See and be seen:
How visibility affects the personal branding of top managers

Scheidt, Stefan (University of Twente, The Netherlands)
Loohuis, Raymond (University of Twente, The Netherlands)
Henseler, Jörg (University of Twente, The Netherlands)

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Purpose of Paper

Society assigns great value to the actions and opinions of individual top managers in terms of their influence on economy and society and the impact they have, for better or worse, in their fields of work. Indeed, top managers are increasingly viewed in terms of personal brands that help sustain (or destroy) the value assigned to them. However, while celebrities as a specific category of personal brands have won broad scholarly attention (Furedi, 2010; Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016; Milner, 2010), we know remarkably little about how exactly top managers develop their personal brands over time.

The notion of personal brands has increasingly attracted the attention of both practitioners (Peters, 1999; Andrusia and Haskins, 2000; Roffer, 2002; Montoya, 2004; Rampersad, 2015) and scholars (Carlson and Donavan, 2013; Cocker et al., 2015; Delisle and Parmentier, 2016; Fillis, 2015; Moulard et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2014; Shepherd, 2005). A personal brand is defined as a set of associations that audiences within and beyond a given field of practice attribute to individuals engaged in that field (Parmentier et al., 2013). Personal branding represents the logical extension of more conventional forms of branding, such as product brands, service brands, corporate brands, or retail brands (Gehl, 2011; Hearn, 2008; Kotler and Levy, 1969; Lair et al., 2005; Philbrick and Cleveland, 2015). As such, there is some overlap in the development of a personal brand with traditional branding practices (Close et al., 2011; Parmentier and Fischer, 2012; Ternès et al., 2014).

So far, the research interested in personal branding of managers has largely focused on the specific traits and attributes that define a personal brand (Ahn, 2014; Fetscherin, 2015; Graham et al., 2010; Hsu et al., 2013; Scheidt et al., 2018). In general, visibility is considered a key variable in the development of personal brand (Chen, 2013; Clark, 2011; Gander, 2014;

Philbrick and Cleveland 2015; Preece and Kerrigan, 2015; Shepherd, 2005), caused by the advent of mass communication (Kotler and Levy, 1969), cable television (Lair et al., 2005), Web 2.0 and social media (Fillis, 2015; Gehl, 2011). In a society where fame and attention have significant cultural value, media coverage has mutated into a key currency that can create or destroy personal brands (Bendisch et al., 2013; Hearn, 2008). The creation of visibility can be divided in two categories: First, there is on-field visibility, meaning that visibility emerges in the original field of practice and profession of the branded individual. Alongside it, there is off-field visibility, created outside of the professional field, in the sense of building a mainstream media persona (Kapferer, 2015; Parmentier and Fischer, 2012). This paper takes up this perspective and examines empirically how on and off-field visibility is balanced and managed by top managers in the pursuit of developing a personal brand across the various stages of their career. In doing so, this study adopts a process perspective (Langley et al., 2013), aimed at uncovering emerging patterns of action over time of, in this case, six top managers who developed strong personal brands. The research question guiding our efforts was: "How do top managers manage their visibility on and off-field in their pursuit of developing a personal brand over time?"

Methodology/Approach

Our empirical approach can be characterized as exploratory in nature (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Gerring, 2007; Hartley, 2004; Kohlbacher, 2005). For our interest in the top managers' lived experience of creating their personal brands, we are drawing inspiration from process research literature (Berends and Lammers, 2010; Gehman et al., 2013; Langley et al., 2013; Van Oorschot et al., 2013), a longitudinal perspective in personal branding (Lindridge and Eagar, 2015; Preece and Kerrigan, 2015), and the multi-stakeholder approach (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2013; Roper and Davies 2007; Svensson and Wood, 2008) as a way of generating new theoretical and practical insights.

We draw on a multiple case study approach (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) by studying the personal branding processes of six top managers with different backgrounds and genders. The fieldwork consists of three research activities, partly conducted in parallel. Archival data from different public and private sources was gathered to tease out a longitudinal dimension (Fillis, 2004; Fillis, 2011; Goulding et al., 2004; Pettigrew, 1990; Preece and Kerrigan, 2015). Between May 2018 and October 2018, individual semi-structured

interviews were conducted with these six selected top managers. Moreover, twelve of their stakeholders, identified by using snowball sampling during the top managers' interviews, are scheduled to be interviewed by January 2019.

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In analysing each case, we used the narrative strategy (Langley, 1999; Poole et al., 2000; Van de Ven and Poole, 2005) to enable the managers to tell their own individual stories of personal branding, deeply rooted in their real-life activities. Next to this, we created a visual map based on the stories produced by each manager. In doing so, we first classified the data in terms of the chronology of specific life events and actions related to the management of visibility on and off-field. Visualizing the data was helpful in uncovering converging and diverging patterns across the six cases. We went to several iterations between the raw data from the interviews and documents, the narratives created, and the visual maps produced in our effort to arrive at robust findings (Creswell 2007; Eisenhardt 1989; Goulding 2005; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Findings

The findings of this study indicate the presence of significant visibility activities and a sequence of events that mirrors the development of visibility during the narrative histories of the sample group. More specifically, we identified the following three patterns across the six cases of top managers in experiencing and managing visibility in the development of their personal brands.

