

Graduate Student Self-branding as Integrated Marketing Communication: The Call for Reflexivity

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Self-branding among graduate students is explored conceptually in this essay as an extension of the notion of personal branding. This concept is tangential to impression management, sense-making, and face negotiation. A central contention pursued in this essay is the call for administrators to reconsider how to respond to the perceived need of student self-branding. Moreover, graduate student self-branding is compared to a respective form of IMC that utilizes the Kellogg School's notion of contact points. The present essay explores theoretical reasons for why the increased individualized practice of graduate student self-branding occurs. Importantly, the essay invites communication administration into the conversation from a graduate student perspective. The increased demand, desire, and expectation for graduate students to self-promote their personal brand like a business is discussed in this essay through the lens of Beck's notions of individualization, risk society, and reflexivity.

Keywords: self-branding, reflexive modernity, integrated marketing communication

“... we must manage the entire range of things from which they take (as) brand information...”

-Lisa Fortini-Campbell
The Kellogg School

Self-branding is a self-validating and confidence-boosting phenomenological construct that executes a micro-level form of integrated marketing communication (IMC). This kind of reflexively modern branding harnesses persuasive potential in the promoting of a singular voice, message, and idea about any given individual. While graduate students who consciously utilize self-branding traditionally fall under some kind of pre-professional sphere, self-branding extends to non-professional social spheres and other kinds of newly formed roles and professions. Administrators might ask the question: how does self-branding *happen*? Graduate students might ask an ongoing question: should I post (self-brand) or not post? Phenomenologically, self-branding begins with a directed intention that projects outward to an object of experience. At the same time, self-branding can also happen unintentionally. When audience members or customers ultimately possess the determination over what kind of brand a person has (Iacobucci & Calder, 2002), self-branding occurs at the unintentional and merely unconscious level, or in other words, a level that is out of the brand-maker's realm of control.

In this essay, I consider how self-branding practice among graduate students can inform communication administration practice. I also contend that contemporary uses of self-branding practice are congruous to what the Kellogg School of Marketing identifies as contact points, touch points, or moments of truth. Contact points are any moments when customers come in contact with a product, whether physically or sensually, digitally, or psychologically. As a theoretical framework, contact points help explain how the

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presentation of self (Goffman, 1956) in digital and physical life is mediated, constituted, managed, contested, and decided. Moreover, self-branding is discussed here as a reflexive speech event supported by Ulrich Beck's notion of risk society and individualization. The essay unfolds through an exploration of the following sections: graduate student self-branding and individualization, self-branding as IMC, the risk of not self-branding, university students and personal branding, and finally, administration and the call to reflexivity. These sub-categories will provide evidence to support how self-branding can be considered as a contemporary and popular form of IMC.

As we come to understand an ever-mediated phenomenon of self-branding as a distinctive form of integrated marketing communication (IMC), a rationale for its popularity reaches clarity. After all, self-branding is something self-manageable, democratic, doable, and attainable. For example, anyone can open a social media account and post professional updates to it. Self-branding is for all. In this current age of what Ulrich Beck argues as reflexive modernity, students take visibly concerted efforts to publish updates, articles, photographs, and other personally branded phenomena to various discursive and digital modalities. Indeed, we live in a world now where individuals can even pay to be branded. The sources of expert advice for such aligned branding efforts can come from consultants, classes, websites, airport books, textbooks, family friends, and other prescriptive agents.

Importantly, professionals in higher education such as academic advisors and counselors harness specific rhetorical power to help students navigate modern pressures to self-brand. At this point in modernity, we can nearly predict the mantras about how to post, update, upload phenomena in a cognizant, mindful, and aligned manner. Students might frequently ask themselves: *to post or not to post?* In any case, student-scholars should pause to ask critical questions about self-branding in this very moment. For instance, why do some individuals now choose to disseminate the self across contact points (Iacobucci & Calder, 2002) such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Academia.edu, Research Gate, personal homepages, and LinkedIn? In addition, is this practice disseminating, presenting, promoting, asserting, competing, expressing, communicating, selling, advertising, branding, or something else?

