

Sanja Kapidzic

# Personal Branding on Social Media

Predictors of Self-Presentation and  
Relationship Management of German Academics



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edited by Patrick Rössler

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# 1 Introduction

The partial disintegration of traditional forms of work and employment and the introduction of more flexible arrangements led to a perceived need for persons to actively take charge of their life and career. The present study aims to explore one facet of this phenomenon: the use of social media for personal branding and the factors that influence self-presentation and networking on social media. However, first it is necessary to place personal branding and a self-entrepreneurial career approach into a broader context. Three aspects are especially relevant in this regard: (a) the changes that happened in the employment market in the past decades, (b) the subsequent perceived importance of personal branding to impact reputation, and (c) the role of technological advances, especially social media in personal branding. These points will be discussed in detail in the following subchapters. First, an introduction to the topic will be provided. Second, changes to the professional environment will be traced back to the 1970s to provide insights into the factors that led to the contemporary employment environment characterized by perceived uncertainty and flexibility. Only in such a professional environment could a self-entrepreneurial approach to life and careers develop and self-marketing and branding terminology permeate everyday professional discourse. Third, the perceived importance of a proactive approach to creating and maintaining reputation through professional self-presentation and networking due to these perceived changes will be discussed. Finally, the crucial role of technological advances, especially social media, in providing people with easily accessible tools for traceable self-presentation and networking will be considered.

## *1.1 The Broader Societal Context*

The development of personal branding can be placed in a wider social context of the perception of heightened individual responsibility in contemporary Western society. By the middle of the twentieth century, Fromm (1950) already noted changes to the perception of the role of a person within society stating that “capitalistic economy put the individual

entirely on his own feet. What he did, how he did it, whether he succeeded or whether he failed, was entirely his own affair” (p. 93). Whereas the rigidity of earlier systems decided the faith of a person and their place in society before they were born, modern society allowed people to succeed based on their actions and merit (*ibid.*, p. 92). However, they were also seen as being entirely responsible for their failure. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1993) posited that fixed structures, such as traditional companies, were eroding and that uncertainties formerly managed through the norms of such micro-environments were transferred onto the individual, who had to make decisions about his or her life without reliance on predefined structures (p. 179).<sup>1</sup>

In this vein, contemporary professions and careers are impacted by perceived uncertainty and the need for flexibility characteristic of contemporary society in general. This has given rise to contemporary ideas of professional life as a realm in which proactive, self-centered, and enterprising approaches are increasingly necessary (cf. Arthur, 1994; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Pongratz & Voß, 2004). In addition, the proliferation of enterprise and marketing discourse into personal and professional life has further spurred the perception of the necessity to think of oneself as a marketable entity (cf. Bröckling, 2013, p. 62). This perception was fueled by the mutual reinforcement of employment conditions in contemporary environments and the discourse of enterprise propagated in popular self-management literature (du Gay & Salaman, 1992, p. 615). Bröckling (2013) even argued that while developments in global policies and economy created a more flexible and uncertain work environment, providing fertile ground for self-management and personal branding literature, it was the success of books written by Tom Peters and other self-management gurus in the 1990s that led to the popularization and proliferation of marketing discourse into the personal realm (p. 62). This in turn led to the

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1 These notions are often referred to as individualization. Beck (2002) posited that “the catchword ‘individualization’ should be seen as designating a trend. ...Individualization...is an exemplary diagnosis of the present and the wave of the future” (p. 5). In a simplistic definition of the term, individualization can be described as an individual becoming the central focal point for herself and the creator of social reality which she forms according to her own choices (Junge, 2002, p. 7).

transition of the perception of professionals following the model of the 'organizational man' to that of the self-entrepreneur (*ibid.*, p. 65).

The importance of proactively impacting reputation through self-presentation and relationship management on an individual level is not new. Nessmann (2005), for example, argued that personal PR, people promoting a certain public image of themselves, is the oldest form of public relations (p. 11). However, for a long time active professional self-presentation was considered necessary only for persons in higher functions, such as politicians (*ibid.*, p. 12). This began to change at the end of the twentieth century. While the notion of the necessity of proactive self-presentation and networking was limited to managers and persons in higher functions until the early 1980s, the 1990s saw a distinct change with these activities being portrayed as a necessity for the broader population, from the unemployed to young job-seekers and mid-career professionals (Vallas & Cummins, 2015, pp. 301-302).

Herbst (2005) argued that due to changes in society in general and in the employment market in particular, an increasing number of people had to work on promoting their achievements due to rising competition and an increase in people with similar, and thus exchangeable, skills and professional qualities (p. 99). In addition, advances in technology led to changes in the organization of work away from structured organizations to project-based collaborations forming based on skills necessary at a given moment (*cf.* Malone & Laubacher, 1999, p. 125). The importance of professional networks beyond traditional organizational boundaries also increased. Furthermore, the notion of relocating for jobs and forming a large number of weak connections instead of a small number of strong ones became acceptable to an increasing number of people (*cf.* Sennett, 1998, p. 18). Thus, it seems that both active professional self-presentation and relationship management beyond organizational boundaries have become relevant career activities in the contemporary professional environment.

