this end, a distinction provided by Davis and Jurgenson is useful: they

differentiate between context collusion and context collision; both represent context collapse but only the former is intentional. That is, context collision occurs when 'different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly come crashing into each other', while collusion is 'the process whereby social actors intentionally collapse, blur and flatten contexts, especially using various social media' (Davis and Jurgenson 2014, p. 480). Viewed thus, context collusion speaks to the audience reach enabled by the exhilarating diversity of multiple social media platforms, and the efficient crafting of messages to address this '*en masse*'.

Self-branding through social media pivots on attention and narrative, yet significantly extends the potential for fame and celebrity. Compelling narratives potentially attract audiences for a multitude of reasons – they could be inspirational, relatable, instructive, cautionary and so on. What matters is that they find a following through social media and thus stand out in the attention economy. Moreover, through trans-media narratives, the hallmarks of all effective branding are theoretically sustained (consistency, distinctiveness and value) and the brand is consolidated as audiences/followers/fans embed it within their own individualised media flows through likes, shares and comments. This collaborative, dialogic space facilitates self-branding as attention-seeking users produce a public persona that is targeted and strategic. As such, and as Page argues, there is 'particular emphasis on the construction of identity as a product to be consumed by others, and on interaction which treats the audience as an aggregated fan base to be developed and maintained in order to achieve social or economic benefit' (2012, p. 182).

Social media is driven by a specific kind of identity construction – self-mediation – and what users post, share and like effectively creates a highly curated and often abridged snapshot of how they want to be seen. Self-mediation was clearly possible before the Internet era; for example, diaries preceded blogs, photo albums preceded Instagram, and hardcopy scrapbooks preceded Facebook (Good 2012, p. 569). The main difference with personal archives on social media, however, is how convergent technologies provide a platform for global, interactive and commercial communication, on a scale and at a speed hitherto not possible except for privileged elites. Since it is designed for public consumption rather than personal reflection, the branded self not only plays to postmodern notions of identity, with an emphasis on construction, style and fluidity; it also and necessarily claims distinctiveness (Berger 2011, p. 235).

Social media both accommodates ordinary users with distinctive stories and/or content, and furnishes them with highly visible metrics of popularity and endorsement. These metrics are inextricably tied to self-branding: a following can evolve into a fan base and in this way 'ordinary' users find online fame. Keeping in mind the importance of visibility and attention, the pursuit of this recognition entails practices of 'micro-celebrity': the concerted and strategic cultivation of an audience through social media with a view to attaining celebrity status.

Theresa M. Senft first coined the term 'micro-celebrity' in 2001 during her research on how 'camgirls' used conditions afforded by online tools to forge a then-new style of performance. This entailed 'people "amping up" their popularity over the web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites' (Senft 2008, p. 25). While this popularity required micro-celebrities to sustain a relationship with their audience that seemed more 'real' than the conventional one between mainstream media stars and fans, there was at least one important similarity: 'both must brand or die' (2008, p. 26).

Whilst Senft's research chronicled the relatively early adopters of such strategies, within a few years both the concept and its practices had become a pervasive cultural phenomenon, such that, as Marwick and boyd point out, micro-celebrity 'implies that all individuals have an audience that they can strategically maintain through ongoing communication and interaction' (2010, p. 121). Again, success here is registered through the number of likes, shares, retweets, followers and comments that one can boast – albeit superficially, the bigger the audience, the stronger the brand. This phenomenon is fuelled by at least three interrelated forces: the extent to which social media proceeds without the gamut of gatekeepers that otherwise determines and limits content flows; audiences increasingly predisposed to 'ordinary' people in the spotlight; and a cultural economy that contours almost everything (including conceptions of the self) along consumerist lines. The 'celebrities' of self-branding thus manifest and triumph at a marketing media nexus distinct to the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

The 'demotic turn'

