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The Role of Social Media in Reinforcing Self-Branding and Entrepreneurial Culture Among University Students

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● **دور شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي في تعزيز العلامة التجارية الذاتية وثقافة ريادة الأعمال بين طلاب الجامعة**

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Abstract

Social media has accelerated the adoption of self-branding and entrepreneurial culture to penetrate the competitive labor market. Journalism and creative industries are at their most precarious moment of job scarcity and insufficient living wages. Future media practitioners need self-branding and entrepreneurship more than ever. This study examines self-branding practice and entrepreneurial culture among Egypt's senior Mass Communication students. It uses a mixed method approach that combines a survey of 399 students at Cairo University with semi-structured interviews with the eight most active students on social media. The study revealed unequal level of awareness and practice of self-branding in social media. It showed self-branding as a labor-intensive practice that reinforces an entrepreneurial culture among future media practitioners. The study also showed self-branding practice as influenced by personal motivation, platform affordance and privacy concerns.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, neoliberalism, privacy concerns, self-branding, social media.

ملخص الدراسة

لقد أسهمت وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تبنِّي العلامة التجارية الذاتية وخلق ثقافة ريادة الأعمال في المجتمع؛ لاختراق سوق العمل التنافسي وخاصة في ظل ما تمر به الصحافة والعمل الإعلامي من ندرة الوظائف، وعدم كفاية الأجور المعيشية، لذا يحتاج ممارسو الإعلام إلى العلامة التجارية الذاتية وريادة الأعمال أكثر من أي وقت مضى.

ومن هذا المنطلق، تبحث هذه الدراسة في ممارسة العلامة التجارية الذاتية وثقافة ريادة الأعمال بين طلاب الإعلام في مصر، وتجمع الدراسة بين المنهج الكمي بالاعتماد على دراسة استقصائية لـ 399 طالبًا في جامعة القاهرة، ودراسة كيفية تعتمد على مقابلات متعمقة مع الطلاب الثمانية الأكثر نشاطًا على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بين مفردات العينة. وقد كشفت الدراسة عن التفاوت في مستوى الوعي بالعلامة التجارية الذاتية، وتفاوت ممارستها في وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بين أفراد العينة، وأظهرت النتائج العلامة التجارية الذاتية كممارسة تعزز ثقافة ريادة الأعمال بين دارسي وممارسي الإعلام في المستقبل، كما أظهرت الدراسة أيضًا أن ممارسة العلامة التجارية الذاتية تتأثر بالدوافع الشخصية، خصائص وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، والمخاوف المتعلقة بالخصوصية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العلامة التجارية الذاتية، ريادة الأعمال، الليبرالية الجديدة، مخاوف الخصوصية، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي.

Introduction

Self-branding has become a key concept in the neoliberal economy in which we live. The increasing rates of unemployment has made entrepreneurship and self-branding mandatory for any career pursuit. In Egypt, the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MPED) strongly supports entrepreneurs in accordance with the 2030 vision for sustainable development (MPED, 2021). Entrepreneurship has become a core subject for all second-year university students since September 2019 at Cairo University, the oldest public university in Egypt (Cairo University, 2019).

Job entry in the media field is difficult (Graybeal & Ferrier, 2020), and most jobs do not provide sufficient living wages (Caplan et al., 2020). Freelancing and entrepreneurship are now the available alternative for job seekers in the field of media, which points back to the necessity of self-branding. It is particularly widespread among people, seeking to build up careers in public relations, event planning and communications (Vallas and Christin, 2018). In essence, all forms of media professionals engage in self-branding, even journalists.

Mass Communication students are often anxious about their chance of finding jobs after their graduation. They try to stand out and establish a good reputation using social media. These students often showcase their skills and widen their social network to increase their employability. They may consciously or unconsciously practice self-branding on social media to secure jobs or become freelancers.

Research Objectives

This exploratory study investigates social media practice among Egypt's senior mass communication students, through addressing the following objectives:

- To understand the motivations behind self-branding practice among the students

- To explore the entrepreneurial culture professed in self-branding practices on social media
- To examine platform specific self-branding practices
- To investigate the impact of privacy concerns on self-branding practices
- To analyze the authenticity level of students' revealed identities in self-branding practices

To attain these objectives, the researchers start with a review of literature on self-branding and entrepreneurship in neoliberal economies with special focus on the media field. They then explain the mixed method approach used, including survey and semi-structured interviews. The researchers then discuss the findings and their implications on media education and future research.

Literature Review

Self-branding in social media

Social media platforms have made self-branding widespread among internet users. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram as well as other social media platforms have pushed users to establish their online personas to communicate and engage with others. Users purposefully construct 'stylized self-images' (Pagis & Ailon, 2017: 244) to produce carefully curated self-promotion in the job market (Duffy & Pooley, 2017).

These stylized self-images may differ from one social media platform to another. Each platform has its features, audience, and perceived purposes. Users deploy different strategies of self-branding resulting in the so-called 'platform specific self-brand'. (Davidson & Joinson, 2021; Scolere et al., 2018). LinkedIn, for instance, is a professional social networking site, in which millennials reported using it for finding job and internship opportunities (Smith & Watkins, 2020). Instagram, on the other hand, is a comfortable place for participation through curated images (Duffy & Hund, 2019), often criticized for promoting fake and inauthentic self-images (Davidson & Joinson, 2021).