In this work, the term personal branding will be used to denote the combination of self-presentation and networking behaviors. It must be noted that the concept of personal branding is often described as blatant self-promotion and marketing. This is possibly due to its popularization through self-management guides. The term has been in wide use in popular practitioner literature since the concept was first introduced at the end of the twentieth century by Tom Peters in an article written for *Fast Company Magazine* titled "The Brand Called You" (1997). While sometimes

applied to private contexts such as dating (cf. Peters, Thomas, & Morris, 2013), personal branding is inherently related to the professional realm. However, more recent academic literature has used the term to denote proactive professional self-presentation and relationship management with the goal of contributing to a person's reputation (cf. Gandini, 2016). As such it highlights the conscious effort to present oneself and build and maintain professional networks. In this work, the term will be used to denote the combination of self-presentation and networking efforts. In addition, the use of a single term to denote both self-presentation and networking highlights the importance of the combination of both behaviors. While self-presentation is focused on image and networking on relationship creation and maintenance, personal branding focuses on the combination of these activities to gain professional attention and build reputation.

However, while the idea of the necessity of combining proactive professional self-presentation and networking has found its way into mainstream self-management advice and thinking, the question of whether and how this translates into actual behavior has not been fully explored (cf. Bendisch, 2010, p. 77; Nessmann, 2010). The concept of personal branding is discussed in large part from a critical standpoint in which self-management literature is discussed in terms of the promotion of self-commodification. Looking beyond the notion that marketing terminology may be seeping into professional and even private discourse, however, the question remains to what extent people who are not politicians or celebrities have adopted proactive self-presentation and networking behaviors into their professional communication and interaction.

From a communication science perspective, the idea of personal branding is especially interesting in light of technological developments that have provided the general population with communication tools that parallel the opportunities provided by mass-media. Until a couple of decades ago, making your professional cause known to a larger number of people was a costly enterprise that involved buying public advertising space. Today, only internet access and basic knowledge of social media platforms are necessary to share content with a potentially vast number of other people. In addition, the internet has simplified networking and connecting to professionally relevant others. Due to lower context cues about status, for example, it is easier to contact unknown and barely known others (cf. Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, p. 1497). Furthermore, the internet gives people "access to a wider range of others to whom we are weakly tied, extending

communication possibilities by crossing time and space” (Haythornthwaite, 2002, p. 388). Moreover, due to the self-presentation possibilities provided by social media, potential new contacts are provided with information about a person even before a connection is established (El-lison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011, p. 887).

The internet and especially social media provide people with platforms for easy and cost-effective public communication. In this vein, individuals become part of public communication in which they can participate and communicate using the same channels as professionals such as journalists and PR-professionals. As such, it is relevant to explore how people use these relatively new opportunities. While research within communication science has extensively studied the communication of the general population both from the perspective of their participation in public discourse online (e.g. political or social) and from the perspective of the use of social media for everyday communication with friends and acquaintances, the same amount of attention has not been paid to the use of social media tools for professional purposes by the general population.

Studies exploring the concept of personal branding in general or online are rare (see chapter two). Furthermore, while studies exist that discuss and analyze personal branding behavior online, the determinants of such behavior have not been explored. Considering the growing perception of the importance of attention, marketing, and networking over actual skills and achievement in career advancement (cf. Gandini, 2016, p. 138; Goldhaber, 1997, n.p.), it is necessary to explore to what extent people engage in personal branding behaviors. Furthermore, considering the proliferation of branding discourse, it is necessary to explore the relationship between personal branding behaviors and, for example, the pressure to participate that might arise not only from public discourse, but also from observing the behavior of others and perceiving that others think that engagement in personal branding is necessary.

In this vein, Vallas and Cummins (2015) interviewed over fifty people from diverse backgrounds about personal branding and found that there was a perception that its necessity in the professional context was pervasive in the general population (p. 309). Many reported using the internet to gain professional attention and provide information about themselves (ibid.). However, two distinct sentiments were evident: one group heralded the possibilities offered by social media, while others felt obliged to engage in self-presentation and networking due to the perception that they

were necessary on the job market (ibid., p. 311). In general, it seems that people believe that engaging in professional presentation and networking is no longer optional, but that “rejecting the discourse of personal branding seems to comprise a luxury they can simply not (or no longer) afford” (ibid., p. 312). This can cause additional stress in an already complex employment environment (cf. Gruzd, Staves, & Wilk, 2012, p. 2347) and might contribute to a more evident shift in the perception of factors relevant to professional advancement. For these reasons, it is necessary to explore the combination of professional self-presentation and networking on social media and their determinants in detail. However, studies that have systematically dealt with this issue are rare. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring how social media are used for personal branding purposes and what factors influence personal branding on social media.

