Bloggers as Brands and Self-Marketers: an ethnographic approach

Introduction and Aim

Food is not only necessary for survival, it is also tied to individual identity, culture and society (Caplan, 1997). Food bloggers present and communicate their food choices which are closely tied to a sense of self identity (Bisogni et al., 2002), and are as varied as the diets found in the UK. Food photography and discussions are popular on social media where people "use food to find a sense of personal identity, and perform their identity on an ongoing basis" (J. Walter Intelligence, 2015, p. 3). Digital identities are dynamic and progressive (Kerrigan & Hart, 2016) and so online groupings of people are nebulous and shifting. Groups that share interests and congregate in communities online have been referred to as 'small worlds' (Patino et al., 2012).

While other studies have covered the value of bloggers to brands who partner with them to reach the blog readership, this PhD will examine the blogs and bloggers themselves as communication channels, entrepreneurial ventures and/or brands. This study will employ an immersive and multi-sited ethnography comparing multiple case studies of bloggers. Blogger motivations and methods for building blogs as communication channels, self marketing platforms, entrepreneurial ventures and brands will be fully described and explored against literature. The aim of the research is to define bloggers as self-marketers, brands or entrepreneurs in order to more clearly articulate self marketing and self-branding as valid theoretical constructs.

Literature Review

The internet allows for a new arena in which identify can be explored and enacted in an progressive process online (Kerrigan & Hart, 2016). Unlike other forms of consumption, food allows for an exceptional measure of socially acceptable self-determination because it is necessary for survival and most members of society are allowed autonomy over their own diets (Daya, 2016). Food can become a talking point, it demands a level of trust (because it is so closely linked to our survival) that can then be reciprocated to establish relationships with wider societal impact (Neely, Walton, & Stephens, 2014). Food bloggers are not only building their own digital presence online, but are also having a wider societal impact on how others build identity around food. This condensed literature review begins with a brief overview of the self as an individual and social construct in the online environment. A summary of how blogs and bloggers relate to marketing communications follows. We conclude with a critical appraisal of accepted blogger motivations and how the concepts of self marketing and self-branding might be advanced through a study of bloggers.

<u>The narrative, digital self</u>

Building an online presence is, by nature, an act of self-presentation, evaluation and reflection. It has been found that individuals who construct personal websites often reflect on the question "who am I" while building the site because the process of building a site to represent oneself, or even a personal interest, is quite self-reflective (Edwards, 2004). Foucault identified that individuals can view their 'selves' with a degree of detachment and critical awareness, and can then work on this 'self' (Probyn, 2011). Whilst identity can be determined by the individual, Goffman (1959) theorized that identify is exhibited and refined through social performance. From this theory, it can be presumed that through the act of telling about oneself and interacting with others, food bloggers not only displays but also shape their identity.

In order to reach out to readers, many bloggers employ narrative as a tool (Hsiao, Lu, & Lan, 2013). They do this through an introductory story, but also through posts that carry

elements of that story forward in a discursive structure understood presented by the blogger and understood by the reader as part of a wider narrative (Gergen, 2011). Blogger profiles are written and presented as a story, often with elements of societal narrative (mother as a role and relation to others, for instance) repeated throughout (Hawkins & Saleem, 2012; Schechtman, 2011). Readers might then relate to this shared identity/social role, and understand the communications on a deeper level which they can relate to their own personal experience.

Bloggers build ties to readership based on shared personality, identity and goals (Fullwood, 2015; Li & Chignell, 2010; Schechtman, 2011). Readers become familiar the person behind the blog and often identify with the blogger's personally (Li & Chignell, 2010). Blogs might help readers engage more fully in imaginative consumption and identity formation – where they can see the blogger producing food and a lifestyle that they can more easily desire because the blog is such a visual medium (Cowan & Dai, 2014, p. 1008). This desired self may not simply be tied to consumption, but may be part of a more altruistic process of self definition:

> The desire for mastery takes the self into the controlled and controlling world of rationality and rational decision-making. The modern self is a self defined as a project: identity is framed carefully, systematically and painstakingly…
>
> <div align="right">(Elliott, 2008, pp. 153–154)</div>

The modern self exists simultaneously in the virtual and real world, adapting a digital self which is fit for the internet as a new and separate social domain (Zhao, 2005). Within blogging, it is authenticity that is valued and bloggers develop and maintain identities which are perceived to be authentic by readers (Siles, 2012). The self that is presented might not be an complete presentation of the self, but it is likely a self-image that the blogger is aspiring to achieve. The internet has created a greater opportunity to find alternative non-expert, non-affiliated voices (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012) and this provides opportunity to present and explore different opinions and ideas.