The question of whether self-branding actually affects employer perceptions or decisions remains unanswered and open for future deliberation. One troubling thought is that self-branding does not make much of an impact upon some employer perceptions. In other words, the practice of branding solely affects the brander's *own* sense of self, confidence and self-efficacy. Self-branding becomes a therapeutic way to manage uncertainty, unpredictability, and precarity in a world of risks and threats. Self-branding could be a waste of time, time that could be spent doing actual work or labor. This possible paradox of self-branding sets up an exigence for analysis. Regardless of whether or not self-branding affects real-world outcomes with employers, the practice seems to harness significant philosophical and rhetorical potential in the fostering of positive self-esteem and sense-making of one's self. Such possibilities of increased positive attitude matter because positive self-image can allow one to do the best work that one is capable of doing in the public sphere.

Graduate Student Self-Branding and Individualization

Self-branding enters the scene as one of the many effects of individualization, a sociological, psychological, and economically laden process concomitant with a risk society. The disembedding from previous institutions in pre-modernity and Industrial modernity

brings forth a kind of re-embedding into a reflexive state, one in which individuals must see themselves as “the centers of action” (Beck, 1992, p. 135). Thus, the need for an ego-centered worldview becomes necessary to survive in a risk society (p. 136). Graduate students need to re-embed themselves in a world where they suddenly stand alone, above, and independent of institutions. This kind of non-reliance on institutions is what jettisons the construction of self-biographies. In other words, habits and patterns constructed in reflexive modernity (Aiken, 2000) propel enlightenment tendencies and a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic that celebrates the individualistic notion of doing something with one’s own hands rather than relying on a community for approval or validation. This very modernity came abruptly, unseen, undesired, and in the wake of a period of dynamic modernization. In a way, the current stage has imposed itself in our lives like a slap in the face after periods of pre-modernity and industrial modernity. We are thrown into an expectation of Being (modernity) in which we must think, react, and respond reflexively. It should be specified that this (condition of) thrownness is something we did not ask for.

Importantly, for Beck, we have some options for response to the unfortunate thrownness of our Being. When left with just ourselves in void of institutions, we become compelled to respond reflexively, which reveals itself in self-promoting and self-branding practices (Aiken, 2000, p. 6). Self-promotion and branding are survival mechanisms in a newly Darwinian kind of thinking. In other words, “Individuals must produce, stage and cobble biographies themselves. They become chosen, reflexive, do-it-yourself biographies” (Beck, 1998, p. 33). This condition is an effect of a kind of withering away of solidarity. In a state where the reliance on institutions atrophies, places without communities and communities without places emerge, pushing individuals to self-branding practice. In public self-branding processes, one also may invoke the threat of attracting envious voyeurs. This kind of voyeurism can arise out of destructive polysemy. Destructive polysemy means that self-brands can be misinterpreted, misunderstood, and judged unfairly. Is it possible to have a democracy without enemies in a reflexive modernity? If self-branding is turned into mere self-promoting, will it end up working counterproductively by forming increased and new enemies and competition?

The aforementioned questions operate on the premise that the digital sphere represents freedom and democracy. There are risks in both choosing to self-brand and choosing not to self-brand. When one chooses to brand, it can create an unintended effect where the individual becomes a point of passage that sometimes leads to unintended and destabilizing consequences. For example, Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2001) argue that when all expectation and labor is turned upon oneself through the process of individualization, one becomes a point of passage for error. In the digital sphere, the onus of making an error or self-defacing speech act when the individual is the primary point of contact and passage can ruin some kind of systematic outcome even as far as destabilizing a particular kind of future for that individual.

Self-Branding as IMC

IMC is defined as a process where companies accelerate returns by aligning communicative objectives with communicative goals (Schultz & Schultz, 2003, p. 3). In this case, aligning goals, objectives, mission, image, and expression all fall under the efforts of IMC. On the micro-level, self-branders attempt to perform this kind of alignment through the representation of self in various modalities. Self-branders in the graduate student world disseminate bits and pieces of hints throughout their day regarding how an academic might

engage in a particular routine or method of teaching or doing scholarship. Although the self-brander may not think much of the activity, it becomes part of the process of branding the moment it is decoded by a public audience. People relate to brands rather than a strict sense of “cold” marketing communication. Brands can be viewed as a natural way that people sort out preferences. Brands can be an unconscious or subconscious sorting mechanism. Behind each brand, however, there is always a form of marketing communication (Schultz & Schultz, 2003, p. xvii) and demand for new forms and types of marketing communication.