Self-presentation in social media practices is gradually becoming atomized in contrast to the single identity once envisioned by Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook (Davidson & Joinson, 2021). Zuckerberg repeatedly described having multiple self-images as a lack integrity, though it is unnatural to have single self-image in all situations (Zimmer, 2010). People tend to show different versions of themselves depending on the context: family gathering or workplace. Social media users tend to use content filtering to determine

the audience of their posts. They might opt for wider audience to increase their likeability; however, they must exercise continuous self-monitoring to maintain polished self-images that are not too embarrassing or too revealing (Davidson & Joinson, 2021; Brooks & Anumudu, 2016).

The promoted self is not necessarily the real self. Real and authentic identities are often substituted with artificial and crafted ones to be more socially desirable (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013). However, users need to balance their self-presentation so as not to look fake or too real (Duffy & Hund, 2019). It is a balance that helps achieve visibility and deflect any potential criticism. Users need to negotiate their way to stand out of the crowds without fabrication. They must exercise 'the right kind of authenticity' (Mutanen et al., 2023: 334), in which they reveal things about themselves within the boundaries of socially and morally acceptable behaviors. Instagram users, for instance, use stories to add authenticity to their carefully curated images, and they exercise self-censorship to prevent objectionable content that might provoke criticism.

Self-branding and entrepreneurship in the neoliberal economy:

Social media users utilize 'identity narratives' to acquire social capital that increases employability and career advancement (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016: 24). They project their professional skills and personal tastes as part of their public-selves. They use storytelling and engagement techniques to foster social networks necessary for finding jobs in the neoliberal economy (Gandini, 2016).

Neoliberalism views everything as a commercial enterprise, including individuals. They adopt entrepreneurial culture characterized by 'initiative, adaptability, acceptance of risk, self- confidence, focus on results, competitiveness' (Fernández-Herrería & Martínez-Rodríguez, 2016: 316). Individuals are entrepreneurs applying business logic to everything in their lives to maximize their value and potential profits (Musílek et al., 2020). They focus on self-employment and freelancing opportunities instead of live-long careers in response to the precarious working environment. Individuals rethink the dependence on 'bureaucratic employment', and they become entrepreneurs applying 'corporate marketing strategies in their online and offline interactions' (Vallas & Christin, 2018: 5)

In the UK, for instance, 25% of working age individuals are engaged in some type of entrepreneurial activity or intended to start a business within the next three years, according to the global entrepreneurship monitor 2020 report (Hart et al., 2020). In Egypt, on the other hand, 11.3% of adult

population (aged 18-64) are currently either actively setting up a new business or have started a business that is younger than 3.5 years (Ismail et al., 2020).

Entrepreneurship has become mandatory for any career pursuit. Jobs are scarce. Permanent workers are laid off. Temporary workers are brought in for task-based roles (Brooks & Anmudu, 2016). Work environment is precarious urging job seekers to become entrepreneurs. They are morally obliged to practice self-branding to stand out in the job market. Their self-branding may even become more important than their actual professional skills. Job seekers' educational levels and professional skills have become 'entry tickets' (Gandini, 2016). Professional success depends on self-branding practices and the ability to establish large networks and strong reputation.

Reputation takes the place of trust as the key to building social capital necessary for professional success (Gandini, 2016; Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013). Job seekers no longer rely on direct interaction to build trust in their work. They use self-branding and publicly shared information to establish a good reputation for their work among a wider network of strangers.

Turbulent media field and self-branding

Self-branding is particularly widespread among people, seeking to build up careers in public relations, event planning and communications (Vallas & Christin, 2018). They can market themselves and engage in audience-seeking behaviour. In essence, all forms of media professionals engage in self-branding, even journalists.

Media organisations are suffering from lots of economic problems. They are hardly able to sustain their work due to the strong competition and turbulent media landscape. American journalists, for instance, described their self-branding practices as 'inevitable feature of freelancing work' (Vallas & Christin, 2018: 22), which is diverse in nature. Freelancers may provide content writing for corporate clients, sponsored articles, edit website content, produce multimedia documentaries for distribution on different social media platforms (Josephi & O'Donnell, 2022).

Freelancers rely on their self-brands as their source of income. Their ability to use self-branding to acquire reputation is necessary for their financial security (Scolere et al., 2018). Yet self-branding is labor intensive, time consuming and stressful. It may endanger professional identity and ethics (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016). Journalists may be motivated to share opinions on social media to encourage audience participation and sustain visibility of

self and work, creating the so-called 'opinion spectacle' (Usher, 2021: 2838). The boundaries between the roles of journalists, influencers and political activists may blur, challenging the widely held journalistic principle of detachment.

There have been many guidelines issued to help journalists achieve the best self-branding practices on social media such as *The New York Times* (Sreenivasan, n.d.). These guidelines are very helpful to not only journalists, but also anyone engaged in self-branding to become an entrepreneur and maximize their potential value and profits (Scolere et al., 2018).

However, these guidelines alone are not sufficient. Formal training courses in entrepreneurship helps instil the self-branding culture among job seekers not just in the field of journalism but across different fields.