As 'ordinary' people seek and find fame through practices of micro-celebrity, they redistribute cultural power in both media and marketing: implicitly, micro-celebrity points to the growing agency, enterprise and business acumen of everyday media users. However, while social media in particular places users in a command position insofar as self-branding is enabled and encouraged, it bears stressing that this seemingly egalitarian shift in media did not originate online. Rather, it surfaced most notably in the early 1990s with the popularity of reality television and that genre's reliance on 'factuality' for entertainment. Global hits such as *Big Brother* (1999–), the *American Idol* (2002–2016) franchise, *Survivor* (1992–) and *Masterchef* (1990–2001; 2005–present) turned 'ordinary' participants into primetime stars, moving them from the peripheries of cultural life (the 'non-media' margins) to its centre: celebrity (Couldry 2002, p. 289). Turner (2006) calls this seminal change in media the 'demotic turn', with the growing visibility of the ordinary person across media generally, and certain genres especially: reality television (e.g. *Big Brother*), confessional talk shows (e.g. *Jerry Springer* [1991–]), docu-soaps (e.g. *Sylvania Waters* [1992]) and reality-based game shows – all of which depended on ordinary people wanting fame. Using Rojek's term 'celetoid' to describe the 'ordinary' person whose primary goal is media visibility (or fame), no matter how fleeting or fragile, Turner writes:

> Given what appears to be our culture's appetite for consuming celebrity and the scale of the demand for new stories, gossip and pictures the celebrity-media industries generate, the accelerated commodity life cycle of the celetoid has emerged as an effective industrial solution to the problem of satisfying demand. (2006, p. 156)

For Turner, the demotic turn validates the celetoid commercially inasmuch as he/she experiences celebrity not despite their ordinariness, but because of it, since it is a precondition for eligibility.

Importantly, Turner saw in the demotic turn – this spotlight on the 'ordinary' – its production-side appeal. He writes:

> Installing ordinary people into game shows, docu-soaps and reality TV programming enables television to 'grow their own' celebrity, to control how they are marketed before,

> during and after production – all of this while still subordinating the celebrity of each individual to the needs of the particular programme or format. (Turner 2006, p. 156)

Reality television seemingly welcomes 'ordinary' participants into the mediasphere, and baits them with the high likelihood of fame, celebrity or, at the very least, mass exposure. However, this is conditional on their fit with the product at hand and its commercial imperatives as participants are embedded into a given programme and repurposed across its media with implicit marketing goals in mind. For instance, in 2009 the inaugural winner of *Masterchef Australia* (2009–) Julie Goodwin was the archetypal relatable mum whose 'ordinariness' served the show on several fronts. Her 'back to basics' style – in cooking, demeanour and looks – was easily woven into the *Masterchef* model, with its emphasis on contestants' personalities, backstories and 'journeys'; in turn, her win was a fitting tribute to the *Masterchef* brand and its associated merchandising (Khamis 2013). Considering its commercial aims, being the first Australian television show to break the $100 million advertising revenue mark (Hargreaves 2010, p. 90), it was crucial that the *Masterchef* winner complemented the show's wide suite of sponsors, which included grocery giant Coles, Western Star butter and Campbell's Real Stock. Given *Masterchef*'s target demographic, the cultural middle ground and 'everyday' cooks, Goodwin's persona (an endearing and accessible suburban mum) worked well for its brand.

The rise of 'instafame'

The demotic turn that Turner refers to is extended on social media. Users need not be folded into an existing narrative structure (such as *Masterchef*) and can instead fashion their own autonomously authored brand. In this way, self-branding ostensibly frees practitioners from the top-down dynamic that ultimately characterises reality television, despite whatever democracy it suggests. Micro-celebrity is predicated on this, and takes for granted users' ability to muster a following and fan base independent of the resources and dictates of legacy media (the big-name bastions of television, print and radio); online, self-branding is a decidedly individualised process. While the goal might be to eventually link up with advertisers and parlay an online profile towards a broader public presence, self-branding through social media does not require initial affiliation with the 'already powerful'. Rather, and to reiterate, what matters most is visibility and attention – and therein lays the critical importance of self-branding strategies and practices of micro-celebrity.

