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Like Me: Generation Z and the Use of Social Media for Personal Branding

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Abstract. *Building a personal brand in this modern age, where technology and social platforms redefine the way individuals interact, has become a necessity, especially for the young generation Z which are increasingly involved in the online medium. A personal brand conveys an individual's identity and distinctiveness and it has become an important tool for young individuals that enables them to achieve success regardless of their status: they can be young professionals in search for a job, public speakers, bloggers, managers or entrepreneurs. In this context, this paper focuses on Generation Z and the importance of building a personal brand in the age of social media. Taking into consideration the recent development of personal branding tools and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram or LinkedIn, the aim of this paper is to investigate the degree in which young individuals, belonging to Gen Z, understand the benefits of social media personal branding in order to create a strong online identity to help them at the start of their career. It is specifically interesting to discover how Gen Z individuals appreciate the efficiency of personal branding through social media outlets, considering that they belong to a generation known for being digital and tech-savvy, more so than their predecessors.*

Keywords: *brands; personal branding; social media; Instagram; Facebook; Generation Z.*

Introduction

Nowadays, brands are present in every aspect of our societies, from products, cities, to universities. Hence, developing a personal brand has become an increasingly discussed topic both in academia and business environments. However, personal branding was a common phenomenon for decades for entertainers, politicians, general managers or businesses, but currently, it has spread, and many other people from different environments or positions in the company are now branding themselves (Baltezarević, & Milovanovic, 2014). Moreover, the practice of personal branding is considered a necessary strategy for success (Hearn, 2008).

Personal branding has evolved from branding, and it follows the same main principles. Therefore, examining the well-established academic literature on brands and branding offers us a starting point to understanding the concepts and principles for personal branding. Taking into consideration all the discussions on brands, specialists offer a multitude of perspectives. Aaker (1991), Kotler and Armstrong (2012), argue that brands are meant to support the consumers in their decision-making process, as they reflect the quality of the products. In the same time, Aaker (1997, p.347) emphasizes the importance of the brand personality that he defines as “the human characteristics

associated with a brand". Olins (2009, p.8) follows the same line of thought defining the brand as "an organization, a product or a service with personality". In addition, Kapferer (2004) characterizes brands as a collection of a consumer's experiences. An important aspect is defined here, namely, the importance of establishing some coherent and consistent personality traits that help define and distinguish your product, service or company, and even that help you develop an individual's image. In this sense, Aaker, (1991), Kapferer (1997) and Keller & Richey (2006) include the management of psychological associations into the discussion of brands.

Kotler and Armstrong (2012) argue that brands are comprised of six levels of meaning: attributes, benefits, values, culture, personality and user, and the most durable of them are values, culture, and personality. In this sense, personal branding literature stresses the importance of developing a collection of symbols and associations that give an individual the same benefits that companies with strong brand equity have (Wight, 2009). "Personal branding involves managing your reputation, style, look, attitude and skill set the same way that a marketing team would run the brand for a bag of Doritos or bottle of shampoo." (Wight, 2009, p.6). The scope of personal branding has grown from a simple business tactic in psychological recognition of the impact that the business world has upon the ideas and the consciousness individual about himself/herself (Baltezarević & Milovanovic, 2014). Lair et al. (2015) point out that personal branding can make the difference for an individual, especially in the context of a crowded marketplace. "The progress from consumer branding to company branding to the branding of a person and a career is hardly surprising when we consider the push for consolidating the branding movement via an ideology of individual efficacy, identity, and control' (Lair et al., 2005, p.314). All these perspectives are important elements of branding theory, and they are the foundations for the rapidly developing body of literature on personal branding.

This paper draws on the branding literature for a better understanding of the basic principles that stand behind the process and practice of personal branding. This process is even more interesting and challenging when we bring into discussion the use of online platforms and their role in personal branding practice. The focus is on young individuals, belonging to Gen Z, as they are game changers and they put a lot of emphasis on the use of social media in every aspect of their lives. Generation Z individuals are known for the way they "move from face to face and digital platforms for social life, conversations, learning assessments, work and play with fluidity and ease" (Madden, 2017, p.16). In this context, the objective of this paper is to take an in-depth look into the approach and practice of Gen Z individuals when it comes to personal brand building through social media. For this reason, the paper presents a review of the body of literature and studies about both brand building and Generation Z. The study includes a quantitative approach conducted on Gen Z individuals (born 1995-2009) (Madden, 2017).