One school of thought in IMC practice comes from The Kellogg School. The Kellogg School advocates a mindfulness of how consumers are experiencing contact points with a particular brand or product across time (Iacobucci & Calder, 2002). Contact points, in traditional advertising, come across in forms such as print media, digital media, and face-to-face encounters. In the phenomenon of self-branding, contact points are utilized in a similar fashion. Individuals enter the consciousness of their audience across many social media modalities. Audiences become analogous to the concept of customers when considering self-branding. Despite not intending to encounter the self-brander, audience members may accidentally encounter the digital images in rhetorically powerful ways. For example, audiences observe the everyday informal behavior of self-branded individuals through mediums like Google +, Instagram, and LinkedIn. When audience members encounter a self-branded person visually through various contact points and then physically in real life, an alignment of perception begins whether the self-brander intends for it or not. The alignment of image contact points across boundaries and countries is made possible through a new sense of thinking about expectations from globalization within a world that now has no boundaries (Beck, 2006).

The Risk of Not Self-Branding

After situating the context for why graduate students are compelled to self-brand in universities, the perceived risks associated with not branding may come to fruition. The professional advice to self-brand delivered from administrators can be so prescriptive that some graduate students seem to rebel against this advice simply to see what they can “get away with” online. Sometimes, professional advice to graduate students comes from the *perceived* threat that if individuals do not self-brand, they will encounter *more* (socially constructed and perceived) risks. As the process of globalization creates less distinguishable boundaries for institutions and nation-states, the idea of crossing boundaries as social entrepreneurs or freelancers becomes an emergent, respected, and viable possibility. The entrepreneurial workforce members “know that they must no longer and can no longer simply carry out work given to him by others in fulfillment of their bounden duty...the work always has to be justified in the sense of a socially enlarged use-value” (Beck, 2000, p.151). Hence, freelancers feel the need to advertise themselves as a survival method and way to make sense of their own identity.

The perceived need to self-brand comes from a condition of precarity. Precarity is defined as “an uncertain adjustment to the natural world” (Bourdieu, 1958, p. 7). How can one be sure about the identity of self in a place where community has withered as an effect of the market? One of the ways that people make sense of who they are is by projecting images, words, text, and other rhetorical activity through self-branding practice. Sense making is vital in reflexive modernity to keep motivated and within (the simulation of) control. The practice of self-branding is neither entirely helpful nor destructive. Both benefits and constraints occur during the practice of branding. For example, a study on

personal branding among pharmacy students points to a need for more education on how to reconcile private and public personas through the online branding process (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015). This need was identified due to a mentioned ability for self-branding to be a large asset for young professionals in the twenty-first century. On the other hand, more critical learning studies (Dijck, 2013) have asserted that the recent imposed connectivity to social media sites has limiting, unrealistic, and negative effects due to the promotion of one sole identity.

The freelance and social entrepreneur movement can be explained as a kind of enterprise culture. The discourse of enterprise started with discussion of managerial tendencies in the 1980s and 1990s, which involved the idea of “excellent cultures.” Du Gay (1994) argues for the need to translate the residue of enterprise culture to a contemporary context that still holds on to natural entrepreneurial characteristics. In the present century, however, managerialism, control, bureaucracy, and self-regulation tendencies shift into new demands in the work world. “Enterprising selves,” thus, are cultivated to calculate, control, think, and improve themselves. Enterprising selves are constituted through communication in the digital world even though online selves are merely hyper real representations of an actual person-referent. Audience members can be viewed here as customers who come to know these enterprising selves as authority figures. Authority figures who take the time to initiate branding practice become brands themselves. People as brands can bestow different kinds of habits such as thoughtlessness or virtuousness. This kind of brand expression is something that customers can emotionally attach themselves to. While brands need to be attached to something that is real, hyper real selves gain power and can sometimes interpellate even more authority than “real” selves (Eco, 1986).