The scale of potential audience reach for 'ordinary' people through social media is such that popularity and prominence no longer rest on the go-ahead from traditional gatekeepers (editors, producers, etc.). As Marwick notes, for instance: 'With Instagram's user base of 150 million comes the possibility of achieving *Instafame*, the condition of having a relatively great number of followers on the app' (2015, p. 137; original emphasis). While Marwick concedes that the most followed users of Instagram remain celebrities whose fame is conferred by traditional mainstream media (such as Beyoncé, Oprah Winfrey and Kobe Bryant), she highlights how ordinary users have become 'Instagram famous' through what appears to be little more than streams of eye-catching 'selfies' (self-portraits) – for example Cayla Friesz, a photogenic and

conventionally attractive high school student from Indiana whose otherwise 'ordinary' pictures of herself, friends, food and outings are seen by over 35,000 followers, many of whom have dedicated fan pages to her. Marwick argues: 'Instafamous people like Friesz have the potential to reach an audience that rivals that of television networks in size, what we might call a mass audience' (2015, p. 150).

Marwick's notion of the Instafamous is easily applied across the most common social media sites, especially Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Their popularity does not just challenge that of legacy media but increasingly eclipses it, especially among young people. For these 'digital natives', most media activity (production, distribution and consumption) is conducted overwhelmingly online. Not surprisingly, the fact that micro-celebrity such as that enjoyed by Friesz appears disproportionately dependent on the vanity and ego of attention-seekers fuels wider fears that social media underwrites an epidemic of self-obsession. Young people in particular appear convinced that good looks, good living and conspicuous consumption (through artfully composed images of outfits, make-up, meals, holiday resorts, etc.) warrant adoration and emulation. This emphasis on spectacle seems to have a lamentable psychodynamic consequence. According to MacDonald, for instance, social media is primarily a gateway to self-promotion and therefore is at least partly responsible (alongside changes to traditional family life and the growth of celebrity worship) for an increasingly narcissistic society. For MacDonald, the desire for social media fame prompts young people to focus on image and artifice at the expense of 'real' achievements of depth and substance, which in turn warps perceptions of actual accomplishment – that is, it can be articulated through a false and materialistic grandiosity (2014, p. 147).

This article is not interested in how narcissism functions in (or is a product of) self-branding through social media; it will suffice to note that, in the packaging of image for commercial and/or cultural gain, it makes sense that users enhance what they consider their most appealing or lucrative aspects, and underplay those that do not further their branding objectives. What is more pertinent here is the widespread willingness of fame-seekers to be submitted to personalised scrutiny in the media. For P. David Marshall, this marks a specific historic moment: 'the ubiquity of the exposed public self' whereby 'the individual is more than invited to participate in a world of general exposure and learns to inhabit the risks that such a world entails' (2016, p. 235). Moreover, this openness to 'exposure' can be rationalised in terms of how the 'attention economy' expects from everyone what was once associated with celebrities: 'The recognition culture that operates as a form of economic value in this wider culture industry is similarly the model through which the populace begins to calibrate their own value' (2016, p. 507). As such, the normalisation of these practices speaks to the dissolution of any social demarcation between celebrities and ordinary people. As Gamson notes:

> The ordinary turn in celebrity culture is ultimately part of a heightened consciousness of everyday life as a public performance – an increased expectation that we are being watched, a growing willingness to offer up private parts of the self to watchers known and unknown, and a hovering sense that perhaps the unwatched life is invalid or insufficient. (2011, p. 1068)

This last provocative point – that 'perhaps the unwatched life is invalid or insufficient' – merits further discussion. Obviously it points to the philosophical and existential

questions at play, but this is beyond the thematic breadth of this discussion. The focus turns instead to the political economy behind Gamson's claim, specifically: how self-branding through social media and the attendant logic of micro-celebrity marks the extension of a consumerist ideology and orientation to practically every area of contemporary cultural life, and the totalising rise of largely neoliberal values, ideals and assumptions.