Building a personal brand: why is it so important?

The global contemporary society is shaped by the progress of technologies and online platforms that have made the world a much smaller place. The new means of communication and information technologies (sites, blogs, social media) have made us more connected and competitive. In a digital world where information travels instantaneously and continuously, branding (corporate or personal) becomes essential

for surviving in the 21st century (Kang, 2013; Olins, 2009). The competition is global both on a business level or on a personal or professional level. For this reason, it may have never been more important to differentiate from your possible main competitors. For decades, the marketing discourse stresses the crucial role of brands for business success, and this approach is currently spreading to everyday discourse and practice, where individuals are encouraged to regard themselves as personal brands. Wilson & Blumenthal (2008, p.4) point out the relevance of personal branding for every individual “who wants to unleash his or her inner passions and proactively build a fulfilling future, as well as grow in importance, relevance, and reputation”. Specialists (Wilson & Blumenthal, 2008; Manai & Holmlund, 2015) argue that one of the most important aspects of personal brand building is knowing how to brand a personality in a way that is appealing to audiences. Therefore, the concept of personal branding is defined as the means through which an individual is able to “communicate his/her abilities to a wider audience in networking situations, in applying for jobs and in making a name for oneself as a means of getting ahead in one’s career” (Manai & Holmlund, 2015, p.4). According to Keller and Richey (2006), a brand personality reflects three dimensions which consist of corporate brand personality dimensions: affective (feelings), cognitive (thoughts) and conative (actions). Extrapolating to personal branding the Keller and Richey (2006) approach, then when building or managing an individual brand, one should focus on all three dimensions, as part of the brand strategy.

Personal branding is your image and your reputation and it is the key to influence, opportunities, and advancement (Kang, 2013). Previous research (Johnson, 2019; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018; Kang, 2013; Farhana, 2012; Harris & Rae 2011) shows that in order to build a strong personal brand an individual should develop the strategy and actions to guide their brand. On the topic of building a personal brand, important aspects are highlighted by specialists: some debate that a strong brand cannot exist without authenticity (Harris & Rae, 2011; Liu & Suh, 2017), while others argue that leadership skills are necessary (Baltezarević & Milovanovic, 2014). Stressing the necessity of authenticity, Liu and Suh (2017) state that it acts as a differentiation factor on social media from that on other platforms. Wilson (2008) argues that establishing personal brand attributes is highly important taking into account the individual’s background, philosophy, lifestyle, passions. Nevertheless, drawing upon the branding body of literature, as Kotler & Armstrong (2012, p.423) point out, brands are more than just names and symbols and a “powerful brand has high brand equity.” In this sense, Wilson (2008, p.77) highlights that “a healthy brand identity contributes to strong brand equity and vice versa.”

The purpose of personal branding is to build a highly valued brand equity through marketing image and it represents an individual’s most important asset (Baltezarević, & Milovanovic, 2014; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018). Kotler and Armstrong (2012, pp.243-244) discuss brand strength along four dimensions: differentiation (what makes the brand stand out), relevance (how consumers feel it meets their needs), knowledge (how much consumers know about the brand), and esteem (how highly consumers regard and respect the brand). The principles of personal branding can be applied to great effect when building a personal brand. However, there are specialists who argue that there is a misconception when it comes to personal brands and branding: “personal branding is not about packaging yourself to sell yourself. It is about bringing focus to your actions so that the right kinds of people can find you and subscribe to your message, and vice versa. Brands want to be people. They strive to evoke the same emotional

connections that people create naturally.” (Johnson, 2019, p.14) In order to create a compelling brand story, one should create a clear brand knowledge structure, as Keller (1993) posits.

