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PERSONAL BRANDING FOR ACADEMIC FACULTY: A NEW SOCIAL PHENOMENON FOR RUSSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION?

The paper reports the results of a pilot study on the extent to which academic faculty at Russian higher education institutions engage in personal branding. The paper places personal branding in the context of an increased reliance on social media by Russian higher education institutions and examines the question of whether personal branding might be conducive to academic faculty's career advancement. Employing analysis of publicly available data, the authors demonstrate that leading Russian universities use social media to raise their profile. Analysis of the Facebook, Instagram and vk social media accounts of academic faculty at a prominent Russian university demonstrated that almost a third of academic faculty engaged in personal branding to some extent, and almost 7% engaged in strategic personal branding. This was limited, however, to senior faculty members and it is unclear whether their strategic personal branding impacts on their career advancement or is merely reflective of it. It remains to be seen whether this trend will 'trickle down' and become more prevalent among Russian academic faculty.

Keywords: *personal brand, academic career, social media, Russian higher education.*

Introduction

In our globalized knowledge economy, the opportunities for reaching a potential target audience have increased exponentially to unprecedented levels. Yet these very same opportunities for reaching a target audience – the internet, global social networks, etc. – create heretofore unimaginable challenges in terms of the degree of competition for that audience. The internet, in acting as a ‘great equalizer’ has leveled the playing field for all those who would venture to offer their professional services to a wider audience. Already, Russian higher education institutions have started paying increased attention to social media.

Now the current job market in Russian academia is undergoing a sea change. With low remuneration and undignified work conditions, until only recently in Russia there was relatively little competition for academic jobs compared to, for example, the UK and USA. Once employed as a lecturer (the first step on the academic ladder), academic staff would typically remain at the same university ‘for life’ and be promoted ‘up the ladder’ in accordance with their qualifying period of service and their fulfilment of formal criteria relating to academic qualifications and number of publications. The situation, however, is changing as pay and conditions improve dramatically, and universities internationalize and attract talent from across the country and internationally. In this context of increasing competition for employment and career advancement, would-be and early-career staff are in need of strategies to “enhance their recognition as experts in their fields, establish reputation and credibility, advance their careers, and build self-confidence” [1. P. 6]. Personal branding is one such strategy.

‘Personal branding’ is a relatively recent concept whose definition varies in the literature. For the purposes of this paper, we shall employ Schawbel’s definition of

personal branding as “the process by which individuals and entrepreneurs differentiate themselves and stand out from a crowd by identifying and articulating their unique value proposition, whether professional or personal, and then leverage it across platforms with a consistent message and image to achieve a specific goal” [1. P. 6].

For a newly-mobile generation of early-career academics, a personal brand may be seen as bestowing advantages in terms of reputational enhancement. There are, however, detractors who would argue that the concept of the ‘personal brand’ demeans rather than promotes the person by equating them to a product and smacking of naked commercialism [2–4]. Yet Zarkada concludes that “there is a market need for it linked to the prevalence of identity crises and job insecurity” [5]. Moreover, “What is being turned into a commodity by the personal branding literature... is not really people but hope: the hope of standing out in the crowded spaces of urban modernity, the hope of being acknowledged, feeling unique and worthy of attention and most of all, the hope of finding meaning now that traditional values have been eroded and conspicuous consumption is fast losing ground as a panacea to obscurity and loneliness” [5. P. 6].

Speaking about academia, Tregoning argues that one is “defined by [the] CV: where we have worked, on what and with whom. But these strands need to be pulled together into a single memorable ‘personal brand’... This brand comes into play when meeting potential collaborators, conference organizers and funders” [6. P. 1].

Research shows that profiles on social networking websites can have either a positive or a negative influence on gaining employment depending on their content [7]. In the growing atmosphere of nationwide academic mobility, it can only be a question of time before employers commence vetting the social media of potential employees. This surely will involve not only the ‘weeding out’ of candidates with ‘undesirable’ social media content, but also the positive welcoming of candidates whose social media content promotes their academic reputation and that of their existing employer. This is perhaps particularly relevant when taking into account the popularity of social media among the current generation of teenagers, who constitute the majority of a university’s key target audience, i.e. students; not for nothing are universities expanding their own social media presence [8]. Given the obvious attention directed toward their social media presence, it logically follows that universities as employers would be especially keen to hire academics whose social media presence could add to their own efforts in this sphere.

This paper reports the results of a pilot study whose aim was to investigate the prevalence of personal branding among academic faculty in Russia in the context of Russian higher education institutions’ increased reliance on social media.

Methods

In order to confirm the importance of a social media presence to Russian higher education institutions, an analysis was made of the social media activity of the top ten non-specialized Russian higher education institutions, i.e. those that offer a wide profile of degree programs from arts and humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. It was decided to select the top ten such universities due to their status as prestigious study/work destinations for both future students and academic faculty. The selection was made according to the annual survey (the latest data at the time of study were for 2019) by RAEX [9], a national survey highly regarded by the Russian higher education community.