Entrepreneurship training, self-branding among university students

Policymakers across the world recognize entrepreneurship as a tool for job creation, unemployment reduction and economy stimulation (Burton et al., 2019). They promote entrepreneurship training among university students as future job seekers. For instance, entrepreneurship is now a core subject for all students at Cairo University in Egypt (Cairo University, 2019). Yet entrepreneurship education in Egypt is in its infancy level. Egypt is ranked the 32 out of 45 economics adopting post-school entrepreneurship education (Ismail et al., 2020).

A similar trend of entrepreneurship training exists around the world across different disciplines. Economics, management, and engineering disciplines score the highest level of entrepreneurship training efficiency (Oulhou & Ibourk, 2023). Students are asked to participate in course-based exercises to develop their entrepreneurial mindset, such as 'Marketing Me' exercise (Flostrand et al., 2016). Or they may take a stand-alone entrepreneurship course, that consists of various topics such as self-branding, pitching and social media platforms (Caplan et al., 2020). These courses often connect to academic and professional worlds, where guest speakers are invited, and students are encouraged to participate in entrepreneurship events and competitions (Graybeal & Ferrier, 2021).

Mass media can also provide a non-conventional tool to spread and encourage entrepreneurial culture across societies, particularly youth. Shark Tank and other TV contest shows for entrepreneurs to get funding for their startups reinforce the entrepreneurial culture. Seoke at al. (2023) even advised educators to collaborate with mass media entrepreneurial shows to improve the outcomes of entrepreneurship training offered at universities.

University students may be well versed in social media by nature. However, success in constructing self-brand and becoming an entrepreneur is not always guaranteed. They must have strong motives, exert huge efforts, and receive external support (Chaniago & Sayuti, 2022). This study attempts to examine self-branding practices among Egypt's senior university students across social media, including Facebook and Instagram. It attempts to understand their motivations, their revealed identities, their platform-specific branding strategies.

This study constitutes an essential step to further evaluate and develop the entrepreneurial culture among university students in Egypt through addressing the following questions:

RQ1: Why do senior students practice self-branding on social media?
RQ2: How do senior students become entrepreneurs through self-branding?
RQ3: How do self-branding practices differ across social media platforms?
RQ4: How do authenticity and privacy concerns influence self-branding?

Method:
This study uses a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative surveys and qualitative semi-structured interviews. Researchers started with a descriptive exploratory survey to estimate students' prior knowledge about and experience in self-branding on social media. Collected responses helped identify the most active students on social media to be interviewed and further examined.

In the survey, researchers used online questionnaires to collect data from senior students in the Faculty of Mass Communication at Cairo University. The researchers aimed at assessing the entrepreneurial culture among the last student cohort to graduate before Entrepreneurship training course become graduation requirement for all Cairo University students (Cairo University, 2019). The questionnaire asked simple introductory questions about self-branding practice, and most-used social media platforms. Respondents indicated the number of followers they have on the different platforms. They also explained motivations behind self-branding practices.

A non-probability available sample of Cairo University senior students was drawn from across different faculty departments, including Public Relations (PR) and advertising, Radio and TV (RTV), Journalism departments and the English section (General Department). Senior students are a few steps away from the job market. They have solid ideas about their future careers, and

they are more likely to think of ways to increase their employability through self-branding.

Online questionnaire links were distributed via students' groups on Facebook. These groups tend to be a virtual meeting point for students to discuss their courses and assignments. Students frequently visited these groups to get important faculty announcements. Therefore, posting questionnaire links there helped to achieve the highest response rate possible.

In total 399 students participated in the survey distributed in April 2022. They represented the four departments with the highest number of students from PR (170 students). Female students were significantly higher (329 students) compared to males, which further reflect gender distribution across the faculty population. The 2020/2021 statistics on students' gender distribution showed females to be 89% of the entire student population on that year. Table. 1 further explains sample characteristics.

	Female	**Male**	**n**
PR	133	37	170
RTV	93	23	116
English	93	8	101
Journalism	10	2	12

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

For the semi-structured interviews, researchers selected eight students (n=8) who had the largest number of followers on different social media platforms. Seven of them were females. Four students were from the Radio and TV department. Three students were from the English Section and only a student came from the Public Relations department. All interviewees consented to be identified in the study. The researcher used their first name along with their major to label their responses in the findings.

Face-to-face Interviews were conducted in May 2022, with each interview lasting 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed manually. Researchers analyzed the interviews using systematic thematic analysis. Text was divided into basic themes and subthemes to present the full units of meaning. These themes were inductive data driven. They emerged from the text in an iterative process. The researchers went back

and forth defining and redefining the basic themes until they were confident that they captured the breadth and depth of interview responses.

Survey Findings

Students' Experience in self-branding

Out of the 399 survey respondents, 304 indicated that they use social media platforms to practice self- branding. The PR department had the highest number of students practicing self-branding compared to other departments, see table 2. These results resonate well with the type of studies provided in PR and advertising department, where students learn about branding and marketing strategies.

Do you practice self-branding on social media?	F	%
Yes	**304**	**76%**
PR	132	33%
RTV	88	22%
English	73	18%
Journalism	11	3%
No	**95**	**24%**
PR	38	10%
English	28	7%
RTV	28	7%
Journalism	1	0%
Total	**399**	**100%**

Table 2. Self-branding practice across faculty departments

Still 24% of the sampled students indicated not using social media for their self-branding practices, which shows a potential lack of awareness about the importance of self-branding in the neoliberal economy to secure jobs. Entrepreneurship has become a core subject for all second-year university students since September 2019 at Cairo University, the oldest public university in Egypt (Cairo University, 2019).