The political economy of self-branding

Self-branding operates through principles and practices distinct to the 'promotional culture' (Wernick 1992) of advanced consumer capitalism. It shows how private individuals have internalised ideas that were designed for the marketing of commodities, and thus represents a seminal turning point in how subjectivity itself is understood and articulated. There is a historical logic to this: global capitalism coupled with the communication technologies of social media has wrought significant cultural, economic and political upheaval, and the concept of self-branding manifests as an apposite navigational strategy for otherwise vulnerable, overwhelmed individuals. As such, self-branding through social media can be understood as a way to retain and assert personal agency and control within a general context of uncertainty and flux. Therefore, it harmonises with neoliberal notions of individual efficacy and responsibility; and rests on capitalist faith in enterprising, resourceful and self-directed labour. Within the twenty-first-century context of intense media activity and competition, the emphasis on the atomised, distinctive self is framed as an affirmation of control and conviction. In this schema, just to be noticed is a victory of sorts. As Senft makes clear, whatever 'immaterial labor' (in the Marxian sense) is required to assert the branded self through social media is 'almost always cast in narratives of empowerment' (2013, p. 350) – which effectively celebrates those who triumph in the 'attention economy'.

Self-branding explicitly invokes labour to be malleably responsive to dynamic market conditions. It calls for what Duffy and Hund term 'creative self-enterprise' (2015, p. 1) and sits easily within dominant discourses of creative economies, cities and precincts (Florida 2003). Here, cultural entrepreneurs (rather than 'labourers') assume both the risks and rewards of economic opportunities and constitute a 'creative class' that is, argue Banet-Weiser and Sturken, 'comprised not only of professionals who are paid for their creative labor but also of "creative amateurs", encouraged to be "empowered" by the flexibility and openness of new technological formats and expanded markets' (2010, p. 272). In turn, and as Chen notes, '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' (2013, p. 334). However, the fact that this requirement to project a distinctive character is channelled through a discourse of autonomy and independence is highly disingenuous. On the one hand, platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook empower users to address audiences without the constrictive scaffolding of traditional media. Through strategically inspired image control, self-branding through social media relies on rhetoric of freedom and agency. On the other hand, however, the fact that self-branding shifts the onus of labour security to the individual and their capacity for commercial relevance sits within increasingly dominant

economic realities and political priorities. Ironically, self-branding can therefore be seen less as a testament to personal control and more as a reflection of unstable and uncertain labour markets, whereby workers are expected to be as adaptive and nuanced as all branded products (from sneakers and fast-food to smartphones and furniture) in post-Ford globalised economies. As such, and as Bandinelli and Arvidsson (2012) argue, the rise of self-branding constitutes another form of neoliberal governance by compelling (or 'empowering') people to consider themselves entrepreneurial subjects, ultimately responsible for their own success or failure in the marketplace. Moreover, it has spawned a belief system that now infiltrates the neoliberal knowledge economy: marketing, coaches, therapists, teachers, social workers and universities, all of which promote self-branding skills as both life-changing and life-making and thus succeed in the social production of market relations (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012, p. 68).

The branded self, with subjectivity shaped by and for the market, is always working. For Hearn (drawing on Tronti), this monetisation of just being makes most sense through the concept of the 'social factory', which:

> describes a situation under contemporary capitalism in which work extends far beyond the temporal and spatial limits of traditional workplaces, eluding effective forms of capture and measurement, and capital's productivity penetrates ever more deeply into all, including the most intimate, aspects of our lives. (Hearn 2011, p. 316)