### *1.2 The Contemporary Professional Context*

The rapid change to the traditional concepts of work and careers can be traced to the 1970s (Harvey, 1990, p. 142). In the late nineteenth century, industrialization brought with it a profound shift in market and production principles, characterized by an ardent striving for rationality, effectiveness, and productivity; labeled “efficiency fever” (Mikl-Horke, 2000, p. 69). Production was increased by localizing manufacture into factories and the division of labor. Originating in the United States and reaching Western Europe after the Second World War, the Fordist production system based on standardized mass-production increased the efficiency of production while also positively influencing the demand for produced goods (Harvey, 1990, p. 126).<sup>2</sup> The relevance of factory workers, the driving force of early industrialization, stagnated, whereas industrial professions, such as administrators, technicians, and skilled workers gained in importance (Voß, 2002, p. 291). The 1970s, however, saw the crumbling of production systems based on mass-production due to their rigidity (Har-

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2 Fordism, a term coined to denote the organization of the Ford automobile company, propagated a steady increase in the production of standardized goods, simultaneously providing the people who worked on producing them with stable employment and comparatively high wages to be able to afford them.



vey, 1990, p. 142). As production systems grew more complex, the time and cost investment in planning and execution grew higher and the production process was not easily adaptable and changeable (Galbraith, 1967, p. 23). Yet, the recession and ensuing drop in demand that hit most of the Western world in the 1970s revealed a major flaw of rigid and highly planned mass-production - the inability to adapt quickly. In order to mitigate the risks that arose from the unpredictability of demand, market principles became defined by flexibility. Production was adapted to fit principles of continuous innovation, modification, and on demand production (Harvey, 1990, pp. 147-158). Losing the rigidity of previous decades, the 1970s saw the introduction of the model of “flexible specialization”, allowing companies to offer a wider range of products through a flexible production process that was able to adapt to changes more effectively (Lemke, 2004, p. 84). This was due to the introduction of new technologies that allowed companies to surpass the rigidity of traditional mass-production and adapt more easily to unstable markets through diversification and decentralization (Mikl-Horke, 2000, p. 194).

The need for flexibility led to strong workplace ties being replaced by looser relationships between companies and workers, freeing them of responsibility and accountability to each other. Companies increasingly shifted to the use of “the agency of small, independent production units, employing skilled work teams... to meet rapidly changing market demands at low cost and high speed” (Holmes, 2002, n.p.). Industrial production moved towards specialized flexibility. Large companies began subcontracting smaller businesses to execute parts of the production process. This move towards smaller, flexible businesses did not necessarily have positive consequences for employees. Flexible employment contracts meant that they could be hired and fired easily to fit production needs (Mikl-Horke, 2000, p. 205). The unpredictability of product demand, increasing competition, and growing unemployment allowed employers to incite flexible employment contracts and work terms (Harvey, 1990, p. 150). Furthermore, Castells (1996) argued that a system of global connectivity fostered a new educated class, behaving and living similarly disregarding location (p. 22). The disintegration of traditional groups increased mobility and people became more open to leaving their established social networks and geographically relocating for better job opportunities. Increasingly, people formed only weak ties, which could be replaced when they had to move on (Sennett, 1998, p. 18).

Furthermore, the changes that took place in production also had an impact on the structure of the workforce. In terms of workforce demands, the second half of the twentieth century experienced a shift away from narrow specialization towards diversification in line with concepts of more strongly integrated work organization (Baethge, 1994, p. 715). The specialized knowledge workers relevant to Fordist production (Drucker, 1968) were increasingly replaced by highly educated individuals who possessed a diverse range of knowledge and skills (Florida, 2002, p. 13). This was increasingly important to accommodate heightened flexibility in the workplace. In this vein, Baethge and Baethge-Kinsky (1998) pointed to the increasing erosion of traditional professions as socio-structural categories due to heightened global competition and marketization (p. 461).

These “economic transformations have been central to the claim that something fundamental has happened in our present: a shift from ‘fordism’ to ‘post-fordism,’ from mass production to flexible specialization” (Miller & Rose, 1995, p. 427). The present age has been labeled a risk society with high individualization (Beck, 1999), a society of flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1990), or a networked society (Castells, 1996). However, Thorsen and Lie (2006) proposed that instead of labeling contemporary society, it should simply be described according to the perception of changes that happened in recent decades. They concluded that since the late twentieth century we live in “an age of greater complexity, uncertainty, and volatility” (p. 17). Voß (1998) proposed that, especially related to work, the consequences of greater complexity and uncertainty could be subsumed under the term “flexibility” (p. 473). Beck’s (2002) translation of a newspaper article excerpt by Zygmunt Bauman from 1993 summarized the perception that the contemporary employment market was characterized by uncertainty: “I cannot build for the long term on my job, my profession or even my abilities. I can bet on my job being cut, my profession changing out of all recognition, my skills being no longer in demand” (p. 3). These changes also affected the perception of work and careers.