Most Used Platforms for Self-branding

Facebook and Instagram were reported as the top used social media platforms for self-branding, with a slight difference in the average number of followers per account. TikTok came in the third rank in terms of average number of followers per account. Yet the maximum number of followers for a single account was recorded in TikTok, see Table 3. Recent statistics show

that TikTok population of users is expanding quickly with a potential 6.9% increase in TikTok ad reach compared to a potential 1.8% decrease in Instagram ad reach between January and April 2022 (Kepios, 2022)[2].

Followers' numbers across different platforms are considerably low. Many students do not have any follower on their social media accounts, others do not have accounts on particular social media platforms. Twitter, TikTok and LinkedIn are the least popular among the sampled university students. Even the highly active students on social media reported not having LinkedIn account, which seemed to them difficult to use and understand.

YouTube is popular despite the 87.5% of students who do not have channel followers/subscribers. They are not content creators who use YouTube channels to reach a wide audience. They use YouTube mainly to watch available videos. Some students raised privacy concerns regarding their Facebook and Instagram accounts. Therefore, they used closed accounts that do not permit access to followers/strangers. They only used their accounts to connect with their listed family and friend members. Such privacy concerns may limit the effectiveness of their self-branding practice. They will not be able to expand their network and connect with potential job opportunities.

		RTV	PR	English	Jour	All
Facebook	count	88	132	73	11	304
	mean	1500.386	1460.795	970.2192	712.1818	1327.37
	std	2801.928	1814.403	1114.834	833.4757	2014.12
	min	0	0	0	0	0
	max	20000	14000	7553	2025	20000
	0 count (%)					61 (20%)
Instagram	count	88	132	73	11	304
	mean	1479.443	704.7121	1168.11	235.7273	1023.2829
	std	3830.284	1740.459	2386.467	488.1684	2648.69
	min	0	0	0	0	0
	max	20300	14000	17000	1622	20300
	0 count (%)					65 (21.3%)
TikTok	count	88	132	73	11	304
	mean	1476.432	751.9167	467.1918	0.909091	866.0987
	std	8664.073	6046.269	2506.611	3.015113	6247.509
	min	0	0	0	0	0
	max	77300	61900	19600	10	77300
	0 count (%)					243 (79.9%)
Twitter	count	88	132	73	11	304
	mean	97.51136	104.7879	419.7123	6.818182	174.7599
	std	317.6634	358.7333	1841.108	22.61335	953.6475
	min	0	0	0	0	0
	max	2000	3000	14100	75	14100
	0 count (%)					224 (74%)
YouTube	count	88	132	73	11	304
	mean	104.0568	17.36364	226.8219	0	92.12829
	std	559.4616	94.77964	1757.409	0	913.6781
	min	0	0	0	0	0
	max	5000	900	15000	0	15000
	0 count (%)					266 (87.5%)
LinkedIn	count	88	132	73	11	304
	mean	23.43182	51.90152	106.2877	4.454545	55.00329
	std	78.24788	273.2212	366.7022	14.77406	258.8688
	min	0	0	0	0	0
	max	500	3000	2500	49	3000
	0 count					231 (76%)

Table3. Specialization vs self-branding practice across social media

PR students were more likely to practice self-branding on social media according to their self-reports as explained in Table 2. However, the highest average number of followers was not tied to the social media accounts of PR students, see Table 3. RTV students had the highest average number of followers in Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, whereas English Section students had the highest number of followers on Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Although PR students are well versed in developing marketing strategies for existing products, they are not necessarily content creators. RTV students might be more specialized in video production that often drives more traffic and attracts more followers. Similarly English section students study subjects from all three majors (RTV, Print and PR). They acquire a diverse skillset necessary to become successful content creators and effective marketing strategists with strongly held self-brands.

Motivations for Self-Branding

Sampled students indicated penetrating the job market as their primary motive for practicing self-branding on social media, followed by establishing a distinguishable self-brand, and making money. Becoming popular was the least reported motivation for self-branding.

Self-branding appeared as necessary for finding work and building up a successful career for 79.6% of students. They used social media to present their skills and expertise and construct distinguishable self-brands that help them land freelance jobs and increase employability.

Financial revenues were the third ranked motivation. Most students from across departments agreed that self-branding on social media is performed to make money, except for English Section students. Most of them refused money to be their primary motivation for self-branding, see table 4. They did not perceive self-branding as an end but rather a means to secure a job. English section students refused driving traffic and running ads to be their sole purpose behind their self-branding practices.

		PR	RTV	English	Jour	Total (Agree)[1]
To penetrate the job market	Top	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	
	F	94	79	58	11	242
	%					79.61%
To build a self-brand	Top	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	
	F	80	57	45	8	190
	%					62.50%
To make money	Top	Agree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	
	F	75	49	40	7	164
	%					53.95%
To become popular	Top	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	
	F	79	46	37	6	136
	%					45.72%

Table 4. Motivations for self-branding across departments

Most students from across departments disagreed on popularity as their main reason for self-branding. To them, becoming famous is not their goal in itself. Their goal is to establish a distinguishable self-brand necessary for career advancement.

