Be Our Brand!: Emotional Labor and Social Media Branding Positions

Hannah R. Gnegy, West Virginia University, USA

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The affordances and relative low costs to maintain a social network account often attract retailers to these sites, as a new form of marketing and promotion (Fournier & Avery, 2011). While retailers are enthusiastic over the affordances of social network sites, they must be cautious to enter these sites with improper branding strategies. Individuals often label retailers as being unauthentic and intrusive on these sites, as they perceive their entrance as being another sales strategy (Fournier & Avery, 2011). However, if retailers are able to gain access to these communities, through providing authentic and honest content, they are able to use these platforms as a new way to brand their product or service (Rohm, Kaltcheva, & Milne, 2013).

When communicating with consumers on these sites, the retailer persona should be sensitive to customer needs and empathize with them, acting as a friend, not a corporate entity (Qualman, 2013). Achieving this level of connection, though, can be a daunting task. Brands are now seeking out employees to "become the brand" on a social network site, creating a brand identity that agrees with company standards yet still communicating with consumers on a personal level that could not be achieved by computer-generated messages (Sivertzen, Nilsen, & Olafsen, 2013). Communication evolves in both a social and emotional context, as the retailer persona is now viewed as an "individual" on these sites. The burdens of every consumer, all of their needs, desires, complaints, and praises fall squarely on the shoulders of social network branding employees. This can take a substantial emotional toll on the employee.

When emotions are applied to a work environment it is termed emotional labor (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Hochschild (1979) proposed that when emotions were considered as part of the labor unit, they might be bought and sold as power. This buying and selling of emotions makes them a unique commodity, as workers may have their inner values swayed by power of monetary funds. Employees feel they must adhere to a specific code of conduct in the workplace, even in a digital format, regardless of if it conflicts with their personal values, if they wish to continue receiving compensation for their work (Grandey, 2000).

Employees tasked with managing brands' social network presence do not escape these emotional pressures, as the brand asks the employee to think as they would and respond as an individual, however, one that is operating solely on behalf of the brand (Qualman, 2013). There is a potential that the values held by the employee may not match those of the brand, however, they must respond with the emotions and values upheld by the company, as they are being paid to do so. Additionally, as the employee becomes the brand on these sites, there is a chance that the perception of reality becomes skewed (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). The employee may begin to embody emotions of the brand in their personal lives, displacing personal values for those of the brand beyond the workplace. As Qualman (2013) suggests, "The world

has shifted, and whether we like it or not, we are always representing who we are and whether we are on the clock" (p. 181).

Social media branding is considered an entry-level position at most companies, as brands seek out young individuals that can "manage" the large volume of posts on social media accounts (Sivertzen et al., 2013). The fashion design and merchandising industry is no different. Many companies have built their brand around social media, using the platforms to build a brand identity alongside the consumer (Rudawsky, 2012). However, there has been little discussion about how the pressure of "being the brand" on social media affects employees desire to remain in the industry. As students seek out these entry-level careers in the fashion industry, it is important that they understand the pressures associated with this type of positions. As faculty, discussion should occur regarding the expectations of these positions and how faculty members might prepare students for a job in this context. As the prevalence of social media use continues to grow in the fashion industry, it is essential that faculty understand how these positions function, to better prepare students to enter this roll. An understanding regarding social media branding practices should begin with the faculty members, so they may communicate these expectations to students, preparing them for a career in this position.

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