In order to investigate the existence of personal branding among academic faculty, analysis was conducted of the social media presence of academic faculty at one of the ten selected leading higher education institutions. The analysis examined 71 accessible social media accounts on Facebook, 22 accounts on Instagram and 38 accounts on vk, i.e. a total of 131 social media accounts. It must be noted that LinkedIn was not considered due its current prohibited status in Russia because of data protection laws. Schawbel's definition of personal branding – “the process by which individuals and entrepreneurs differentiate themselves and stand out from a crowd by identifying and articulating their unique value proposition, whether professional or personal, and then leverage it across platforms with a consistent message and image to achieve a specific goal” (1 P. 6) – was used to infer the use of personal branding by academic faculty.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis shows that each of the examined Russian higher education institutions maintains an official presence on Facebook, Instagram and vk (a mostly Russian social networking website) (see Table 1). Moreover, the mean number of posts per university on a given platform over a seven-day period amounted to 14.83 posts. The existence of these social media accounts and the not insignificant number of posts are evidence of the importance placed by Russian higher education institutions on their social media presence.

Table 1. Top Russian universities' social media presence

#	University*	Facebook (posts per week)	Instagram (posts per week)	vk (posts per week)
1	Lomonosov Moscow State University	33	2	35
2	Saint Petersburg State University	5	3	28
3	Novosibirsk State University	9	4	13
4	Ural Federal University named after the First President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin	18	15	31
5	National Research Tomsk State University	9	5	23
6	Kazan Federal University	7	5	56
7	RUDN University	16	11	14
8	Siberian Federal University	1	11	25
9	National Research Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod	7	6	13
10	Far Eastern Federal University	12	10	18

* The top ten, non-specialized Russian higher education institutions according to the 2019 ranking by RAEX.

As for the existence of personal branding among academic faculty, using Schawbel's definition of personal branding, it could be inferred that of the 131 social media accounts studied, personal branding was at least partially employed by 23 Facebook accounts (32.4% of the total studied), 5 Instagram accounts (22.7% of the total studied) and 11 vk accounts (28.9% of the total studied) or an average of 29.8% of the social media accounts analyzed (see Table 2).

Table 2. Personal branding on faculty social media accounts

Social network	Number of accounts with personal branding	Number of accounts with strategic personal branding
Facebook (71 accounts)	23	6
Instagram (22 accounts)	5	1
vk (38 accounts)	11	2
Total (131 accounts)	39 (29.8%)	9 (6.9%)

It must be noted, nonetheless, that the efforts of those who engage in personal branding are often misdirected or insufficient [10]. This begs the question of how a personal brand should be managed in order to be effective. Gander concludes that, “Brands grow organically, the best personal brands develop as a result of strong communication, a sense of purpose... Brands demand consistency and clarity... too much inconsistency or ‘failure’ leads to a rapid diminution of brand status” [11. P. 5]. Indeed, according to Wee and Brooks, personal branding involves projecting “a consistently distinctive personality in all interactions” [12]. This led to further investigation of those social media accounts where the presence of personal branding was identified. Hearn postulates that personal branding “involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries” [4. P. 198]. Additional analysis in the light of these strictures demonstrated that self-conscious, consistent personal branding, or what we will describe as ‘strategic personal branding’, was employed by academic faculty on six of the examined Facebook accounts, one Instagram account and two vk accounts, i.e. 6.9% of the identified social media accounts (see Table 2). It is interesting to note that all of these nine accounts belonged to senior academic faculty, ranging from head of department to the executive leadership of the university. Llopis writes that, “Developing your personal brand is essential for the advancement of your career and development as a leader” [13]. This raises the ‘chicken and egg’ question: Which comes first – career advancement or developing a personal brand? In this regard, it is noteworthy that in eight of the nine examples mentioned above, the faculty member in question commenced personal branding when already in post rather than being promoted after developing a personal brand.

Conclusion

In the Russian higher education industry, as in most industries around the world, there is a demonstrated reliance on social media and corporate branding. It is hardly surprising that such a trend has an impact on those who work in higher education institutions. This influence can be seen in the social media accounts of academic faculty, even where such accounts are nominally ‘personal’ as opposed to ‘professional’ (cf. Facebook vs. LinkedIn), to the extent that almost 30% of the academic faculty examined were engaged in personal branding. Of those academic faculty who were engaged in strategic personal branding, all of them were senior leaders and all but one commenced their employment of strategic personal branding after gaining their positions. This is in line with Llopis’s thesis that, “Personal branding, much like social media, is about making a full-time commitment to the journey of defining yourself as a leader... Your personal brand should represent the value you are able to consistently deliver to those whom you are serving. This doesn’t mean self-promotion – that you should be creating awareness for your brand by showcasing your achievements and success stories” [13]. The question remains, however, as to whether these senior leaders’ personal branding impacts on their career advancement or is merely reflective of it. This issue, along with their personal beliefs about and approaches to strategic personal branding, necessitates further research.

Small-scale pilot studies are not easily generalizable; research on a national level is needed to provide a picture of the situation in the higher education commu-

nity at large. Furthermore, longitudinal research is required in order to investigate whether there is a significant trend toward increased social media reliance by academic faculty at Russian universities. Currently, there is strong anecdotal evidence that personal branding has a positive impact on academic mobility for early-career faculty. It remains to be seen whether more junior faculty members will follow the example of their senior leadership by promoting their personal brand using social media and whether this will have a significant effect on their career advancement.

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