Lady Gaga goes virtual: Social network gaming communities’ response towards virtual branding efforts

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Lady Gaga goes virtual: Social network gaming communities’ response towards virtual branding efforts

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Abstract

This study examines community members’ response towards a one-off online personal branding campaign of Lady Gaga. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study critically examines forum messages from the official Zynga forums of the social game, Farmville. The findings reveal that in the context of social network games, the marketers’ role is, to some extent, reduced, while the roles of consumers, especially opinion leaders, become paramount. Theoretical and managerial implications are also discussed.

Keywords: Personal Branding, Social network, gaming communities, virtual branding

Track: Brand and Brand Management

1.0 Introduction

The tremendous growth and prevalence of the internet has changed the way we interact and connect in our daily lives. One of the most important developments is the growing popularity of numerous virtual worlds. These virtual worlds are defined as “technology-created virtual environments that incorporate representations of real world elements, such as human beings, landscapes, and other objects” (Kock, 2008). Maclaran and Catterall (2002) highlight the importance of interactions in virtual worlds and communities for marketers. From a marketing perspective, increased attention among researchers is evident, as these virtual worlds provide an important source of information. Barnes (2007) was among the first to present the concept of advertising in virtual worlds. He highlighted the attractiveness of this medium for enhanced modes of advertising.

The unique characteristics of virtual environments present several challenges for marketing and in particular, branding. These challenges include identification of the target market, and in exploring whether users represent their true selves in these virtual worlds. Willi et al. (2014) suggests that in the interactions that occur through virtual communication platforms, such as an online community, individuals produce and re-produce their identities in order to create a favourable impression. Such impression formation is an inherent trait of the personal branding concept. We thus explore and utilise the context of social network gaming, which we define as virtual games on social media (specifically Facebook in our context) as a channel for personal branding for celebrities.

Only a few studies have examined branding practices in virtual worlds. American singer and songwriter Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, who brands herself as Lady Gaga, was among the first celebrities to use a social network game, as a branding tool and also as a way to engage with fans. She partnered with Zynga, the creator of the online game, Farmville, to launch and promote her Born this Way album (Osborne, 2011). This was Zynga biggest brand campaign to date, and the first time it had collaborated with an international superstar. For a limited time (from May 17 to May 26, 2011), players of the Farmville game...
could visit GagaVille, a virtual farm within FarmVille, and download exclusive unreleased songs from the album, after completing a number of specially themed tasks. This virtual farm featured animated animals and items that players could win or buy from the marketplace, including unicorns, spiky trees, and sheep riding motorbikes. It is hoped that this study will add to the existing literature on branding on virtual worlds. In view of the substantial user numbers, it is not surprising that social media games are increasingly being seen by companies, celebrities, and promoters, as a medium to engage with fans and a means to expand their reach and influence. For celebrities, the growth of social media (namely Facebook and Twitter) represents new mediums to directly enhance their personal brand and engage with their fans.

Virtual world users often adopt branding practices to brand themselves, and this process of self-presentation and impression often happens in social games. Thus, the purpose of the paper is two-fold: (1) To critically examine the cases of a one-off promotion effort in social games on Facebook and (2) To analyse how personal brand (re)presentations are perceived by the members of these virtual communities.

2.0 The Rise of Virtual Worlds and Personal Branding

Most of the researches on marketing in virtual worlds have focused on Second Life, (developed by Linden Labs) and World of War Craft (developed by Blizzard Entertainment). Both games are in the genre of popular “massively multiplayer online role-playing games” (MMORPG) (Barnes, 2007; Hemp, 2006; Tikkanen, et al. 2009). Recently, another category of virtual communities has surfaced, namely, the social network games. Despite being immensely popular, they remain significantly under-researched. These virtual role playing games are played on online social networks, such as Facebook, where members often form close-knit online communities. CNN (2012) reported that social network gaming represents one of the most popular activities on Facebook, and that users spent around one billion hours playing these virtual games. The development and growth of social gaming are slowly catching the eye of marketers, who realise that they can tap into a demographic (mainly women in their 30s) that is out of reach, when targeting traditional online gaming audiences (Nutley, 2011).

The evolution and popularity of online social networks has resulted in a major shift in the way branding is practiced, specifically in the way in which consumers participate in the creation of marketing and brand-related information (Cappo 2003; Jaffe 2005). This shift results in a need to redefine branding in virtual environments and virtual communities. In the present study, we define virtual branding broadly, to refer to the creation and management of brands in virtual environments with the active participation of consumers. We base our study on this definition, which highlight both the context and the consumers' interactive role. One of the key characteristics that differentiate online branding from offline branding is the increasing emphasis on experience and customisation. The question for marketers is whether virtual branding in these social games can be used to promote brand loyalty and involvement (Cappo 2003; Jaffe 2005). To examine this relationship, we review the relationships between the concept of personal branding, celebrity brands, and social gaming.