With the commodification of the self, individuals are locked into a mode of constant promotion. This surfaces spectacularly on social media sites, since these 'produce inventories of branded selves; their logic encourages users to see themselves and others as commodity-signs to be collected and consumed in the social marketplace' (Hearn 2008a, p. 211). Self-branding asks the individual to view relationships as transactional and instrumental, and to look to the market to gauge personal accomplishment – each social encounter effectively tests how useful (and hence valuable) the branded self is (Wee and Brooks 2010, p. 54). In this way, and as Hearn points out, self-branding ultimately exacerbates the insecurity it aims to resolve, since it relies on economic conditions that are notoriously precarious, decentralised and flexible. She writes: 'Here, we see the "self" as a commodity for sale in the labour market, which must generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary' (Hearn 2008b, p. 497). All branding requires consistency of narrative and image, yet the market – the 'dominant corporate imaginary' – is highly changeable (under the pretext of consumer choice and variety), and therein lays a constant and inescapable tension.

In its breathless appeals to self-motivation, the literature of self-branding reworks one of the most haloed motifs in US culture: the resourceful individual. With its upbeat and optimistic tone, this concept demands the successful individual to be driven and future focused, and posits naysayers and sceptics as cynical, defeatist and/or lazy. As Lair *et al*. note, the concept:

> resonates strongly with the by-your-bootstrap mythos that has historically played a central role in American culture in general and American business culture in particular, as well as with the neoliberal economic philosophy that has become so prominent for many Western governments. (2005, p. 322)

It casts economic turmoil as a default setting for which anything other than a 'can-do' attitude is futile. The more *laissez faire* the economy, the more creative agility an individual needs – or to put it another way, this concept implies that it is not the economy which should be corrected or adjusted, but rather the individual. In this way, self-branding effectively absolves governments of fiscal intervention, and thus plays straight into the *modus operandi* of free-market ideologues.

Recent cases of self-branding and the rise of social media influencers

To consider strategies of micro-celebrity in practice, and to see the phenomena discussed thus far manifest with varying consequences, three recent examples are highly pertinent. These examples illustrate a particular kind of online micro-celebrity: the SMI. As Hearn and Schoenhoff explain: 'The SMI works to generate a form of "celebrity" capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic "personal brand" via social networks, which can subsequently be used by companies and advertisers for consumer outreach' (2016, p. 194). SMIs determine their success in terms of return on influence as marketers seek them out to capitalise on their wide social networks and benefit from the intimate, more 'trustworthy' relationships SMIs have ostensibly created (2016, p. 203, Gormley 2016).

In 2015, two Australian food bloggers made headlines for very different but not entirely unrelated reasons. In February, Jess Anscough – better known to her fans as the Wellness Warrior – died from a rare form of cancer, epithelioid sarcoma, at the age of 30. Anscough, who had been diagnosed seven years earlier, and had lost her mother Sharyn to breast cancer in 2013, found social media fame by eschewing conventional cancer treatment and instead advocating the controversial Gerson Therapy (Corderoy 2015). Developed in the 1930s, Gerson Therapy claims to cure cancer and other degenerative diseases through diet, which for Anscough entailed huge amounts of fruit and vegetables and up to six daily coffee enemas. In April, 23-year-old Belle Gibson, who found social media fame by claiming to have cured her terminal brain cancer through diet and lifestyle alone, revealed that she had lied about having cancer (Davey 2015, Phillip 2015). By the time her hoax was exposed, Gibson's empire, under the name 'The Whole Pantry', had grown from a blog to a widely publicised phone app and a book deal. This article is not concerned so much with the ire, scepticism or pity these women generated in their eager embrace of 'wellness' strategies that were obviously contentious: their fame rested on their rejection of conventional medicine and science. Instead, it is argued here that, by strategically embedding compelling narratives within their respective online personas, both Anscough and Gibson show how contemporary social media enables and powers online celebrity, whereby 'ordinary' users cultivate fame and influence that can be then leveraged more widely.