### *Self-Entrepreneurial Perception of Work*

At the end of the twentieth century, Malone and Laubacher (1999) proposed that as technological innovations advanced, especially those related to communication technologies and networks, the organization of work would change even more drastically. They suggested that the dominant

business model might shift from that of stable corporations to “an elastic network” in which project-based networked teams would form based on skills as opposed to professional categories (p. 125). Project-based work, a similar concept, is already a prevalent form of employment (cf. Pongratz & Voß, 2003, p. 4). Malone and Laubacher (1999) further posited that “the new coordination technologies enable us to return to the preindustrial organizational model of tiny, autonomous businesses - businesses of one or of a few - conducting transactions with one another in a market” (p. 125). In a similar vein, Pongratz and Voß (2003) argued that “today the attempt is taking place... to free up the usual boundaries of the traditional employee in the workplace in nearly all dimensions... and enhance their own responsibility through strategies of increased flexibility and ‘self-organization’ in the workplace” (p. 3). Furthermore, the authors posited that the key characteristics of persons working in the contemporary employment market could be labeled as “self-entrepreneurial” (p. 1).

Work is the most important way of gaining economic resources that enable people to partake in society (Wadell & Burton, 2006, p. vii). However, even though the material or monetary aspect of work is stressed, implying that people work to gain the financial means to do other things, the description understates that work is one of the most fundamental means of participation in society (Mikl-Horke, 2000, p. 6) and is central to the formation of individual identity (Miller & Rose, 1995, p. 427). Through identification with their work people “assemble and reassemble their identities” (Knights & Clarke, 2014, p. 338). Furthermore, a development away from an economic focus characterizes the contemporary discussion of labor. Putting in “work” not for immediate gain, but rather to gain attention that might in turn provide access to future remuneration, is perceived as an important aspect of the new economic paradigm (Goldhaber, 1997, n.p.). The impact of these changing perceptions on careers can be categorized on an *objective structural level* and on the *level of subjective response*.

Examples of structural aspects of increased flexibility and reliance on self-organization are flexible work schedules, job sharing (Junge, 2002, p. 8), group and team work, as well as project-based work organization (Pongratz & Voß, 2003, p. 4). Greater structural flexibility can both have positive and negative connotations, depending on the work context in which it is observed (Kohli, 1994, p. 228). In contexts in which factors such as time and location-flexibility are offered in a regulated environment, flexibility and individual choice are perceived differently than in

contexts in which deregulation and high turn-over force people to constantly reinvent themselves and look for new opportunities (*ibid.*).

Over twenty years ago, Kohli (1994) argued that the disintegration of traditional work arrangements was only apparent at the fringes of the employment market (p. 231). However, the past years have seen further changes that follow the trend towards greater flexibility. In Germany, for example, fixed contract employment rose from six to eight percent from 1991 to 2014 for employees over the age of 25 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2015a, p. 40). Part-time work saw a much sharper increase - in 1992, fourteen percent of the working population worked part-time, in 2014 the number rose to 28% of all employees (*ibid.*, p. 22). Partially responsible for these changes are the preferences of employees. However, the rise of part-time and fixed-term employment is also due to employer strategies, who provide fixed contracts to better deal with demand fluctuations (Weinkopf, 2009, p. 181). In sum, it can be argued that although structural changes in the form of flexible work arrangements are not the norm in Germany, there is an evident trend away from traditional permanent work towards a more diverse range of job arrangements.

On a subjective level, increased perceived flexibility translates into the notion of increased self-reliance and self-responsibility. Mikl-Horke (2000) argued that structural elements and subjective perceptions of individual responsibility in the workplace are intertwined (p. 432), positing that the willingness to take risks (and to make choices) is increasingly a prerequisite for functioning in the employment market (*ibid.*). In line with this notion, Pongratz and Voß (2003) argued that there is an evident trend towards self-entrepreneurial work attitudes. The authors distinguished three categories in which people take responsibility for their work and careers. First, they posited that people needed to exercise self-control and take their work into their own hands, arguing that companies were no longer interested in controlling the work process, but only in receiving work outcomes (p. 7). Furthermore, persons increasingly needed to self-rationalize by adapting to a fluid interpretation of work and leisure time (*ibid.*). Finally, Pongratz and Voß posited that apart from regarding their own capacities and skills as commodities that needed to be worked on and improved to adapt to changing workplace demands, people “must also ‘market’ their capacities on the company level to ensure that their capacities are needed, acquired, and effectively used and - paid for” (*ibid.*, p. 7).