<u>The Marketing of blogs</u>

The internet differs from established marketing communication channels in many ways. First and foremost, it has a degree of interaction that is unprecedented, and so the online world mirrors offline social interactions in ways which other mass communication channels cannot replicate (Simmons, Thomas, & Truong, 2010). Second, these interactions are documented and available publicly, a point of benefit in terms of the reach and documentation of communications, but also caution in terms of impression management and careful interaction with others (C. Fullwood, Nicholls, & Makichi, 2014). Finally, the internet allows for an unprecedented amount of self-published information to be freely available (Edwards, 2004). Because of these three factors, bloggers have risen in the online world as people of influence, hubs for social networks and marketing communications channels.

Traditional sources of information, authority figures and formal channels, are being eschewed for more authentic sources of information (Lankes, 2008; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Schallehn, Burmann, & Riley, 2014). There is an increased demand for openness and transparency from online audiences (Arora & Stoner, 2009; Lankes, 2008). The internet is used to find and share information. Source credibility is determined by reliability rather than authority (Lankes, 2008), which suits bloggers as non-expert individuals (Cox, Martinez, & Quinlan, 2008). Information seekers rely on self-chosen networks, sometimes known as 'small worlds' to evaluate information (Salvini, 2010). Small worlds are voluntarily formed, actively engaged, divers and dispersed (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Unlike traditional

marketing audiences, these are naturally engaged in similar interests and for some marketing message they are more effective targets than demographic or psychographic groupings.

Within this context, bloggers become communication channels whose influence can be judged by the size of their readership. The readership follows the blog because they identify with the blogger and trust their opinion (Hsu, Huang, Ko, & Wang, 2013). The blogger uses the blog to cultivate and manage relationships with the readership (Schmidt, 2007). The blog can become financially valuable to the blogger and act as a source of supplementary or fulltime income (Charlesworth, 2015). There have also be more recent instances of bloggers leveraging their readership online to launch books, write columns, or even launch products. In this case, it becomes fitting to ask whether the blog, or the blogger, have become brands in their own right.

Six motivations have been identified for individuals to engaged in blogging: personal revelation, emotional outlet, creative outlet, selective discourse, social networking and advertising (Charlesworth, 2015; C. Fullwood et al., 2014). Chignell and Li (2010) add documentation of life to that list. By identifying advertising, the list does include a brief nod to monetization of the blog, however the identified motivations are rooted in the personal and social value of blogging. This list fails to recognize motivations to blog as a commercial activity. There are several motivations such as innovation, challenge and dissatisfaction that might apply to bloggers. These are identified within literature around entrepreneurship, and so entrepreneurial motivations should be presented to bloggers as well as those established social spheres and those tied to self marketing.

Self-branding and Self marketing

"Human brand" and "person brand" seem to be applied inter-changeably in the literature depending on the author(s). Although there is some ambiguity around terms, it is established that a human / person can be a brand. "A successful brand is an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values which match their needs most closely" (de Chernatony, McDonald, & Wallace, 2010, p. 20). Parmentier et al. (2013) effectively apply corporate brand theory towards successful positioning for any career pursuit. Individuals can differentiate their offering while appealing to employers through engaging in a variety of marketing in a process of self marketing.

Within academic circles, there has been criticism around how the terms branding and self marketing are constructed, investigated, discussed and applied.