University Students and Personal Branding

David Ogilvy (1983) once asked, “If you can’t advertise yourself, what hope do you have in advertising anything else?” For students, there can be risks associated if they neglect branding activities. For example, not announcing one’s accomplishments (publications, service, and/or conferences) in a timely matter or not sharing information about future classes to be taught can lead to a sense of invisibility for graduate students. The higher up the social hierarchy one goes in academia, the more branding inevitably takes place, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Since the ultimate decision of brand image lies within the hands of the audience, we can see how branding in academia can be an unintentional phenomenon. Students vary in their tendency to promote their own brands—that is, some students choose to push their own brand more intentionally than others. Regardless, branding is a necessary kind of evil that is here to stay. Self-branding is not leaving our modern consciousness any time soon, so we must come to terms with how to manage this form of branding practice.

Self-branding is a both/and concept in the sense that it is both vulgar and helpful. In Holmberg and Strannegard’s (2015) study on the practice of branding in Swedish schools, brands are considered props and scripts that allow people first to create their identities and then to shape their lives. Brands constructed by academics must be managed through a variety of modalities. Media technologies have come a long way since faculty members used to have only their photo and biography listed on university departmental web pages. Even before that, a pre-internet era for faculty entailed relying on forms of orality for making one’s status in academia known. In other words, the pre-internet form of self-branding was largely based on primal scenes of communication (Angus, 2000), which were constituted by

face-to-face encounters. Through departmental web pages, universities were one of the first institutions to display, digitally and publicly, photographic information in a way that aligns with self-branding. In other words, departmental profile pages were a kind of noetic in a particular historical moment. They existed as one of the only means of advertising or presenting information about one's self. Today, we can consider how the original visual referent (faculty home pages) has been abstracted to contemporary modalities like Facebook or LinkedIn that display a similar, yet different, visual yearbook of headshots and biographical information.

While early forms of faculty and departmental web pages may have looked pithy and unglamorous, they were early forms of people-as-brands. According to Aaker (1996), brands have personalities and can be “humorous, serious, competent, trustworthy, or even active” (p.83). These human qualities alone can solidify the relationship between the consumer and the brand. People in this age of postmodernity respond soundly to the concept and image of human expressiveness. Expressiveness creeps its way into and across various modalities, showing characteristics and attributes in discursive ways, contributing to a strong personal branding. A few everyday examples include the practice of academics taking photographs of hints or routines that allude to their daily writing routines, books obtained, conference events, and even outings with students.

Today, it would not be outside the status quo to encounter students who upload selfies to their social media accounts to showcase just another day in their awesome and fun class culture. In other words, personal phenomena relating to one's academic job now enter the public sphere through media such as Instagram and Facebook. The private and personal choices within a student's classroom are now readily and directly understood as involving real public implications. Such formerly private sphere, journal-like outlets have been reflexively reconstructed as a hyper-public outlet of professional expressiveness.

The many expressive ways in which individuals now use these media represent a new individualized status quo. When expressing such personal information about student or faculty life on social media, consideration for ethics and accountability of such actions now indubitably changes. For instance, even posting something as commonplace as internet memes about academic life should be examined for their ethical implications, since internet memes signify real feelings and thoughts about some phenomenon. The choice to post internet memes about graduate student life could imply a lack of shame since memes are often veiled in humorous codes. Such humorous codes can be perceived as productive and helpful. However, this possible lack of shame could also be a revealing factor of one's code of communication ethics, whether realized or not. As Johannsen, Valde, and Wedbee (2007) argue, the role of shame is central to one's communication ethics and a powerful emotion for moral behavior (p. 243). This kind of contemporary online expression is increasingly viewed as normal. What was once intended for private expression has now been normalized into a public performative presentation of self. This is especially the case for students. Ulrich Beck argues that through the process of individualization, we are condemned to self-express whether or not we have the guidance or tools to do so. He would further argue that this kind of turning on the self with little help from others sets us up, ultimately, to fail. In other words, people sometimes post, promote, share, like, create, and express without really knowing what they are doing. Ultimately, however, some people believe that this kind of publicly expressive behavior simply feels good, giving in to emotive justification.