The exercise of self-control is evident in employees in many professions, whereas self-marketing is predominantly evident in those oriented towards external markets, such as freelancers (cf. Voß, 2013, pp. 67-68). In this vein, Pongratz and Voß (2004) posited that the general trend of self-entrepreneurialism was evident across all professions. They emphasized, however, that in its full spectrum it was most pronounced in project-based work in the areas of communication and information technology, in the media and cultural sector, as well as in the areas of corporate consulting and the new economy (p. 29). Finally, a self-entrepreneurial approach to work is most evident in freelancers and the self-employed in these sectors. Furthermore, self-entrepreneurialism, it seems, is most strongly evident amongst highly-educated, young persons (ibid.). Köhler, Barteczko, Schröder, and Bohler (2014), however, argued that it was possible for self-marketing to become more prominent in all professions with the rise of self-initiated job changes between employers (p. 122).

### *Self-Entrepreneurial Perception of Careers*

Just as the perception of work itself changed, so did the perception of careers. The career concept is primarily used to refer to a person's advancement through professional life in industrial society (Young & Collin, 2000, p. 2). Melamed (1995) described a career as "an employee's sequence of experiences and roles in work-related organizations" (p. 35). However, the term career also carries a more competition-oriented connotation. Stebbins (1970) pointed out that although career progression is in most cases described in terms of movement through various positions, it still has a competitive aspect. He argued that "if the career line is the race course, then the career itself is the kind of race run by the individual participant" (p. 33). A successful career can be described as climbing "institutional or occupational ladders" (Becker & Strauss, 1956, p. 260).

Traditionally, careers were conceptualized as a progression through various intra-organizational stages and determined by promotions and salary increase (Sullivan, 1999, p. 457). Career strategies focused on the context of single organizations and aimed at intra-organizational career management (e.g. Gould & Peneley, 1984; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Guthrie, Coate, & Schwerer, 1998; Nabi, 1999). Contemporary careers, on the other hand, have become less bound to single organizations or professions (cf. Arthur, 1994). They are less something a person goes

through, but rather something that people must construct and continuously define and redefine (Hitzler & Pfadenhauer, 2003, p. 12). Thus, while traditional careers move on an organizational ladder, contemporary career paths do not necessarily move upward; a person may move to a similar position in a different company or “jump from one career over to another” (Becker & Strauss, 1956, p. 254). Due to heightened flexibility and the fast pace of change, careers have also become increasingly boundaryless or protean (cf. Briscoe & Hall, 2006, p. 1). Boundaryless careers are independent of traditional career principles within organizations (Arthur, 1994, p. 269); an independence that is either traceable through organizational changes or subjectively perceived by the individual (Briscoe & Hall, 2006, p. 1). In the contemporary understanding of careers, people do not aim to prove themselves loyal to one employer to progress within a company, but rather work on their own individual advancement moving from job to job “across the boundaries of separate employers” (Arthur, 1994, p. 269). An employer is perceived as temporary and career value is gained from outside sources (ibid.). In the case of academics, for example, career value is not drawn primarily from praise from institutional administrators, but rather from research publications. The protean career concept adds the importance of a person’s self-directed attitude towards their career (Briscoe & Hall, 2006, p. 1), focusing on reliance on the self instead of the organization to define an ideal career, and on personal freedom, mobility, and satisfaction as indicators of career success (Hall, 2004, p. 5). Both understandings of careers have in common an individualistic and entrepreneurial approach to careers.

### *1.3 Personal Branding in Contemporary Careers*

The contemporary employment market in the fields highlighted by Pongratz and Voß (2003), such as project-based work in communication and information technology or the media and cultural sector, is characterized by Malone and Laubacher’s (1999) “elastic networks” of people that come together on projects and regroup for others. In this vein, people function as “businesses of one” within a transaction market (p. 125). Pongratz and Voß (2003) highlighted the necessity of adaptability and individualistic self-perception and self-reliance in such an environment (p. 7). However, they failed to discuss a probably more important aspect - the

increased importance of social relations and personal reputation within such a work milieu and the engagement in proactive self-presentation and networking with the purpose of building and maintaining them.

While people have always more or less consciously tried to influence their reputation, societal changes, as well as changes in the perception of the relevance of reputation building through attention and visibility, have led to an explosion of self-management books full of advice on how to present oneself in the best way and how to build and utilize professional networks (cf. Nessmann, 2003, p. 166; Shepherd, 2005, p. 589). In line with societal changes, the late twentieth century saw the introduction of the concept of “life as a business” in popular self-improvement books (McGee, 2005, p. 20), with the tone of discourse shifting from one of options and willingness to one of self-management and self-marketing (Maasen, 2004, p. 229). Bröckling (2013) even argued that while developments in global policies and economy created an uncertain work environment, providing fertile ground for self-management literature, it was the success of books written by branding gurus such as Tom Peters in the 1990s that led to the popularization and proliferation of marketing discourse into the personal realm (p. 62). Furthermore, while popular business literature in the early 1980s was dominated by guides aimed at managers and persons in higher functions, the 1990s saw a drastic change, with books being published that targeted the general public (Vallas & Cummins, 2015, pp. 301-302). This change reflected the perceived need for everyone to actively work on their self-presentation and networking.