Lair et al. (2005) categorise branding to include consumer brands, retail brands, corporate brands, and personal brands. In their review, the authors trace the evolution of personal branding and emphasised how the personal branding concept has grown as an extreme form of market-appropriate response. It is commonly agreed that the term ‘personal branding’ was first used in an article by Tom Peters in the August 1997 issue of the Fast
Company Magazine. He wrote, “You're not defined by your job title and you're not confined by your job description. Starting today you are a brand” (Peters, 1997). In the same year, a group of international brand and career experts collaborated and came up with a single definition for personal branding. According to their definition, personal branding “describes 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 establish reputation and credibility, advance their careers, and builds self-confidence” (Schawbel, 2008). From a marketing perspective, Shepherd (2010) reviewed the concepts of self marketing and personal branding. He pointed out that for many entrepreneurs; there is no clear division between marketing themselves and their business. According to him, “personal branding is essentially an inside-out process that serves to encapsulate the current strengths and uniqueness of the individual in relation to a targeted market” (Shepherd, 2010, p.602). This personal branding concept is widely used by athletes, authors, celebrities, businessmen, and politicians.

This paper specifically focuses on celebrities' personal branding efforts in social games. In the modern sense, the main characteristic of a celebrity is their presence in mass media. Celebrities are people, who have succeeded in building a personal brand. For example, we consider Lady Gaga to have developed a successful personal brand. In the marketing realm, most studies on celebrities have previously looked at their role as brand endorsers (Atkin and Block, 1983). Scholars note that the celebrity brand is a person with a name, physical feature, and unique personality, as opposed to an inanimate corporation (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1995). This is why marketers use celebrities to endorse and give inanimate products a recognisable face. Many of these studies highlight the importance of consumers' perceived image of the celebrity. Ohanian (1990) was among the first to come up with a scale for measuring celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, which, according to him, were considered important characteristics. Walker et al. (1992) also highlighted the importance of making sure that an endorser's image is consistent with the desired product image in order to gain trust, and subsequent loyalty. In this study, we examine members' perceptions and responses of celebrities' personal branding campaigns on virtual worlds, adding to existing stream of research in personal branding, social media, and consumer behaviour.

3.0 Methodology

To examine how icons become brands and examine the cultural logic of the celebrity brand, scholars have relied on biographical and archival analysis. Conventional content analysis was utilised where categories are derived from data during data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We critically examined messages, which were posted on the official Zynga forums of the social games, namely, Farmville. To prepare for the study, the researchers engaged in the game as active players. In addition, they were registered as members of the forums in order to access other users' comments on the virtual brand efforts. As such, the researchers were familiar with the characteristics of games, these online communities, and their members. We specifically focused on the forum threads, which discussed Lady Gaga. A total of 98 threads mentioning Lady Gaga were downloaded and analysed.

We focused on Lady Gaga's personal campaign in the game. We examined the threads in order to understand the discourse and interactions of people. This approach allowed us to include the identification of shared systems of meaning, and the identification of unique themes merging from the conversations taking place in the forums. To protect the privacy of the members, we did not record aliases or actual names. We classified the downloaded
threads from both forums as social or informational content. We observed that in several threads, there was heavy moderation of the comments, with moderators being strict in removing comments with personal opinions about the celebrities and not related to the games.

4.0 Results and Analysis

The objective of Lady Gaga's campaign on Farmville was to promote her new album. Lady Gaga's virtual farm was created to reflect the "album's focus on self-expression and positivity" (Szalai, 2011). Next, we investigate the users' feelings towards the celebrities, who have suddenly been dropped into their environment. We further examine users' motivations to achieve the games' goals and the implications of the forum postings. We ensured that all members in these two different forums were also the participants in these virtual games.

4.1 Virtual Rewards and Overall Brand Experience

Lady Gaga's special contest seemed to be popular based on the number of posts by the members discussing the contests. Whenever the players completed a special quest, they could download Lady Gaga's whole album for free with the purchase of a special Zynga $25 game card (Zynga, 2011). Lady Gaga was able to reach out to many new customers via this campaign. Several members had not even heard her songs or even of her before her campaign (mostly non-US members). One member wrote: “Am definitely planning to buy the album when it comes out on Monday. Not bad, considering up until a couple of days ago, I hadn't heard any Lady Gaga songs at all.”

One member summed up her overall experience of Lady Gaga's promotion: “I really enjoyed the Gagaville promotion and quests! I'm a total cynic, and didn't think I'd like it at all, but it was the best promo ever. Everything worked! The music played! The quests were just challenging enough but not impossible. The rewards were fun and mostly useful! If they weren't useful (the sign and the tree) they were good-looking, and didn't take up a ton of space. To me, everything was well-thought out and implemented. Somebody worked HARD on this - and it really showed. Many congrats!” Another member who admittedly was a fan, added: “I thought the decorations were cool, I loved most of the quest rewards, and free listens of Gaga's songs (as I'm a fan). I also know many people who don't like Gaga, but absolutely loved this theme.” The members’ comments highlight the importance of the overall brand experience in a brand strategy and the fit between the target audiences.

4.2 Reputation Perceptions.

There was also an interesting discussion on whether Lady Gaga was a good “role model.” There were an almost equal number of members with opposite opinions, with slightly more members who thought that Lady Gaga was a good role model. Even on one of the threads, which were started by an angry parent not happy with the explicit lyrics and demanding that the songs should come with parental warnings, there were more members coming out in support. One member thought that Lady Gaga was one of the best role models for kids as well as for adults, because she promotes “equality and acceptance of differences.” The member asked: “Why are you so afraid of that?”