Interview Findings

Interviewees showed a huge interest in Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok platforms, in particular. They might have personal accounts on other platforms such as YouTube, LinkedIn, but the use of these platforms is very limited for most of them. LinkedIn, for instance, seemed difficult to deal with and understand its features.

Interviewees learned about the concept of self-branding through their formal studies as well as independent learning activities such as social media videos and books. For example, Hussein –a student at English section - said, "I was teaching a course in personal branding, and recently I have got my social media diploma on various platforms". Others knew about the concept

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[1] Total number refers to the sum of students who responded agree to each statement. Their percentage is calculated in relation to the total number of students who reported practicing self-branding (n=304).

through work and internships in advertising and marketing agencies. Bassant – a student at Radio and Television department- said, "I have worked in more than one agency since my first year in college. I started to learn about advertising, hold accounts and eventually I became a social media specialist".

Awareness about the importance of self-branding at the present time was relatively high among the interviewees. They considered it as the gateway to secure jobs in media organizations or to become freelancers.

Motivation for self-branding:

The interviewees' motives for self-branding varied between psychological and financial motives. But the main motive for most of them was to build a strong CV necessary to become a radio or TV presenter.

Jobs in the media field are difficult to find (Graybeal & Ferrier, 2020). Interviewees agreed that social media can be an important gateway to enter the job market. Sandra -a student at English section- said, "social media are currently the power that can literally do anything. They can link me with anybody working in the media field, as it is not easy to get a job in our field. I see that social media is my greatest possibility."

Most of our interviewees agreed that self-branding is just a method to achieve success and get a suitable job opportunity. It is not a goal in itself. They use self-branding on social media to market their personal brands and/or to become a social media blogger. For example, Christina -student at radio and television department- explained, "I want to be a blogger on social media making ads and getting gifts".

The order of psychological and financial motives differed among the interviewees. The psychological motives of self-branding were represented in the feeling of satisfaction, entertainment, fulfillment and expanding their networks. For instance, Hajar, a student in the Radio and Television department, mentioned, "It is the feeling of satisfaction you can get when you post a picture or share your work. You get a lot of support and encouragement from people, which gives you positive energy." Christina added, "I feel much better when I am laughing and joking with people, I think that's the most important motive to me".

The importance of financial motives was clear in some interviewees' responses. Toka and Habiba -students at the PR department and English section respectively- reported using self-branding to reach the stage of financial independence. For example, Toka said, "I wish to buy a car and an apartment. For now, I ve reached the stage where I don't take money from

my mother. On the contrary, I can help her with our household expenses, as my father passed away many years ago."

However, other interviewees perceive social media as "not profitable" in themselves. Social media money often comes from freelancing opportunities as well as advertisements and gifts offered by sponsors. They do not seem to mind making ads on their accounts. However, they were vigilant about these ads that may cause more harm than benefits. Their credibility is at stake. Hussein explained, "I cannot advertise for a company, and after a while advertise for the competing company […] Also advertising for a bad product that may harm people will not keep me credible." This also confirms their socially responsible use of social media. Their financial motives for social media do not overrule their principles of credibility and social responsibility.

Entrepreneurship in self-branding

Almost all the interviewees deal with self-branding on social media as a business. It can be the way to reach stable jobs, freelance opportunities, and build a strong CV. It also can help them become social media bloggers and make money.

Despite their desire for a permanent job, most of the interviewees are open to freelance opportunities offered via social media. They enjoy the extent of freedom found in freelance jobs where they get to be their own bosses. They feel satisfied even if a permanent job does not show up soon. As Sandra -the English Section student- explained,

> "The idea is that you work on social media and manage your own self. You don't have to obey the rules of someone else. You are free to do what you want at the time you want. This is awesome even if you make less money than what you earn from a stable job."

All interviewees agreed that entering the labor market, especially in the media field, requires hard effort, qualifications and skills more than just obtaining a university degree from one of the media colleges. They indicated that many radio and TV presenters did not graduate from the Faculty of Mass Communication. They just were able to successfully market themselves and became famous. "When anyone sees social media bloggers on TV, he will say, 'Oh, I know them'. No one will ask if they graduated from the Faculty of Mass Communication," Dalia - a student at Radio and Television department- said.

Many radio stations even look for super famous social media bloggers regardless of their educational background. "They already have their own followers. The station will not exert effort in getting ads or a lot of audience for their programs," Sandra said.

Social media engagement metrics appeared as the key towards securing the largest number of followers. "I choose to post at specific times of the day, when people will be using social media more. Late night and early morning are completely excluded for posting," Dalia said.

Such attempts to secure higher rates of interactivity are often a labor-intensive practice. Social media content creators analyze algorithm-tracked user behavior to understand their audience profile: their age, gender, interests, as well as their content and time preferences. "I conduct analysis to see who follows me, their age and locations. Then, I decide the right time for posting and the content I should present to them," Basant -the RTV student- said.

As a labor-intensive practice, self-branding is a life-long learning process, interviewees agreed. They have to constantly update their knowledge base and keep track of the newly added social media features. "I have to keep learning by all possible means to discover the new features that help go viral," Bassant said.

This labor-intensive practice is expected to grow after graduation. Interviewees insisted on the need to exert more effort in self-branding after graduation. They need to continue their trial approach until they are confident about users' preferences. Only then will interviewees be able to generate high audience interaction and land job opportunities in media organizations.