Moreover, graduate students may also engage in a process of co-branding. The value of a personal brand can increase when graduate students are presented with others of certain capital or social statuses. Co-branding (Blackett, 1999) occurs as a phenomenon when pre-

meditated photographs are taken strategically with others who could positively influence one's brand. For example, photos might be taken with colleagues, romantic partners, professors, and even complete strangers such as homeless people. Another example and positive way that co-branding occurs among graduate students in academia is through co-authoring. It is important to note, here, that co-branding is not a negative phenomenon. It is a both/and phenomenon. Co-branding can be necessary to exist and thrive in academia. Another way that graduate students co-brand is by sharing another colleague's research publicly on social media to highlight how fascinating it is.

The intentional act of public sharing binds two names together in a meaningful, positive, and constructive way. I will carefully say, however, that when everything is fascinating, co-branding in academia can potentially set one up for burnout. Simply put, when all research and studies are fascinating, they become both everything and nothing. When everything is fascinating, there is no delineation between particular research interests or schools of thought. As an example, burnout through co-branding can happen to graduate students when they mimic or take on their advisor's and collaborator's research interests instead of choosing their own. This form of burnout can overlap into the well-known cul-de-sac of graduate students choosing writing and research motifs that are too broad rather than selecting "one piece of the pie" for research purposes. Therefore, it is worthwhile for graduate student academics to push for intentional particularity in (the publicizing of) their interests and co-branding practices. What I am respectfully advocating is for graduate students to recognize limits in their research interests. More is really not better, sometimes, and student academics should be as specific as possible in order to avoid burnout.

Furthermore, co-branding and co-authoring can be a sub-political gesture used to mitigate some kind of more dominant political institution. In Beck's (1997) *The Reinvention of Politics*, we find an opening for sub-political activity due to the disembedding of traditional institutions. Beck calls this second modernity a political modernity, due to the reconstruction of decision-making or politics. While academics do not necessarily disembed from traditional institutions, they do find creative, new, and reflexive ways to self-politic, brand, and advertise themselves as a survival mechanism in a world that feels rife with globalized risks. Reflexive ways of branding via social media outlets present various constructive sub-political opportunities for academics to engage digitally in impression management and face negotiation.

Administration and the Call to Reflexivity

Some administrators in the roles of faculty members already recognize the importance of self-branding for graduate students and incorporate the practice into curricula. Warren and Cavanaugh (2016) use infographic résumés to engage awareness of branding through a visual medium. Similarly, Hill and Ferris-Costa (2016) advocate for using personal branding assignments in order for students to practice their "brands". Such pedagogical gestures take on a tone that is noticeably less profit-centric than some self-branding instruction for corporate level workshops. For instance, Vallas and Cummins (2015) discuss how much self-branding curricula in firms operates on the premise that not enough jobs exist for everyone. This kind of lump-sum fallacy of economic activity can be common rationalization and rhetorical motivation behind self-branding practices. In other corporate instructional materials such as ones used for the Price Waterhouse and Coopers firm, self-branding curricula advocate direct marketing principles so that individuals can simply be more profitable (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

Self-branding instruction, while currently practiced in some curricula by communication administrators, could better incorporate in-between jobs and evolving forms of work. The boundaries between what is considered work, job, and career and how students choose or simply accept such professional options are changing. A study by Stephanie Ross (2017) shows that temporary jobs grew by 2.7 per cent since 2016. Ross's study further discusses how the notion of offering students secure long-term jobs, a trend that stretched four decades after the Second World War, has tapered significantly. Such a situation presents several questions for administrators and those in other leadership positions. In current cultural conditions laden with precarity, ambiguity, and uncertainty about one's occupational future, how can communication administrators help students communicate what it is that they do? How can administrators help students envision and craft their profession in a precarious world? Is the impetus to self-brand a mere perception of risk rather than a necessity? Such questions could help communication administrators re-examine how they frame advice to the current generation of students pursuing academic careers.