#### *Reputation as Aim of Personal Branding*

Contemporary society is marked by a shift from the “working self, to the self as work in the form of a self-brand with reputation as its currency” (Hearn, 2010, p. 426). By attempting to influence how behaviors are assessed by others in the present, persons may influence future assessments of their ability and potential (cf. Fombrun & van Riel, 1997, p. 10) and build a positive reputation. In general, people who can present and communicate a positive professional image and who proactively use networking opportunities, gain a reputation of being able to fulfill the demands they face in the professional environment (cf. Blickle, Schneider, Liu, & Ferris, 2011, p. 3032; Roberts, 2005, p. 687). Thus, it can be argued that the combination of self-presentation and networking behaviors has the

overarching aim of building a positive reputation (cf. Mummendey, 1995, p. 136). Reputation, in turn, may function as a “power base” for gaining a variety of future benefits (Tedeschi, 1990, p. 312).

In its most structured form, reputation is based on formal reputation systems, such as degrees, certifications, and other recognition systems that can be awarded to a person (Whitmeyer, 2000, p. 189) and function as an indicator of skills and abilities. However, reputation in a broader sense can be defined as the opinions other people have of a person in their network (Lin, 1999, p. 40). In this context, reputation is the degree of social appreciation a person receives from their social network (Eisenegger & Imhof, 2004, p. 239). Unlike reputation based on formal reputation systems, reputation based on the goodwill or appreciation of others in large part arises from the information a person provides within their social network and their relationship management, as well as the information provided by others about them (cf. Aula, 2011).

In the new economic paradigm, people need to focus on forming a lasting positive image based not only on their work, but also on attention gained to access future benefits (Goldhaber, 1997, n.p.). Franck (2002) described the relationship as attention being “capitalised into the asset called reputation” (p. 3). In this vein, reputation can function as a “new form of currency” (Hearn, 2010, p. 422). In the current environment of information overload (cf. Bawden & Robinson, 2009) attention is valuable. This increases the relevance of actively procuring it to shape reputation (Luoma-aho & Nordfors, 2009, n.p.). Blickle and colleagues (2011) argued that “the formation of widely held reputations involves extensive social sharing of information and, therefore, may depend on the focal person’s ability to transmit information effectively that conveys their reputations within their social networks” (p. 3032). Thus, to impact their reputation, people need to not only actively but also effectively communicate within their reputation arena (cf. Basdeo, Smith, Grimm, Rindova, & Derfus, 2006, p. 1205). In this vein, proactively influencing reputation through professional self-presentation and networking behaviors has become an important career determinant (see chapter two).

### *Social Capital and Impression Management Theory as Context*

Together, the information a person provides within their social network and their relationship management are aimed at influencing reputation.



The idea of social capital provides a useful theoretical entry point for contextualizing reputation. The idea of social capital can be used to explain how “reputation works in practice” (Luoma-aho, 2013, p. 279). Social capital stands for the connections a person has together with the benefits that arise from possessing these connections and is based on “investment in social relations with expected returns” (Lin, 1999, p. 30). It includes the activities people engage in to invest in their social capital as well as returns that arise from investing in social capital (ibid., p. 39). Reputation in the form of recognition from others is a social return arising from investment in social capital (ibid., p. 40). While many of the benefits arising from social capital are based on the existence of connections between individuals, often the mere existence of ties is not enough to procure benefits. Rather, the goodwill of others is necessary for the potential benefits arising from connections to be fully utilized. Therefore, people actively invest in their social capital to proactively impact their reputation and fully profit from the benefits of belonging to their social network in the future.

However, the social capital framework cannot account for the mechanisms that guide the behaviors inherent in social relationships. Here, impression management theory may provide a theoretical backdrop to systematically contextualize behaviors that may serve to proactively build reputation. Impression management theory concerns itself with behaviors that aim to influence and control the impressions people make on others in social interactions (Mummendey, 1995, p. 111). Goffman (1959) described most social interactions as performances in which people attempt to manage the impressions others hold of them. In general, people are aware of their own impact on impressions others form of them (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985, p. 60) and consciously or unconsciously present themselves in certain ways in professional settings. Through behaviors such as self-promotion, ingratiation, or networking people may aim to influence what others think of them. The combination of ideas from social capital and impression management research provides a fruitful theoretical framework to contextualize professional self-presentation and networking behaviors (see chapter three).