Yet self-branding does not stop once a job is secured. Interviewees agreed that self-branding will continue to be needed for career advancement. "Even if I reach my main goal, I will not stop developing my social media accounts and gain more followers. As long as I have a good profile, I will go higher and get better chances in my field," Sandra said.

Interviewees seemed to adopt an entrepreneurial culture characterized by persistence. "In the beginning, they called me the 'fighting girl' I started self-branding to establish my cosmetic brand on social media," Toka -the PR student- explained. "At first, I lost a lot of money, and I was subjected to a lot of scams. My family told me you must stop, you won't succeed, but I was sure that I will succeed, and I did succeed," Toka added.

Self-branding as a form of entrepreneurship has positives and negatives. On the good side, self-branding boosts self-confidence. Interviewees stated that social media trained them to be more comfortable in front of the camera. They become more tactful and sociable people who do not experience fear or anxiety from public speaking.

On the negative side, social media use has become an addictive behavior. Some interviewees described their interest in self-branding as a form of obsession. "I keep opening my account to see if the number of likes and views has increased. It remains an obsession to me," Hajar – the RTV student- said.

The need to constantly provide attractive content to engage users can be challenging. Interviewees highlighted the need to keep the followers' interest and maintain strong presence on social media. "I must post something and have content everyday. It is not allowed to stop posting or [stop] making reels or stories for days. Even when having a difficult day, I post a photo or talk about it in a story or live video," Sandra explained.

Aside from the obsession with keeping followers' interest, the ability to reach the target audience in the first place remains the biggest challenge. "I wish I have a specific method to know how to reach them easily," Habiba - the English section student- said.

Platform specific self-branding:

The ability to reach the target audience and keep their interest is even more challenging. Each social media has its own features, language and nature that makes it susceptible to specific strategies.

Most interviewees agreed that Instagram is much easier and faster than other platform concerning self-branding. For instance, Toka -a student in Public Relations and Advertising department- explained, "I do self-branding to market my brand 'My Cosmatics'. I find selling is much easier on Instagram. Perhaps, it's the Instagram's reliance on displaying images one behind the other that makes everything faster." Moreover, the interviewees also see that the availability of some features on Instagram, such as reels and stories and its reliance mainly on images, can help create a dazzling image which cannot be provided by other platforms.

TikTok has a huge ability to reach thousands of people because of its features, such as "explore" that makes the number of views double in a noticeably brief time as the interviewees mentioned. For instance, Hajar -a student at Radio and Television department- said, "I was shocked when I posted my first video on TikTok and saw the numbers of views. The video

reached thousands of people in a couple of days and that's something that never has happened on Facebook." However, they all see that TikTok still has a bad reputation due to the stereotypical image of its content creators as funny and unserious as well as the lawsuits against some of them for providing unsuitable content to Egyptian society.

Despite Facebook affordance for interactivity as well as video and photo posting, Instagram and TikTok outperform Facebook in their ability to reach a large number of people at a short period of time. All interviewees described that as "Facebook's biggest drawback".

As for the different platform-specific strategies used for self-branding, interviewees agreed that each platform is more suitable for specific content types over others. Some platforms are "more formal" than others as they pointed out. Trivial stuff has no place on Facebook, where family members, friends and media practitioners exist. Interviewees were concerned that such content might subject them to criticism and embarrassment among their Facebook friends. In contrast, TikTok represented a safe haven, where most of their direct contacts do not exist. Interviewees felt more freedom to display any type of content on TikTok without fear of criticism.

Most of the interviewees also agreed on the possibility of repeating certain types of content based on likes, comments or even reach counts–that is, the number of people who saw an individual post without necessarily interacting with it. They sometimes perceived such engagement metrics as "the main goal" of self-branding and an important tool to find job opportunities. For example, Hajar -the RTV student- said, "When I share a piece of content and get a lot of views, comments, I know that a job opportunity will be offered especially if it is related to radio or voice over".

On the other hand, there are those who believe that it is not necessary to repeat similar content. To them, quality content reaches more users regardless of anything. "Content is the king," as Hussein stressed. "If it is good content it will go viral. If it is not, no matter what happens, it will not spread," he said.

Content on social media is not censorship free. The platform-specific nature may force users to publish content against their convictions. Instagram culture, for instance, promotes compelling photos that are highly edited and very different from reality. Similarly, TikTok culture often celebrates trends, which often force users to publish content against their cultural, societal, and personal norms to follow the trend. Hajar explained,

"After I made a TikTok account, I felt that I entered something that was not a bit like me. I kept waiting for the trend that suits Hajar's personality. This is not like Facebook at all, where you don't look for a trend. It's very important to me that when someone sees my TikTok account to feel that Hajar is the same person in all of her social media accounts. I really love to keep my image as a girl that committed with authentic customs and traditions."

Authentic identity or crafted one

All the interviewees highlighted the importance of maintaining their real personalities through social media. They considered trying to change themselves to increase their popularity and social acceptance as not beneficial, and even harmful. Being inauthentic and completely different from one's nature makes a person vulnerable to criticism, specifically from his close circle of friends and family. Sandra -the English section student- said,

"At the beginning of the self-branding process, your supporters are those who actually know you. If they find that you do something other than your authentic identity, they will not support you. You will lose the people you need most in your beginning."