> There is little evidence of the development or promulgation of an over-arching conceptual framework for self marketing, rooted in the discipline of marketing… Advocates of personal branding, by contrast, have more obviously attempted to transfer the principles and practices of branding from products to individuals in a more coherent fashion.   (Shepherd, 2017)

For self marketing especially this is a valid criticism. Self marketing and self branding have largely been introspective processes used to communicate to either individuals or very small networks. Self branding has had more popularity since Peters (1999) first introduced the concept. Self marketing and self-branding are becoming better-defined areas of interest as social media emerges. Most individuals have an online presence and so they are involved in managing their own image, the question is to what degree to they engage in this management. While there are hobbyist bloggers who are content with the process of generating content and forming networks as motivations to blog (Sepp, Liljander, & Gummerus, 2017), others will be blogging with the intention of building a career or a marketable asset online, which fits within

the career branding construct. Others, however, will be using their blog to launch a business based on their name, or they will develop a hobby blog to such an extent that they can launch themselves as a brand through products or services tied to their identity. It is this category of blogger, who is experiencing commercial success tied directly to their identity and name that warrants a fresh investigation of self marketing and self branding.

Methodology

The guiding theoretical perspective for this research is social constructivism. We assume that the bloggers have a unique perspective and situational understanding (Kiraly, 2014). As social life is experienced subjectively, this research will assume an interpretivist stance. The unit of study will be the blogger: their process of building a blog as a commercial asset, their motivations for building a blog, the effectiveness of their efforts in managing the blog as evidenced by the blog itself, and a review of the strength of their marketing/branding efforts as confirmed by external sources.

An immersive and multi-sited ethnography has been chosen in recognition that blogs as sites of marketing communications and these are imbued with meaning which reflects, shapes and enforces societal norms (Goffman, 1979). The blog community is a social group, governed by social protocols, where readers come together to share a common identify or activity, and overcome common difficulties (Larrain, 1979). Ethnography refers to the study of "distinctive meanings, practices, and artifacts of particular social groups" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62).

Digital ethnography entails an investigation of the impact and shared meaning of digital technologies and the ways in which participants use these as part of daily life and to build identities online (Morey, Bengry-Howell, & Griffin, 2011). Digital technologies and social spaces are critical to understand how social life is being played out in an online context (Roberts, Hine, Morey, Snee, & Watson, 2013). As blogging is a wholly online activity, a study that was wholly online would accurately explore the presentation of the blogger in an online context. However, many bloggers extend to other pursuits – professional careers (nutritionist, journalist, author) and new ventures (restaurants, activism, product lines) (Rowse, 2016). Blogger influence is not limited to online, and so the study should not be limited to a mode of data collection that is entirely online.

Ethnographic Case Studies

In order to investigate bloggers, a multi-modal ethnography taking place online and through face-to-face interviews will be conducted employing multiple case studies. Case study is a highly relevant approach for this research as it allows data to be extracted from multiple sources of information (Stark & Torrance, 2005; Yin, 2014). In order to ensure a degree of reliability, multiple case studies (6-8) will be sought (Yin, 2014).

Ethnographic studies begin with the researcher entering into the community of study (Kozinets, 2002). The researcher becomes an active participant observer in a selection of blogs. A wide variety of blogs were followed from high profile bloggers who have firmly established brands outside the blog and exceptional numbers of readers, to bloggers recognised by blogger associations as excellent with large readerships, to novices who are new to blogging with small readerships. Through the application of multiple cases, the theory around brand will be applied with greater breadth of focus to allow for an exploratory approach to understanding bloggers (Hine, 2007).

Ethnography's epistemological remit is to tell the social stories of those under study (Murthy, 2013). In order to gather a thorough understanding of the stories of these bloggers, the case studies will include both interviews and data collected from the blog. This will

ensure greater depth to the data gathering (Hine, 2011) and also ensures the study has a full picture of the blogger identity that is beyond the digital identity. Kozinets (2016, p. 1) identifies "the elevation of personal branding [as] a central element of the netnographic research process", and so building a case study around the personal brand of the bloggers online is an approach recognized in previous literature.