Through stories that were inspirational, accessible and consistent with burgeoning mainstream interest in 'wellness', the process of making active choices towards a healthy and fulfilling life, Anscough and Gibson attracted fan bases, media attention and cultural traction. Both had also traded on one of the most import facets of micro-celebrity: a promise of 'authenticity'. Micro-celebrity is a mind-set and a set of practices that courts attention through insights into its practitioners' private lives, and a sense of realness that renders their narratives, their branding, both accessible and intimate. That is, writes

Marwick, they 'know their fans, respond to them, and often feel an obligation to continue this interaction to boost their popularity, breaking down the traditional audience/performer spectator/spectacle dichotomy' (2016, p. 345). This requires an 'always on' work mode, with the constant vigilance and monitoring of this 'authentic' self that is paradoxically both edited (since it is outward-looking) and 'real'. Such 'emotional labour' can have adverse consequences, requiring, as Marwick writes, 'a thick skin, and an ongoing awareness of the audience' (2013a, p. 196). At the same time, however, the perception of authenticity creates a space that is readily exploitable, insofar as SMIs can parlay the trust they inspire into myriad commercial arrangements. Indeed, as Abidin argues, the sense of closeness that SMIs contrive is central to their material success, since their allure 'is premised on the ways they engage with their followers to give the impression of exclusive, "intimate" exchange', and followers 'are privy to what appears to be genuine, raw and usually inaccessible aspects of influencers' personal lives' (Abidin 2015). This perceived authenticity was at work in the online profiles of both Anscough and Gibson.

Crucially, both women crafted an online presence that effectively monetised their personal image: through self-branding, their 'authentic' public identities were commodified. In this way, both showed the ironic inversion of authenticity as it manifests through self-branding. As Banet-Weiser puts it, the traditional notion of authenticity is one based on 'intrinsic motivation, which values uniqueness, original expression, and independence from the market'; in the schema of micro-celebrity, however, 'it is about external gratification' (2012, p. 80), its recognition and reward determined by others. Once their celebrity was secured in the blogosphere, Anscough and Gibson went on to make television appearances, magazine interviews, speaking engagements and more. They had shrewdly appraised the marketing value of their attention-getting, authentic-seeming brands, and found wide popularity as two of Australia's most well-known SMIs.

Since these women had so convincingly converted 'Internet fame' into 'proper' fame, there was intense interest (and scrutiny) when Anscough succumbed to her cancer and Gibson was shown to have lied. Despite the scale of criticism and anger levelled at both Anscough and Gibson for what many deemed a dangerously tenuous grasp of nutritional science, it is clear that – until early 2015 – both had successfully contrived attractive and lucrative careers through social media. In their advocacy of a nebulously holistic understanding of personal well-being, with a diet-based approach to health and nutrition, both exploited growing popular interest in food education, which is being increasingly sought online. Moreover, there are numerous examples of other bloggers who have successfully created high media profiles by promoting similarly construed ideas. Given just how quick and low-cost online nutrition information is, this is hardly surprising: around 80% of all Internet users aged 18–46 go online for health information, and the majority of these are women (Lohse 2013, p. 69). Because of the potential reach of such information, professional nutritionists have called for 'best practice' industry guidelines to ensure quality control for such online resources (Tobey and Manore 2014, p. 128), but the nature of social media obviously defies such containment. Clearly, the absence of industry-endorsed qualifications did not impede these women's social media ascent; it probably made them more relatable and endearing to their fans. Yet despite the controversy that these cases generated (around the efficacy and merits of Gerson Therapy as advocated by Anscough; and the flagrant lies that Gibson had told to her

growing fan base), they show just how seductive social media is as a profile-boosting platform, and that strategies of micro-celebrity can forge a loyal following on even the flimsiest of grounds. One of the most famous food bloggers, for instance, is 36-year-old Vani Hari, better known around the world as the Food Babe. Hari began blogging in April 2011 and chronicled how she regained her health and vitality after an appendectomy through a more mindful diet, and by combing through food labels to better understand the typical American food system. Aghast at what she considered an alarming rate of toxic chemicals in popular everyday foods, and convinced that these were to the nutritional detriment of consumers, Hari established her signature mission: to reveal the 'truth' behind packaged, processed foods and to lobby for greater transparency on the part of big business. To this end, Hari uses the 'Food Babe Army', her legion of online fans – in June 2015 her Facebook page had 972,000 likes, her Instagram account had over 46,000 followers and her Twitter handle had over 89,000 followers.