That is why all the interviewees stressed the need not to imitate celebrities on social media. Most of them indicated the absence of a role model to fully imitate. They were keen only to follow the content that others provide for the purpose of benefiting and learning.

Despite their interest in authenticity on social media, many interviewees showed some concern about privacy. They refuse to show their family or personal problems on social media. They only post content about themselves and their working skills without addressing private aspects. For example, Dalia -the RTV student- said, "On my personal [social media] account, I refuse to show my family in stories or videos. I only post about my hobbies and my desire to be a radio presenter."

Others agreed to show their families and share happy events with people. "I love to do this even if my family gets angry with me," Hajar -a student in the Radio and TV department- said. "On their birthdays, I love to make them a birthday video. When a family member brings me a gift, I post about that in my account. I just feel happy and want to thank them in public," she added.

Sometimes interviewees move from a strict notion of privacy concern towards sharing selected forms of personal experience for psychological rewards. "At first, I posted only general content as I didn't want anyone to judge me but later I felt that it was normal," Bassant -the RTV student- said.

"I am not sharing very personal details, but I may talk about a personal experience, such as 'how the absence of the father makes a difference'. I thought that I should not be ashamed of something like this. I felt more confident when reading comments, saying 'oh, we feel the same',” she added.

Cyberbullying was the basic reason why some interviewees chose not to talk about private life on social media. “They sometimes comment on the way I dress, the content I provide, or the places I visit,” Dalia -the RTV student- said.

Sometimes the sheer amount of criticism prevented interviewees from expressing their opinions on societal issues and particularly politics. “I don't understand politics at all. I once tried to express my point of view on my account, but I felt that I annoyed my followers,” Hajar said. “I decided never to express my opinion about it at all. Even if a country waged a war on another country, I would not mention my opinion,” she explained.

Yet those who never experienced cyberbullying seemed keen to express their opinions on social media. They had unwavering intention to discuss current affairs on social media with a special focus on women's issues. Christina, for instance, explained how social media allow her to express her voice in any pressing societal issue in Egypt such as sexual harassment. “I express my opinion about it [sexual harassment] to raise awareness but I have to make sure that my words are true and useful,” she said.

Discussion

Egypt has paid great attention to entrepreneurship training among youth as part of its 2030 vision for sustainable development (MPED, 2021). Universities has made such training a mandatory course among the students across the different majors. However, these efforts are yet to achieve the desired outcome, as indicated in the findings.

A significant portion (24%) of surveyed senior students in the Faculty of Mass Communication at Cairo University reported not practising self-branding. They were not fully aware of the significance of self-branding for securing a future career.

These findings are particularly striking. Media landscape is turbulent. Jobs are scarce. They hardly provide sufficient living wages (Caplan et al., 2020; Graybeal & Ferrier, 2020). Media practitioners need self-branding to widen their audience base and achieve financial security (Scolere et al., 2018). Mass communication students are supposed to understand the necessity of

self-branding at such a precarious moment. Their university training is supposed to prepare them to better exploit the potential of social media in self-branding. Perhaps, further curriculum and training development are required to better qualify the students.

For those who reported practicing self-branding, Facebook and Instagram came at the forefront, and then came TikTok as the most used platforms to practice self-branding. TikTok recorded the highest number of followers to a single account though it was the third most popular social media platform. The interviewees further confirmed this finding when they pinpointed how TikTok produces the highest reach counts in a short time period compared to Facebook. Yet TikTok is less popular among students due to the bad reputation associated with its content creators for violating societal norms and values, interviewees indicated. LinkedIn came as the least used platform for self-branding among surveyed students despite its potential to connect to potential jobs, internships, and freelance opportunities. This was true even for highly active students on social media interviewed in this study. They agreed that LinkedIn seemed difficult to deal with and understand.

Still penetrating the job market was the primary motivation for self-branding according to survey and interview data. Students used social media to showcase their skills, build strong CVs, land freelancing opportunities and network with potential recruiters in media organizations. To them becoming popular was not their goal but their gateway towards a successful career path. Securing a job is no longer about formal education background, interviewees agreed. Rather it is about having successful self-brand on social media. "When anyone sees social media bloggers on TV […] no one will ask if they graduated from the Faculty of Mass Communication," Dalia -the RTV student- explained. Professional success thus relies on self-branding rather than educational background or even actual professional skills (Ghandini, 2016).

Financial revenues derived from advertising or receiving sponsors' gifts were reported as a motive for self-branding, according to survey findings. However, students were vigilant for the need to maintain their credibility and social responsibility. Interviewees refused to run ads for competing brands or harmful products. They wanted to maintain truthful to their self-brand and to their followers. Their drive towards making money did not overrule their journalistic upbringing in the Faculty of Mass Communication. They continued to uphold the principles of journalism in terms of being truthful and avoiding harm. These findings do not fully support concerns

about the dangers of self-branding on professional identity and ethics (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016).

Freedom and flexibility of work were highly regarded in self-branding. "You don't have to obey the rules of someone else. You are free to do what you want at the time you want," Sandra -the English section students- said. Interview findings mark a shift in the dominant culture of preferring permanent stable jobs. Interviewees celebrated entrepreneurship even if it is less paid. This is a part of neoliberal economy, which urges individuals to rethink their dependency on bureaucratic employment and encourages them to become entrepreneurs (Vallas & Christin, 2018).