Personal branding is highly important for everyone from recent graduates to entrepreneurs, as personal brands can make a difference between getting a job and ending on the bottom of a file, or it can inspire the necessary confidence that encourages investors to trust your business (Kang, 2013). The body of literature on this subject concurs that personal branding represents a means of self-expression, creating a positive image and reputation with the purpose of building networks, differentiating in the marketplace and staying competitive. Thompson-Whiteside et al. (2018) bring into a discussion that personal branding is also encouraged by the new media platforms, which offer opportunities unlike anything before for individuals to present themselves, interact and share their opinions. Following the same line of thought, researchers (Johnson, 2019; Kang, 2013; Harris & Rae, 2011) note that due to the development of technology, one should be aware that nowadays everything is and happens online. Individuals belonging even to older generations frequently communicate on Facebook. Hence, most aspects of our lives are online, and the information is available for anyone who wants to make an assessment of our competencies and capabilities for new opportunities. Hence, the online platforms bring many benefits especially for building a brand, but finding the right balance can prove to be difficult, as a strong personal brand implies merging reputation, trust, identity, personality, attention and execution.

Building a personal brand online

As social media marketing becomes more pervasive, a new practice has emerged regarding the strategic use of the medium in order to build a strong personal brand. Reynolds (2011) notes that social media has impacted the personal branding process, strengthening it to a greater extent than the traditional practice, which was solely focused on communication style and appearance.

Since the mass proliferation of the Internet, researchers and marketers have been examining how to utilize the medium strategically to build a strong brand. Whether we discuss commercial or personal brands, one aspect is certain: we live in an era of unparalleled transparency. The online information provides a digital footprint that implicitly brands individuals (Labrecque et al., 2011). However, Smith (2018, p.35) asserts that “the key to making a difference through social media is being proactive about how you present yourself, thereby, influencing the information people find”. Following the same line of thought, Liu and Suh (2017) underline the idea that personal branding practice provides social media users with enormous opportunity and autonomy. Considering that traditionally the branding processes imply financial support, one of the benefits of social media platforms consist of its reduced or even non-existent costs. Social media provides a platform and a structure that offers individuals and companies the opportunity to promote themselves very efficiently (Karaduman, 2013).

Technological and communication barriers are disintegrating, and their increasing prevalence enables social media platforms to become the perfect instruments for personal branding. Social media provides a wide range of tools for individuals to manage

their personal brand, hence individuals are able to share their ideas through profiles, blogs, guest blogging for others, micro posts, personal websites, videocasting and online discussions (Labrecque et al., 2011; Markos-Kujbus & Gati, 2012; Kang, 2013; Vanderford, 2017). A comprehensive representation (see figure 1) of social media platforms that enable individuals to create an individual brand is made by Markos-Kujbus and Gati (2012). The two draw on previous research to explain the attributes of SM types, theorizing that different types of media have a dissimilar degree of social presence.

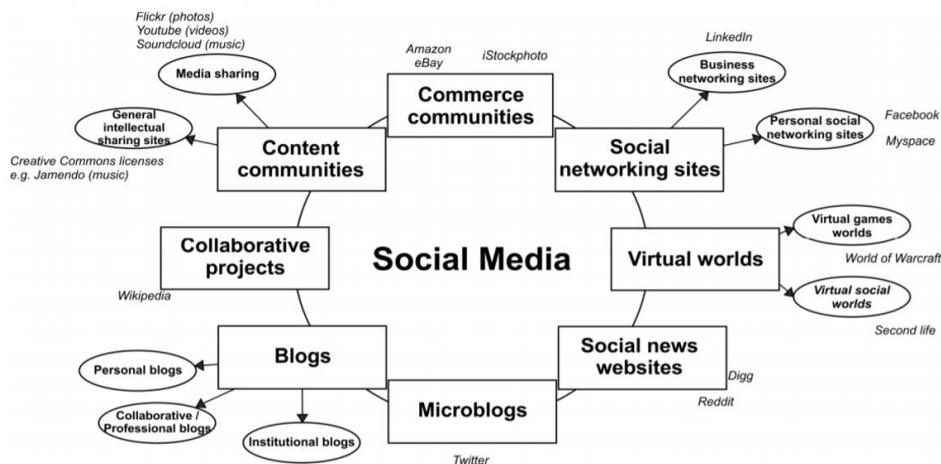


Figure 1. Social Media Components
(Markos-Kujbus & Gati, 2012, p.8)