Furthermore, administrators could help explain how newly formed anxieties in a risk society propel the perceived exigence for self-promotion behaviors. Importantly, whether the exigence is perceived or realistic, the phenomenon of how we talk about and do self-branding should not be left unexamined. Self-branding becomes a natural resolution to managing uncertainty and making sense out of one's self and identity. A risk society, as defined by Beck (1992), shapes the current professional place as one that entertains the everyday phenomenon of waking up to managing myriad micro-level (personal), meso-level (institutional) and macro-level (global) risks. On the macro level, the degree of risk felt in one country can transcend to other nation-states like a domino effect on the macro level. Beck (1999) argues that this is the effect of a cosmopolitan society that starts to feel similar challenges across borders. For Beck (1999), cosmopolitanism is an outlook that analyzes the process of overcoming boundaries that trigger the neo-national reflex to re-erect walls and boundaries (p. 18). Fear of perceived threats and other fears may occur either personally, locally, or globally, translating into a psychological state called a global risk society.

Starting with administration, the advice for students to have a reflexive mindset could help students feel less pressure to perform or act in branded ways in *only* high-stakes situations. The call to a reflexive approach by administration means first acknowledging that students are constantly branding themselves or "in branding" whether they know it or not. For example, working off the clock or simply being oneself becomes reflexively intertwined with one's brand. There is no "on and off" switch with a brand, with brand becoming a condition of everydayness. Adopting this understanding means that one's brand becomes an unconscious and automatically erupting reflex, coming into play when one is most unprepared and in discursive spaces. This way of thinking, a reflexive call to self-branding, considers the overall lifestyle and character of the student, extending far beyond one's personal webpage online or elevator pitch at a conference. Reflexive branding moves away from the traditional thought of only branding in compartmentalized spaces like social media, classes, and conferences. This rather holistic notion of being reflexive about at student's own brand could come closer to a more balanced and healthy attitude in response to today's historical pressures.

Reflexivity as a characteristic of self-branding can also be practiced in various discursive digital media. The question becomes how administrators can help students navigate the many self-branding websites available. Websites that involve number counts, hits, or website traffic now seem to function as a marketing measure. Countless personal

websites embody the do-it-yourself ethic, equipped with analytics and tracking information. In effect, student-scholars are able to track the rhetorical activity of their own brands online.

Website statistics are not new in this contemporary moment. For example, Van Neunen's (2015) study on couples' travel blog websites, for example, revealed celebratory, epideictic announcements about travel and nomadic lifestyle under the guise of a modest and authentic living of one's life. Specifically, the "About Me" page displays metrics on website traffic and reader and comment count. Such statistics and other numeric information on personal websites make seemingly honest, open, and modest speech acts into marketized brands. This phenomenon is evident in self-branding websites such as Academia.edu or ResearchGate, places where academics are emailed with analytics and numbers regarding how many people visit and read their web pages.

Importantly, student-scholars can choose to act reflexively by taking it upon themselves to set up select, appropriate web pages and mindfully track information about their own brand. The intentions behind these practices seem to be ways to seek positive approval of one's face and impression. Those interested in traffic numbers on websites care, to some degree, about negotiating and presenting face in the public sphere in the theoretical sense of face and impression-making (Goffman, 1956, Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2003). Face is constructed and learned at early stages of one's socialization but continues to express itself over time and now through different technological media, such as websites for academics (e.g., Academia.edu).

Impression management is at play when student academics care enough to update such websites regularly. However, it can become nearly impossible to determine how one is received or perceived. In other words, how can we ever really know what other people think of us? In a reflexive approach, we must always be careful about *over* self-presentation. Caution should be exercised if students are advised by administration to see themselves as brands. If one is a brand, then (online and in real life) audience members might start to be viewed as customers. As Fortini-Cambell points out (cited in Iacobucci & Calder, 2003), regardless of how diligently marketers and advertisers attempt to create and control brand image and expression, they ultimately end up being determined by customers. The possibility of polysemy could, in turn, largely serve as counterproductive to the integrated efforts of the self-brander. In a potentially democratic digital sphere, the question of whether or not self-branding actually creates more or fewer customer-like enemies should be explored in a future essay.