However, self-branding for entrepreneurs is often labor intensive. Individuals must exert a huge effort to encourage engagement and sustain the visibility of their self and work on social media (Usher, 2021). Interviewees pointed out the laborious nature of self-branding. They explained the need to trace audience behavior and analyze engagement metrics to identify their audience profile. Audience age, gender, location, time, and preferences often drive decisions about self-branding strategies. However, these decisions are not always error free. Successful self-branding often requires an entrepreneurial culture characterized by risk-taking, flexibility, and persistence (Fernández-Herrería & Martínez-Rodríguez, 2016). Interviewees adopted a trial-and-error approach, in which they learnt from their mistakes. "I lost a lot of money [...] My family told me you must stop, you won't succeed, but I was sure that I would succeed, and I did succeed," Toka -the PR student- said.

Interviewees projected a strong willingness to learn. To them, self-branding is a life-long learning process with the ever-developing social media. "I have to keep learning by all possible means to discover the new features that help go viral," Bassant -the RTV student-said. The self is now a brand. It is perceived as a commercial enterprise that requires business logic to maximize its value (Musílek et al., 2020). Individuals must adapt and learn the new features of social media to better exploit their potential and maximize the value of their self-brand, interviewees agreed.

Social media features differ from one platform to another. Stories, reels and images on Instagram along with TikTok videos often generate higher reach counts compared to Facebook, interviewees agreed. Instagram produces a comfortable place for participation through image curation (Duffy & Hund, 2019). TikTok videos are often funny, entertaining, and probably not serious. They generate high engagement rates, but they may not be suitable for

Facebook. Interviewees agreed that Facebook content tend to be a bit more conservative due to the nature of its friend list. Facebook friends tend to be directly related to the user. They know each other so the user wants to maintain a level of respect. In contrast, TikTok seems a bit relaxed environment. Users belong to a young age group. Old family members are hardly found. Such a difference tends to result in an atomized self-image that differ from one platform to the other (Davidson & Joinson, 2021). However, interviewees often stressed their attempt to maintain a consistent self-image across different platform. "It's very important to me that when someone sees my TikTok account to feel that Hajar is [I am] the same person in all of her social media accounts," Hajar -the RTV student- said.

The nature of TikTok videos often challenged the self-branding practice, interviewees agreed. They struggled to maintain their authentic identity and uphold their societal norms that often contradict TikTok trends. Interviewees refused to fake their self-image to gain social acceptance. To them, self-presentations that are completely different from one's true self are harmful. It is a form of deception that might draw people away and endanger trust. Interviewees might learn from their role models, but they do not imitate. They try to be as authentic as possible.

Interviewees also agreed on the need to self-censor information and parts of the real identity for privacy reasons. Many of them were conservative about sharing family stories and personal problems particularly those who experienced cyberbullying. Interviewees tend to maintain a balanced self-image through a self-monitoring process. It is a process where social media users opt for polished self-images that are not too embarrassing or too revealing (Davidson & Joinson, 2021; Brooks & Anumudu, 2016).

However, privacy concerns might even kill self-branding. Survey findings showed that respondents tend to close their social media account from public view to protect their privacy. This greatly influences their self-branding and entrepreneurship potential. Closed accounts do not permit expanding one's networks. They limit the ability to reach potential recruiters and find freelance opportunities.

Conclusion

The study revealed an unequal level of awareness among Egypt's senior mass communication students. A significant proportion (24%) of the sampled students reported not practicing self-branding. They did not fully realize the potential of self-branding on social media for entrepreneurship

and career advancement. Egypt 2030's vision for sustainable development might need extra effort to be fully achieved on the ground.

The rest of sampled students reported practicing self-branding social media, yet they did not fully exploit the potential of social media. Several factors appeared to intervene, including concerns over privacy and authenticity. For some personal opinions and family events were a red line. For others they were a tool to add sense of authenticity to their self-brand. Platform specific features, in many cases, influenced their self-branding strategy. TikTok seemed a bit relaxed environment compared to Facebook that has family members in the friend list.

Highly active students seemed to embrace the entrepreneurial culture characterized by flexibility and freedom. To them, the ability to be the boss of oneself was a significant added value that could even outweigh the low income and instability in entrepreneurship. They agreed on self-branding as labor intensive work that requires constant learning, audience tracking, and adjustable strategies to produce the best outcome.

Future research needs to further investigate the entrepreneurial culture among the students and its relation to social media algorithms. What are the tools they need to best exploit social media algorithms? Are there any norms or principles that should guide their self-branding? Further research should focus on users' perceptions of TikTok and their impact on self-branding. Does TikTok have the same negative reputation of violating social norms globally? How does such a reputation influence self-branding practice in different contexts?

Future research also needs to further examine entrepreneurship training offered in different Egyptian universities. What are the content and training activities provided? What are the potential ways to improve the training? How did students' self-branding practices differ after taking the course? Perhaps, a comparative study of different curricula of entrepreneurship training across the world will help pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses.

This study still offers invaluable insights on self-branding and entrepreneurship among mass communication students and future media practitioners. It offers a glimpse on how the labor market sometimes prefers self-branding and entrepreneurship skills over formal education and university training. It opens the door for future research to further investigate self-branding from the professional market viewpoint. Media organizations need to offer their input about how and why self-branding skills could overrule university education and even professional skills.

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