The social media platforms used for personal branding are various, the most common and the most discussed in the body of literature (Labrecque et al., 2011; Kang, 2013; Vanderford, 2017; Johnson, 2019) are Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter, each having its own advantages and disadvantages. In the same time, the above-mentioned researchers concur on an important aspect: regardless of the social media platform used for personal branding, a strategy must be first established; otherwise, all branding efforts are in vain. In this sense, Karen Kang (2013) asserts that posting on social media without a clear strategy only creates confusion, therefore for a strong individual brand strategy is a requirement. In addition, many researchers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Labrecque et al., 2011; Kang, 2013; Vanderford, 2017; Johnson, 2019) affirm that in the process of building an individual brand, one should carefully select the online channels according to the established strategy and priorities. The online medium offers a multitude of channels, with various attributes “based on the degree of self-disclosure it requires and the type of self-presentation it allows” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.62). In order to identify which, type of SM to pursue personal branding, the classification made by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) (see Figure 1) can prove to be a very useful tool.

| | | Social presence/Media richness | | |
|---|------|---|--|--|
| | | Low | Medium | High |
| Self- presentation/ self-disclosure | High | Blogs | Social network sites (e.g. Facebook) | Virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life) |
| | Low | Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia) | Content communities (e.g. YouTube) | Virtual game worlds (e.g. WOW) |

Figure 1. Classification of Social Media by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure
(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.62)

A high level of self-presentation and self-disclosure, as well as a medium level of social presence and media richness, can characterize social network sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Users connect and share personal information on such social media sites, including photos, video, audio files, and blog. In this sense, users can create an image that is consistent with one's personal brand identity by consciously revealing personal information such as thoughts, feelings, likes. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Researchers, marketers and the business environment acknowledge not only the importance of a personal brand but also the importance of building and maintaining a personal brand identity using social media. Hence, this paper focuses on these particular aspects while investigating the use of social media personal branding by Gen Z individuals.

Like Me: understanding Generation Z

Generation Z is coming of age as the first of Gen Z talent joins the workforce. The existing literature describes generation Z as a cohort of individuals born in 1995 up to 2009, between the ages of 10-24 years old. However, there are slightly different approaches regarding the years encompassing this younger generation: Tapscott (2008) frames this generation between 1998-2008, Dimock (2019), the president of Pew Research Center, announces the Center's adoption of 1996 as an endpoint to births in the Millennial generation, making 1997 the starting year for Gen Z individuals. Lyons, LaVelle, and Smith (2017) define the birth years for Gen Z members between 1993 and 1999. For Madden (2017) anyone born between 1995 and 2009 is considered a Post-Millennial or Generation Z member. Most members belonging to this generation are still in their teens, the older ones just reaching the age of 24 years old. Nevertheless, in the existing literature and research, several names designate this generation, such as the iGeneration, Homelanders (Dimock, 2019), TrueGen (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), Next Generation (Tapscott, 2008).

Research reports (E&Y, 2015; Lyons, LaVelle, & Smith, 2017) on Generation Z often times compared to the previous Millennial Generation in terms of characteristics. Nevertheless, studies show that there are several differences between the two generations, as they are usually shaped by the context in which they emerged. The comprehension and characterization of Generation Z individuals should take into account several defining aspects.

Firstly, Generation Z members have grown up with instant global connectivity, facilitated by smartphones, tablets, wearable devices, social media platforms and so forth (Madden, 2017; IPSOS MORI, 2018). Hence, technology is an integral part of their lives along with Internet connectivity even more so than the older Gen Y individuals have. Secondly, Gen Z members are content creators (Madden, 2017). They use social media and instant internet connectivity for accessing resources. "Social media has many potential positive influences on young people's lives, such as increasing social connections, helping with homework and enabling teenagers to develop their identities and share creative projects." (IPSOS MORI, 2018, p.105).