In addition to interviews with bloggers, observational notes will be taken of the blogger's self-branding and self marketing posts on the blog. In this process, there is a danger of focusing solely on the individual who is self marketing/branding. If the brand is based solely on themselves, then the conceptualization of this theory focuses on an outdated philosophy of product marketing (Shepherd, 2017). In order to overcome this weakness, publicly available information about the blogger published by other sources will also be used for the observations. This will ensure a degree of external external validity to the case studies. These streams of data will provide a rich picture of the blogger brand and self marketing activities that explores both the desired, projected and accepted image (Balmer & Soenen, 1999). This will not be over a set period, but will rather continue until data saturation is reached, which will be evidenced by no new themes emerging from the observations (Kozinets, 2016).

Qualitative observation of the blogs, combined with data from interviews, will aid the researcher in identifying any aspects that connect the bloggers' personal goals and aspirations to the marketing, branding and entrepreneurial theory (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011). By building a systematic understanding of the subject through interviews, observations of the blog and wider research, the case studies will be built and documented in a clear, and progressive sequence (Punch, 2014). By using multiple and distinct sources of data the case studies will involve a triangulation of data, leading to robust findings (Yin, 2014). Each individual case study will be provided to the blogger, and this will provide the opportunity for bloggers to give feedback, thus ensuring prescribed ethnographic practices involving collaboration with participants are included in the process (Kozinets, 2002).

Once all cases are complete, they will be compared and contrasted against one another to come to general conclusions. As some analysis will be undertaken in progress, the challenges to existing theory will be explored in development, and it is hoped that new ideas will emerge from this iterative process (Bryman, 2012). While these exploratory methods will not cover all aspects of bloggers as brands, they will provide ample data with which to explore how theory applies to UK Food bloggers as communication channels, self-marketers and individual brands online.

Ethical Considerations

There is considerable debate around ethical issues when using contributions of individuals online. Although the internet is a public space, blogs are tied directly to the identities of their creators and bloggers act as gatekeepers to their blogs (Deiuliis, 2015). The researcher considers that any research into a blog is research into an individual, and it is therefore ethical that the consent of the blogger be required to take observations (Bryman, 2012). Gatekeeper consent will be considered sufficient to participate on the blog, but no reader comments or contributions will be recorded from the blog (Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel, 2003). Reader numbers may be measured through number of shares across social media sites connected to the blog.

From the beginning, it has been important to clearly explain to the blogger: how the data will be gathered, stored and analysed; how the results will be reported, and; how the research will be used and disseminated (including potential future applications and what content from the blogs and interviews might be published) (Morey et al., 2011). Informed consent has been sought from all of the blogger participants.

Impact and Limitations

It is a working premise of this research that the collaborative nature of the internet and emergence of bloggers as brands represents a shift in communications which has changed the very nature of both marketing and communications. It is also assumed that bloggers, as non-professional marketers, have a unique perspective and situational understanding of marketing that differs from professional marketers and academics within the subject discipline (Kiraly, 2014). Research into how theory from marketing and brand may or may not apply the blogs/bloggers will deepen understanding of the internet from an alternative perspective (Kiraly, 2014). While a managerialist perspective might want to learn how bloggers can be used for profit, or how they generate profit, a critical marketing perspective will challenge theory from an emerging perspective via discussions, interactions and observations with bloggers (Murray and Ozanne, 2009).

Marketing research should not only be based on the perspective of consumption or markets, but should also engage with the public (Murray & Ozanne, 2017). Bloggers are part of a group that span across both the general public and marketers. Because bloggers are identified as being high in openness to new experiences (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008), bloggers tend to break new ground. They are a significant threat to traditional publishing and their blogs provide an oppositional offering (Cova & White, 2017). Blogger's identity work, particularly bloggers who do not fit within established norms, offer a voice to ideas around food which have previously been marginalized (Harju & Huovinen, 2017). For instance, the alternative vegan diet is becoming increasingly popular and emerging ideas around diets, such as clean eating, are being explored and popularized predominantly through blogs. This study of food bloggers will therefore not only contribute to a better understanding of marketing concepts, but also wider understanding of social change and evolving communications.

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