Implications and Conclusion

This essay demonstrates how the popular practice of graduate student self-branding can be re-considered by communication administrators as both a form of IMC in light of modern pressures as well as reflexive approach. IMC is argued as a theoretical reality within this contemporary phenomenon since self-branding utilizes intentionally or unintentionally aligned contact points. Moreover, this kind of practice of focusing on the self also theoretically derives from communication goals inherent in impression management and face negotiation theory. Through Beck's lens of individualization, irony, and the call to a reflexive approach, the justification behind self-branding might allude to a merely perceived exigence rather than fully realized one. Students, with the help of campus advisors, counselors, and administrators, must respond in some kind of way to the myriad risks, both perceived and real, that suddenly and forcibly confront their livelihood, families, and sense of self-efficacy. The call to a reflexive response incorporates, first, a component of reflection

upon the self and, second, fundamental questions about who the self even is. Once the self is called into question, monologically negotiated, and examined reflectively, a person is then able to disseminate images of the self for public consumption and survival. One indeed survives an academic horizon of being through the reflexive activity of self-branding.

Reflexivity and reflection go hand in hand during the contemporary practice of self-branding, eventually leading to projecting one's brand expression through digital modalities. After all, brand expression cannot operate or make sense to a public audience or customer base without a concrete idea of an initial brand image. This assumes that brand image and brand expression are different constructs. The conditions of reflexive modernity require modern individuals to reflect and take matters into their own hands. This contemporary practice is a reflexive speech act deriving from individualization, pushing us to make sense of the self in a post-professional world through forced constructions of our own biographies.

As this essay points out, graduate students training to become professionals can choose to act in more reflexive ways if guided by sympathetic and reflexive administrators. A reflexive approach could be helpful in today's institutional environments that are sometimes propagated by hierarchy, meritocracy, and precarity. Individualization propels the very skepticism associated with dependency on traditional institutions for a stable economic future, thus motivating such a noticeable increase in self-promoting acts. This Darwinistic survival mechanism serves both to benefit and to inhibit us. Psychologically, the practice helps us gain order, control, sense, and confidence during a precarious time. At the same time, self-branding can be merely therapeutic or cosmetic in asserting hyper real or simulated ideals about the self, ideals that we create to be increasingly difficult to live up to in real life. As Beck would argue, competing in a reflexive modernity means that we already know that we will fail.

Connecting Ulrich Beck to self-branding, this essay has shown the risk of ultimately failing when setting ourselves up with such high digital ideals. Self-branding, as an expressive and therapeutic practice, sets one up for failure or a confrontation with reality in the existential world beyond screens. It can set graduate students up for violated expectations. When we publish something, we create the parallel and subsequent expectation to then live up to the publicly and digitally claimed semantic imprint. This can create a new problem, bringing us briefly to a new question. Can we live up to our own self-constructed biographies? The exigence is clear especially considering how more graduate students drop out or change careers to pursue drastically different endeavors (Lanza-Kaduce & Webb, 1992).

Future research should be pursued in the specific content area of graduate student social media self-branding but could also extend beyond academe. Each specific profession comes with unique cultural expectations that affect digital self-branding. This kind of research could utilize textual or semiotic analyses that track the attempted alignment of one person through various web sites and ultimately in real life. IMC practitioners could benefit from understanding the information, conclusions, and implications yielded from rhetorical and philosophical textual analyses. After all, individuals now serve as individual enterprises or businesses in a post-professional world. Communication administrators could intentionally re-examine the intersectionality of modern pressures faced by students in order to advise more empathetically and professionally in this historical moment. Specifically, faculty and advisors could add content about methods and implications of self-branding to current public relations and IMC curricula. The pressures extend across the economic, personal, political, and psychological. Turning the phenomenological focus on how

administrators can make the choice to know today's graduate student perspectives and pressures better can no doubt strengthen their advice for graduate student self-branding.

Returning to Beck's (1992) notion of risk society, institutions are made up of not only individuals, but self-branded individuals. Understanding the crucial role that administration plays in shaping a climate of health for graduate students as well as the intricacy of branding processes from a philosophical and rhetorical point of view and could lead to increased productivity for that particular institution. Finally, this essay has discussed how self-branding reveals both positive and negative effects in a reflexive modernity, leading graduate students back to the original question: to self-brand or not to self-brand?

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