Research (Criteo, 2017) shows that Younger Gen Z-ers love newer platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram, while older Gen Z members continue to use Facebook. This finding is also correlated with another study that shows "there has been a decline in Facebook's dominance among this cohort of young, but it remains a vital part of their social media mix" (IPSOS MORI, 2018, p.74). The figures disclose that 72% of 13-17-year-olds are using Instagram, 69% are using Snapchat and just half (51%) are using Facebook (IPSOS MORI, 2018).

Social media immersion is another defining aspect of this generation. "Gen Z spend nearly nine hours a day listening to media, looking at a screen or on a device. Including time spent multitasking; they are exposed to over 13 hours of media a day on average" (IPSOS MORI, 2018, p.78). Madden (2017) points out the negative impact of media saturation, such as a shorter attention span, and a constant need for entertainment. Other research (IPSOS MORI, 2018) stresses that social media use comes with its risks, as it can be correlated with anxiety, bullying, peer pressure, lower self-esteem, alongside much more positive outcomes. Nevertheless, Generation Z-ers are highly creative (E&Y, 2015), constantly adaptive (Madden, 2017), and have a highly marketable digital mindset (Accenture, 2017).

A McKinsey & Company report highlights four fundamental Gen Z behaviors, all based on a single element– this generation continuous search for truth (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). These four behaviors, as seen in figure 2, refer to (1) individual expression highly valued by members of Gen Z; (2) Inclusivity and self-centeredness, as shown in another study (E&Y, 2015), that correlates with the findings of Francis & Hoefel (2018). This means that the younger people place a greater emphasis on their role in the world as part of a larger ecosystem and their responsibility to help improve it (E&Y, 2015), as they mobilize themselves for a variety of causes (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). (3) Finally, their decision-making process is highly analytical and pragmatic (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).



Figure 2. Generation Z characteristics (Francis & Hoefel, 2018)

An important aspect relevant to our study defined by Francis and Hoefel (2018) is that Generation Y individuals prefer to experiment with different ways of being themselves and shape their identities on the long run, rather than defining themselves through stereotypes. Moreover, their search for authenticity generates greater freedom of expression and greater openness (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). For this reason, it is particularly interesting to understand the way in which Gen Z individuals relate to their personal brands.

Research methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach with the purpose to gain a familiarity with the personal branding through the social media phenomenon amongst Gen Z individuals and acquire new insight that may formulate a platform for future studies regarding Gen Z in Romania and their online practices. The aim of the study was to provide an understanding of how their actions create and develop a personal brand on social platforms.

To explore the practices and social networking activity of the Generation Z individuals, the primary data collection method involved a quantitative questionnaire that applied to a convenience sample of 100 individuals (N=100), between the ages of 18 and 24 years.

Research objectives

01. To identify the perceived benefits of SM personal branding according to Gen Z individuals;

02. To identify the most relevant components or factors for personal branding on social media among Gen Z individuals.

Results and discussions

Benefits of SM personal branding

The current technological progress influences the way in which young individuals interact. Moreover, social media provides a proper platform for building a personal brand. Naturally, building an online brand requires an active online presence. In this sense, Romanian Gen Z individuals make no exception. All of the 100 respondents (N=100) have an online presence among several social media networks: 98% have an Instagram account, 85.7% have a Facebook account, while only 30% have a LinkedIn account. This finding is in line with previous research on this topic that showed that Gen Z-ers prefer Instagram as a social network above Facebook (IPSOS MORI, 2018; Criteo, 2017). In addition, respondents (approximately 80%) consider that the most effective social network for brand building is Instagram; hence, Instagram according to young Romanians supports their self-expression, self-identity needs, especially when building an online personal brand.

Not only this, 85.7% of respondents consider that everyone needs to build a personal brand, but also the majority of respondents (71.5%) opine that social media networks are helping them build an online personal brand. Considering the fact that this young generation of individuals lives mostly online, this finding may also imply their need to express their individuality, as shown in various international research reports (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; E&Y, 2015).