#### *The Internet as Communication Platform*

An additional important factor in the perception of the increased necessity of attention and proactive reputation management is the popularization of

the internet. The internet gave the general population the possibility to easily communicate with a large number of others at a low cost. However, the internet also increased the perceived importance of attention and reputation through the self-presentation possibilities and sociality inherent in social media formats.

Professional presentation and networking behaviors are evident in many settings. From having thirty second elevator pitches ready (cf. Marwick, 2010, p. 40) to going to networking events, people can aim to draw attention to themselves and their work and build professional networks in almost any setting. However, before the internet offered the broad population the possibility to communicate about themselves to potentially all other persons online and to leave a permanent and traceable footprint, these efforts were mostly targeted and ephemeral. It was possible for persons to talk to others about achievements, send out curriculum vitae, or write letters to introduce themselves to potentially interesting professional contacts. Such interactions can generate attention and have a long-lasting impact on the image others have of a person and their reputation. However, face-to-face interactions are ephemeral, and the impressions conveyed only available to those present in the interaction. Information communicated in letters or even emails provides a stand-alone fragment of information that becomes outdated with time. In public or semi-public online spaces, however, these fragmented interactions form a unified, permanent digital footprint (Madden, Fox, Smith, & Vitak, 2007, p. 2). Online, activities that go unrecorded offline and are practically invisible to a broader audience in private online interactions - from telling another scholar about a publication to contacting a well-known researcher - are not only public, but most often leave permanent, visible, and easily accessible traces.

Therefore, the present study will follow the example of Gandini (2016) and Marwick (2010) and focus on the use of the internet to textualize the professional self and establish and maintain professional relationships, combining them into a networked professional representation. The easy and cost-effective combination of self-presentation and networking behaviors for gaining professional attention in an increasingly boundaryless professional world is closely connected to and embedded in the development of the internet. In fact, a curated professional representation embedded within a network of connections to professional contacts has become highly reliant on the opportunities provided by the internet (Marwick, 2010, p. 312). Through internet platforms, self-presentation and even relationship

building activities, such as connecting to other professionals, have become visible and are part of the publicly observable professional information bundle of a person. As discussed above, the professional self-presentation and networking behaviors performed online that contribute to this visible information bundle will be treated under the label of personal branding. They can serve as a visible connection for other to see or as a platform to access information about another person. Social media formats, especially, support highly individualized, fragmented, information exchange-based social relationships in which private and professional boundaries become more fluid (Wittel, 2001, p. 71).

Online, reputation can be simply operationalized as all the information available about a given person (cf. Marwick, 2010, p. 153). This information, provided by the person themselves, by others, or by commentary by others on information provided by the person, may form the recognition or approval others have of a person or even express it (in case others provide the information). In addition, social media have made it relatively easy to measure attention in the form of commentary on information. Many platforms incorporate metrics of attention and visualize social networks (ibid., p. 141). As Hearn (2010) argued, “the number of times a name comes up in a Google search, ...the number of friends on Facebook, or followers on Twitter can all be considered representations of digital reputation - the public feeling or sentiment about a product, person or service” (p. 422). Thus, it seems that social media provides people with an additional important tool for professional self-presentation and networking with the goal of influencing reputation and attention (see chapter four).

#### *1.4 The Present Study*

Professional self-presentation and networking are not equally relevant to every profession. As discussed earlier, they are most applicable to professionals working in environments characterized by increased uncertainty, flexibility, and competition (cf. Pongratz & Voß, 2004, p. 29), such as project-based or self-employed, highly-educated, persons in the areas of communication and information technology, in the media and cultural sector, and academia. In a representative survey of the US-American population, Madden and Smith (2010) found that 12% of the respondents reported the need to market themselves online as part of their profession (p. 3).

Furthermore, self-presentation behaviors were more prevalent among the highly-educated population, with 18% of college graduates reporting branding as opposed to 5% of employees without a diploma (Madden et al., 2007, p. 8). These findings indicate a trend towards personal branding, but it has seemingly not yet reached the general population.

Both reputation and the content of personal branding behaviors are highly profession-specific and related to the norms of a specific profession (cf. Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber, 2013). Therefore, it was necessary to select a single profession as the focus of this study. Academia was selected for several reasons. First, academics have been described as the archetype of self-managers and entrepreneurs, having always been confronted with the necessity to work towards gaining professional reputation unrelated to their home institution or university (cf. Dörre & Neis, 2008). Enders (2000) proposed that in academia competition was higher between members of status groups than between members of universities, as “the success of the individual career is measured more by the outcome of the main career events than by the prestige of the institutions involved” (p. 43). Furthermore, additional pressures in academia arise from an increase in evaluative formats at the organizational level, such as university rankings, which directly translate to the level of individual academics who are expected to activate all their resources and perform well on measurable criteria (cf. Keupp, 2007, p. 1189). This is paired with an increase in persons competing for the same attractive long-term positions, which have seen a decrease or stagnation in the past decades (Enders, 2000, p. 38). Furthermore, academia is a profession in which people primarily strive for attention and reputation rather than being motivated by monetary gains (cf. Franck, 1999, p. 13). Finally, academics are one of the few professional groups that have social media platforms specifically tailored to their self-presentation needs, such as the academic network platform ResearchGate (see chapter five).