Through practices of micro-celebrity on their social media platforms, these three SMIs found both fame and marketability through strategic self-branding. Ultimately (and obviously) Hari, aka the Food Babe, has been the most successful. As James Hamblin (2015) wrote in *The Atlantic*, hyperbolically perhaps, 'the idea of a lone consultant becoming, in three short years, more influential than entire university departments of Ph.Ds., is indicative of a new level of potential for celebrity in health messaging'. That is not to say that her contribution to the wellness industry has been any more robust, considered or valid – on social media, celebrity is not necessarily dependent on such 'logical' indices. Hari has been the subject of much derision from science writers precisely because of her populist spin on nutritional advice, but her profile continues to grow, with coverage across the *New York Times*, NBC News and the *Washington Post* and her appointment as CNN's food expert. She is a savvy entrepreneur as much as a consumer advocate, and sells eating guides with meal calendars, recipes and grocery lists replete with 'approved brands' – that is, those with which she has a commercial arrangement (Schultz and Morrison 2014). The size of her fan base bodes well for her online petitions that demand change from the giants of the American food industry, including Subway, Lean Cuisine, McDonalds, General Mills, Starbucks and Coca-Cola – all of which have, according to Hari, buckled to Food Babe Army pressure and dropped what she claimed were harmful chemicals in their foods. The Food Babe's brand is strong, distinctive and consistent, much to the chagrin of actual scientists who argue that just because an ingredient is hard to pronounce or is indecipherable for the average consumer this does not render it dangerous (Gorski 2014). Moreover, like Anscough and Gibson, she has a story – a journey to 'wellness' through diet – that has been reconfigured as a popularly accessible promise.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is to critically examine the idea of self-branding first popularised in the 1990s. Although it is conceptually flawed, its popularity has not waned. The question is why? In terms of the examples considered (Anscough, Gibson and Hari), the issue is not their motivations, credentials or even sincerity. Rather, it is the degree to which contemporary social, economic and technological processes both accommodate and reward their style of message management, insofar as social media propelled them from relative obscurity to

become prominent SMIs, and the role of self-branding in this development. Their visibility and efficacy are clearly indebted to communication capabilities distinct to the early twenty-first century, and a cultural milieu increasingly primed for self-promotion and triumphant individualism. This article shows how social media encourages the practices of self-branding that these three women engaged in. At stake is how these practices capitalise on the apparent democratisation of media production and distribution, whereby entry levels are comparatively low and potential reach, in terms of audience and influence, is spectacularly high. The wide-ranging effects of participatory media and user-generated content have been amply documented and discussed for almost two decades. It is argued here, however, that, in the early twenty-first century, key trends appear especially pronounced – not the least of which is the extent to which social media like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram facilitate not just participation but practices of self-branding.

The rapid globalisation of advanced consumer capitalism has obviously widened the scope and scale of all brand marketing, but it is the ascent and entrenchment of self-branding that is considered here, and the ways this phenomenon links dominant notions of individual success, personal responsibility and subjectivity to a political economy defined almost completely by consumerist logic. Our analysis suggests that the rise of social media and our current consumerist orientation may have contributed to this popularity. The rise of both 'Instafame' and SMIs – their pursuit and realisation – effectively underscores three distinct and interrelated processes: the transformative and seminal effects of social, interactive and conversational media in the Information Age; the mercurial dismantling of what were once 'knowledge monopolies', as the likes of Anscough, Gibson and Hari become quasi-experts and assume the role historically reserved for highly trained specialists (such as doctors, dieticians and scientists); and the near-total extension of marketing logic and language into more areas of contemporary social life. While all these processes predate and are not exclusive to social media, cumulatively social media intensifies and spotlights their salience.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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