One discussion thread titled “The thread where we discuss Lady Gaga”, had a total of 147 posts (on 15 pages) and had some heated discussions, where members discussed her outfits and her singing abilities, among other things. One member put it succinctly: “As for myself, I happen to like Lady G's songs, while her outfits are out of the norm ... it's her choice of style, who are we to judge that?? How an artist chooses to dress does not really effect
whether or not they have (or don't have) talent ... personally, I like her singing abilities; I heard her songs on the radio first & thought to myself that's different but I like it.”

From the comments we can see that there were more posts positive towards her. It appears that prior reputation has an important impact but gradually reduces as the campaigns goes on and supports prior findings (Moe and Trusov, 2011). For celebrities seeking to use existing social games for their personal branding strategies, the most important element appears to be the virtual brand experience, followed by the reputation. This is also in line with previous studies (Rowley, 2004) in other contexts.

4.3 Brand Identity Perceptions

According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), the brand identity needs to “resonate with customers, differentiate the brand from competitors, and represent what the organisation can and will do over time”. Similarly, according to Kapferer (2004), identity is what makes the brand “unique and singular and different from others”. When news came out that Lady Gaga would be partnering with Zynga on Farmville, there was a lot of excitement among the forum members, with only few detractors. It was interesting to note that there was no actual interaction with Lady Gaga's avatar on ‘GagaVille’. Users noted that the overall experience could have been improved if there was some way that the players' avatars could have interacted with her avatar. There were no complaints about the suitability of Lady Gaga with the fantasy items in GagaVille and the overall virtual farm theme of FarmVille. The features, which included sheep riding motorbikes and unicorns, were found to represent her unique (and eccentric) style.

4.4 Power of Opinion Leaders

In a game where the number of friends (or allies) matters, we found that there were several examples which highlight the opinion leaders' important role in the forum. They were the most vocal members and often, what they said, mattered to the rest of the group. Thus, they influenced the opinion of other members and via an emotional contagion effect, stirring either positive or negative opinions on the group. As Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) point out, one of the major challenges in building brands, besides getting noticed, is to change perceptions. We recognise that targeting opinion leaders help in the influence towards perceptual changes in the virtual world.

5. Conclusions

Virtual worlds provide a channel for brand interaction and experience by creating online communities around a brand. Online communities are increasingly important in people's lives, yet little research exists in the area of virtual worlds and the interactions. In this study, we put forward a question for marketers, that is, how should brands best be (re)presented in virtual worlds? Using a qualitative content analysis, we investigated 'celebrity branding' in the context of virtual social games. Lady Gaga is very successful in her personal branding. She has become a global phenomenon with millions of fans, whom she lovingly calls her ‘Little Monsters’. As a brand, her celebrity status is not ascribed or attributed but rather achieved, with support from her fans. As this study reveals, she has been able to achieve this because she is perceived as being authentic and genuine. She best represents what she calls “acceptance of differences”. Lady Gaga stands out for her originality, not only with her voice, but also the way she presents herself, the songs she writes, and her values.
Social media presents several advantages for celebrities seeking to influence their brand. By interacting and engaging with fans directly (virtually), they are able to control their own content and brand personality. In the context of social network games on Facebook, they have access to specific demographic segments, which they can target. However, as the results of our study indicate, branding in virtual environments has unique characteristics different from other mediums.

In interactive social network games, it is not possible to have control of the players' interaction and comments. They actively create and spread information, which can ultimately affect the success or failure of the branding campaigns. The campaign highlighted in this study paves way for other celebrities and brands to utilise social games, as a new medium to engage with customers in numerous creative ways. For celebrities developing their personal brand, we emphasise the benefits of authenticity in their image. Creating a brand identity entails thinking about consumers’ perceptions towards the personal brand, the brand image, and investigates how the brand is actually perceived by the consumers.

Lady Gaga has shown an amazing sense of media savviness, which she has exploited to the full potential by fostering a community of loyal followers (known as “little monsters”). This is a clear indication of building, engaging, and interacting with the customer base. Simply giving the online community some attention creates increased exposure, and subsequent, goodwill. Lady Gaga has been successful in developing a unique brand identity. For example, she creates news headlines for her outrageous costumes, and, as some members stated 'not because she was arrested for getting drunk or other scandals.' Thus, she is unique due to her self-definition by clearly defining her brand identity.

7. Limitations of the Study

We acknowledge a number of limitations with our study, which should be considered when interpreting our findings. It is emphasised that the members on the forums represent a small minority of the millions, who were playing the games. In addition, we note that there were no available reports on the finances involved, nor any press releases following the campaigns, either from Zynga or from the celebrities. Our analysis was based on the discussion involving members of the official forums. These players’ comments may not be generalisable, and future studies should take a deeper look at the issues identified, using other research methods, including interviews, to gain a deeper understanding of these unique virtual communities. Finally, we encourage more research looking at social interactions in social media, virtual games, and online communities.

References