The choice of academics is also beneficial for methodological reasons. As research into the combination of professional self-presentation and networking behaviors is still rare, it is beneficial to explore these personal branding behaviors of a population that is relatively easy to define. For professions such as, for example, musicians, the target population is more difficult to define and identifying possible participants would necessarily be biased by their online presence. In the case of academics, university listings of email addresses provide access to the population (cf. Bader,

Fritz, & Gloning, 2012, p. 7; Engesser & Magin, 2014, p. 316; Wirth, Matthes, Mögerle, & Prommer, 2005, pp. 324-325), regardless of whether they have a social media presence or not. For these reasons, academics were selected as the target population for the exploration of personal branding on social media.

Studies empirically exploring personal branding in general are rare. Several studies have explored components of professional self-presentation and networking in the academic context (e.g. Utz, 2015; van Noorden, 2014). However, the combination of proactive self-presentation and networking activities was rarely the focus of studies looking at the social media use of scholars.<sup>3</sup> However, sharing information about professional achievements and activities and networking and relationship management increasingly form an important part of the academic profession that, due to a rise in competition and a decrease in attractive positions (see chapter five), is turning into a “career-job” (Funken, Hörlin, & Rogge, 2013, p. 52). Progressively, strategically built academic résumés, “showing yourself”, and showcasing achievements is perceived as a necessity to achieve academic success (ibid.). Due to these factors, it is possible that an increasing number of academics, especially younger, less established scholars, might turn to social media to garner attention for their work and activities in order to positively impact their academic reputation. In this vein, Nentwich and König (2011) reported that Facebook and the academic network site ResearchGate were used by academics for what they termed “self-marketing”, characterized by drawing attention to publications, rather than collaboration amongst colleagues or teaching (pp. 26-39; see also Utz, 2015, p. 35).

However, “despite anecdotal evidence on the increasing popularity of social media in scientific communication, little is known about researchers’ adoption of these media” (Hoffmann, Lutz, & Meckel, 2015, p. 1). A number of studies exist that explore the frequency of use of social media by scientists and the tasks they use social media for (chapter five). However, questions of whether “scientists use social media to promote their output and enhance their standing within the community” (ibid.), how

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3 There is one study that explored academic personal branding, focusing on offline elements such as publication activity and home institution (Close, Moulard, & Monroe, 2011).

scholars use social media to build and maintain relationships, and how they perceive the self-presentation and networking opportunities provided by social media have not been explored in detail.

In general, the possibilities for professional branding on social media have only recently attracted the attention of a larger number of internet users. LinkedIn user numbers, for example, have grown from 102 million in the first quarter of 2011 to 433 million in early 2016 (Statista, 2016a). Social networking platforms that cater to academics, such as ResearchGate, are an even more recent phenomenon. Nevertheless, sites such as ResearchGate seem to be gaining importance as more people join the network. However, despite this significant influx in membership and growing academic interest, personal branding practices on social media have yet to be clearly defined and their practical application explored in greater detail.

In addition, factors that might influence the amount and type of self-presentation and networking activities academics employ have yet to be considered in detail. Both normative and impression management theories suggest that people observe how others in their environment act, which impacts the perceived social pressure to engage in or refrain from behavior. Reciprocal observation allows people to gain an idea of the social structure and the formal and informal rules that can in turn guide their own behavior (Schimank, 2010). This is especially useful in situations in which clearly formulated rules do not exist. Being a relatively new phenomenon without established rules of appropriate behavior, personal branding on the social web is theorized to be heavily influenced by behaviors observed in immediate surroundings and online networks (Marwick, 2010, p. 13). People's personal branding practices may thus be guided by a complex interplay of personal beliefs about branding and social media, observations of behavior modeled by online connections, and perceived social pressure to conform to arising branding norms. However, the relationship between personal branding on social media, personal factors, and social influence has not yet been empirically tested (see chapter six).

The present study aims to fill both identified research gaps. The goal of this study is twofold: First, it aims to systematically describe the prevalence of online personal branding by academics working at German universities. While studies have reported on the perceptions of the usefulness of social media for sharing achievements and networking (Gruzd et al., 2012, p. 2345) or the general use of social media by academics to promote work or discuss research (van Noorden, 2014, pp. 128-129), for example,