When it comes to the perceptions regarding the benefits of developing a personal brand with the help of the social networks, 50% of respondents consider that a personal brand offers them an opportunity to achieve the desired job more quickly. In addition, respondents (48%) believe that a personal brand is enabling them to showcase their communication skills, personality, and passions. The findings also show other benefits of personal branding that have moderate importance to Romanian Gen Z individuals such as: through personal branding they can differentiate themselves, they use social media platforms to establish relationships and exponentially grow their network, and they can make a distinctive first impression, which reflects their self-image. These findings correlate to the Gen Z values, such as self-expression (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Relevant components for personal branding on social media

Young Romanian respondents frequently check their social media accounts, 80% check in several times a day. Considering Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) approach, individuals can build a personal brand by revealing personal information about themselves, such as thoughts, feelings, likes. In this sense, the findings of this study reveal that the majority of respondents post personal information such as selfies, wefies (i.e. group selfie) on social media. In the same time, respondents prefer to post lifestyle images and content. Only 30% of the respondents revealed that they post professional content on their social media accounts and none of them confirmed to post educational content. Therefore, when correlating these responses with the ones regarding the frequency of their posts on various social networks (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter), we notice that young Romanians, although they have a LinkedIn account, rarely post professional content on this social network site. However, given the fact that they are at the start of their career, this is not at all surprising. In addition, the study illustrates that their preferred types of content that they post on their social media accounts are photographs or videos (57% of the respondents post only photos on their profiles). This is in accordance with the previously discussed aspect, as their preferred social network is Instagram.

Nevertheless, in order to build a strong, coherent professional image and brand that enables Gen Z members to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, they have to take under consideration that exclusively posting photos may not be sufficient. The existing body of literature postulates that personal branding should also include the way individuals present themselves, interact and share their opinions. (Johnson, 2019; Kang, 2013; Harris & Rae, 2011). It is possible, however, for Gen Z individuals to redefine the do's and don'ts of personal branding, especially since they are, after all, the first truly digital generation. Concerning the content of their posts, 70% respondents frequently update their feed, disclosing new information both about themselves and about their friends - the majority of respondents (50%) revealed that they post information regarding their close friends. Hence, communicating and building social networks seems to be relevant to young respondents.

Moreover, the findings of this study reveal that the most important components for building a strong personal branding on social media are a celebrity (42% of respondents agree with this viewpoint), followed by reputation (28%), influence and networking (each scoring approximately 14%). In the same vein as previous research (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Johnson, 2019) the respondents of the study belonging to the Generation Z individuals stress the importance of authenticity when building a personal brand. The majority of the respondents affirm that authenticity is an essential factor for their personal branding efforts, followed by personal attributes and their social media content.

Conclusions

This paper has shown that Gen Z individuals are conscious of their personal brand, and they believe that the development of an online personal brand can help them differentiate in a highly competitive market. In addition, the study contributes to our understanding of how Gen Z individuals who are at the beginning of their career utilize social media and networking contexts in order to build an online reputation. Taking into account the main theoretical approaches that state that social media networks and platforms help an individual build his/her brand equity, this paper reinforces the validity of these approaches among gen Z individuals in Romania. In this sense, Romanian Gen Z individuals build their brands by using Instagram, as their main social network. Most respondents opine that everyone who owns a social media account can develop a personal brand. Hence, Romanian young individuals are aware of the personal branding potential and use social media in such: they frequently spend time online on their phones, on social media apps, whether they are at home, at school, at university or at work, and they frequently update the information on their profiles.

In the present society, where marketing efforts are driven by emotion, passion, storytelling, it is essential for individuals to take time to create and develop their personal brand in order to build long-term, powerful relationships through social platforms, which consequently become an integral part of the self-expression.

This study has some limitations. The most evident limitation is that a relatively small number of respondents was involved in the investigation, which means that caution must be exercised in generalizing the results to the Romanian Gen Z contexts. Expanding the number to more respondents, and using combined methods of investigation should be extremely useful for furthering the knowledge in this field. Nevertheless, as a first attempt at discussing social media brand building for young Romanian Gen Z individuals, this study may lead other researchers to further expand the subject.

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