Chapter 4

Flow My Bits, the Professor Screened: Netnography, Academic Micro-Celebrity, and Personal Branding

Robert V. Kozinets
University of Southern California, USA

ABSTRACT

Academics have always been in the business of producing and promoting ideas. The configuration of their identities or brands can play a central role in the successful realization of this ambition. This chapter uses the participative stance in netnography to discuss academic personal branding, but also interweaves advice, core principles, and a series of short inductive case studies about personal academic brands and fields. Featuring cases like those of Plato, Timothy Leary, John Lilly, and others, the chapter outlines a theory of personal academic branding, relating core identities to academic branding practices and purposes. In particular, this chapter suggests the relationship between thinking innovative thoughts, representing them to various audiences, and having one’s idea shared and built upon by a network of interested others. Core to the successful realization of this endeavor are the following nine elements: unconventionality, creativity, internal and external audiences, segmentation, core constituents, co-branding, simplicity, uniqueness, and catchiness.

INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, learned speakers and writers have plied their trade by forging unique identities that, today, we would consider to be brands. We know the stories of Socrates, and how, while teaching in the market, he inspired Plato to write and teach. Socrates was a man of many questions; one of the major things he espoused was to question authority, and to speak the truth to power. Emboldened by the man, Plato founded the Academy, north of Athens, the world’s first formal university. From Socrates forward, learned scholars thought, taught, were venerated, fear, persecuted, and had impact upon one another and upon the world. Their academic identities interact, intersect, and interweave, reticulating...
with various networks and alliances to reach different audiences to different effects. From academic journals and conferences to students, government, the press, and various publics, academics have always been in the business of devising, promoting and communicating ideas. Like Socrates and Plato, they seek to have an impact upon one another and the world. The role of their identities—their brands, if you will—can play a central role in realizing of this ambition.

This chapter will focus on the role of netnography in academic personal branding, a topic which draws upon and extends my writing in Kozinets (2015). However, it also seeks to do more than this. Interweaving research, advice, and a short series of inductive case studies about personal academic brands I have known and admired, it tries to collect some emerging wisdom about this very new practice of personal academic branding. Through featuring the faces of these talented scholars, I begin to sketch out a theory of personal academic branding, relating core identities to practices and purposes for academics not only in academia but also in society. In particular, this chapter seeks to clear some initial conceptual ground regarding the relationship between thinking innovative thoughts, representing them to various audiences, acting in the world, seeking to cause others to act upon it for social change, and having one’s idea shared and built upon by a variety of interested others. The chapter does this through a focusing on netnography, a fluid concept made even more fluid by its recent redefinition and the new conceptual indistinctness of its greatly expanded boundaries.

In some ways, this chapter is an homage to these great thinkers of the past who have so changed my mind, heart and life. I introduce and honor some of the many giants upon whose shoulders, as Newton brilliantly analogized and many have appreciated, we stand and see even further vistas. Although Socrates plied his trade before the printing press, Albert Einstein at the rise of mass media, and Michel Foucault his before the age of social media, each of these intellectual maestros was able to create much influence in each of these media. Their thoughts increasingly influence discourse and burble through the timestream of public thought. We are thus talking not only of intellectual enterprise here, but of media.

Netnography is anthropology that conducts research on digital interactions and experiences by focusing upon digital content. Netnography is participant observation. And that netnographic participation is conceptualized as a type of public identity work: personal academic branding. Wandering widely and jetting back and forth between empirical instance and abstract principle, this chapter conceptualizes branding in academia as a multifaceted act that is forever changed by the rise of the Internet and the advent of social media. It is into this social space, I seek to situate netnography, the act of engaging with online others in the technologically mediated and self-reflective research of human individual and collective being.

The essence of netnography is ethnography using sophisticated mass broadcasting social media tools. As such, netnography builds upon the organic and orgasmic origins of academic communicative practice in group oration and writing as a communicative ecstasy and act of strategic public relations. Netnography is ethnography in public, online, where we add publishing, amplifying and ungrading our prior scholarly abilities to gain local, niche, topical, and mass attention through all media, using laptop, mobile phone, one’s cell in the network, or any other technologies, of machine or of the self. Netographers are technologically proficient prosumers. They consume consumer research at the same time as they create it.

Netnography, like ethnography, can and often is a deeply personal affair. Being a reflexive participant in your inquiry means you must include your own self, your experiences, your habitus, your life, as you construct research. Please keep this participative aspect of my writing and scholarship in mind in this chapter as I take you pastiche fashion through a series of discussions of particular academics and their brands, notions of personal branding. As I elaborate ideas of netnography, induced/abducted principles