First, we found that all of the six top managers investigated here distinguished between the successive phases of their careers regarding their visibility. While some top managers started with initial step towards visibility already as 'students' because they belong, for example, to "*forward thinkers at the philosophy department of the university (...) a type of thinking elite at the university*", all of themed pass the 'beginner' stage as the earliest step. Later stages as 'professional', 'manager', and, finally, 'top manager' completed this journey. Visibility at the 'top manager' stage is conceived in clear terms by the entire sample group, as one top manager stated: "*I am visible at 50 press conferences around the world. I have articles written about me. People ask me how I see the world*".

Second, awareness about the importance of managing visibility developed increasingly along the successive phases. It was low, if not non-existent, at 'beginner' and 'professional' stage, as a female top manager remembers: "*and then you had these press interviews and the like. I never tried to establish myself and get this exposure; it was always my supervisors or directors pushing me into the limelight. (...) So this all happened rather passively for me"*. Increasing awareness for the need to manage their visibility begins with the 'manager' stage and reaches a very conscious level of selection at 'top manager' stage: *"I usually work with our press officer, and we think very carefully about it (...) I'll take a look at the journalists, have pre-interview meetings, listen to what they want, see what kind of people they are (...) so I still have the chance to say: Maybe this isn't for me.*"

Third, on-field and off-field visibility appear differently depending on different stages of the career. On-field visibility is an exclusive element at all stages up to the point of 'manager'. "*You really had to get active, be there at events, give talks, write papers. Use the internet in the 1980s – there was no internet. It was hard work, but it gave you a certain visibility"*, as one top manager states about her visibility as a 'professional'. A top manager from the banking industry remembers: "*I used to give lots of interviews with the financial press on transaction structures"* as 'manager'. By contrast, 'top managers' have to consider off-field visibility alongside their on-field visibility, which results in "*greater publicity impact"*. Off-field visibility is here experienced positively – "*People now invite me to talks. I was in New York at the United Nations only two weeks ago"* – as well as negatively from the point of view of a female top manager: "*and suddenly you are featured in the 'Bunte' [a German celebrity magazine]. I had lots of people calling. That's absolutely not my thing (...) I don't care about being in the 'Bunte' and having people read about my life at the hairdresser."* In addition, the objects of their on-field activities can also exceed pure professionalism and include more general management topics as well, particularly in the transition from 'professional' to 'manager' stage.

Theoretical Implications

From the process study, a conceptual ladder can be proposed that resembles the various stages of building a top manager's brand. The conceptual ladder highlights the conscious and sequential visibility-forming process when we consider visibility as a key element in the personal branding process of top managers over time (figure 1). We show how the development

of visibility matters in developing a personal brand and that this largely depends on the level of professionalism. We also show that, over time, top managers become more aware of the importance of visibility in general as well as the differences between on-field and off-field visibility as they begin to make more conscious choices. Our study thus represents an empirical answer to the call for longevity to be considered in personal branding processes (Preece and Kerrigan, 2015) and extends given visibility ideas into this area (Parmentier and Fischer, 2012).

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Practical Implications

Young professionals as well as people making their career journey should use this knowledge as a tool to reflect on their personal branding activities and to guide themselves with a view to their visibility in particular.

Top managers and marketing and HR managers are recommended to manage the top manager brand very carefully in terms of its visibility in order to balance the in-field and off-field visibility of the top manager. In this sense, they should consciously go through the different stages of the visibility ladder to plan and execute necessary human brand visibility activities early enough.

This study supports marketers in companies as well as coaches and consultants in understanding the construct of top managers' human brands, especially in their emergence, development, and maintenance in order to invest efficiently into and make better use of this contemporary phenomenon.

Originality/Value

Personal branding has attracted the attention of marketing practitioners, and top managers are increasingly visible in the media, but little attention has yet been given to them in academia. This research is, to our knowledge, one of the few attempts at analysing the phenomenon of personal branding of top managers, and it is unique in nature as, thus far, top managers' human brands have not been analysed empirically in their emergence or with a specific focus on their visibility. Our study thus sheds further light on personal branding and represents a useful contribution to how top managers' personal brands can be built for both

scholars as well as practitioners. In addition, these findings constitute a starting point for further studies into the key element of visibility in personal branding.

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TABLES & FIGURES

(in order of application in the manuscript)

Table 1: The top manager sample group

Personal Information					Company Information		
Name	**Age**	**Gender**	**Current function**	**Nationality**	**Industry**	**No. of employees (2017)**	**Financials in 2017 (€)**
TM1 (pilot)	54	Female	CEO	German	Real estate/ Building industry	2,176	9.3 bn fixed assets; 842 m construction volume
TM2	60	Male	SVP Corporate Communications, Corporate Marketing, Public Affairs	Austrian	Utilities	21,352	21.97 bn turnover; 2.11 bn adjusted EBITDA
TM3	50	Female	CEO	German	Banking	693	2.9 bn total assets
TM4	51	Male	Global Portfolio Director	German	Trade fairs & events	932	443 m turnover
TM5	42	Male	Global Medical Director	Swiss	Pharma	38,295	16.9 bn turnover

TM6	39	Male	Managing Director	Germany	Consulting	770	105 m turnover
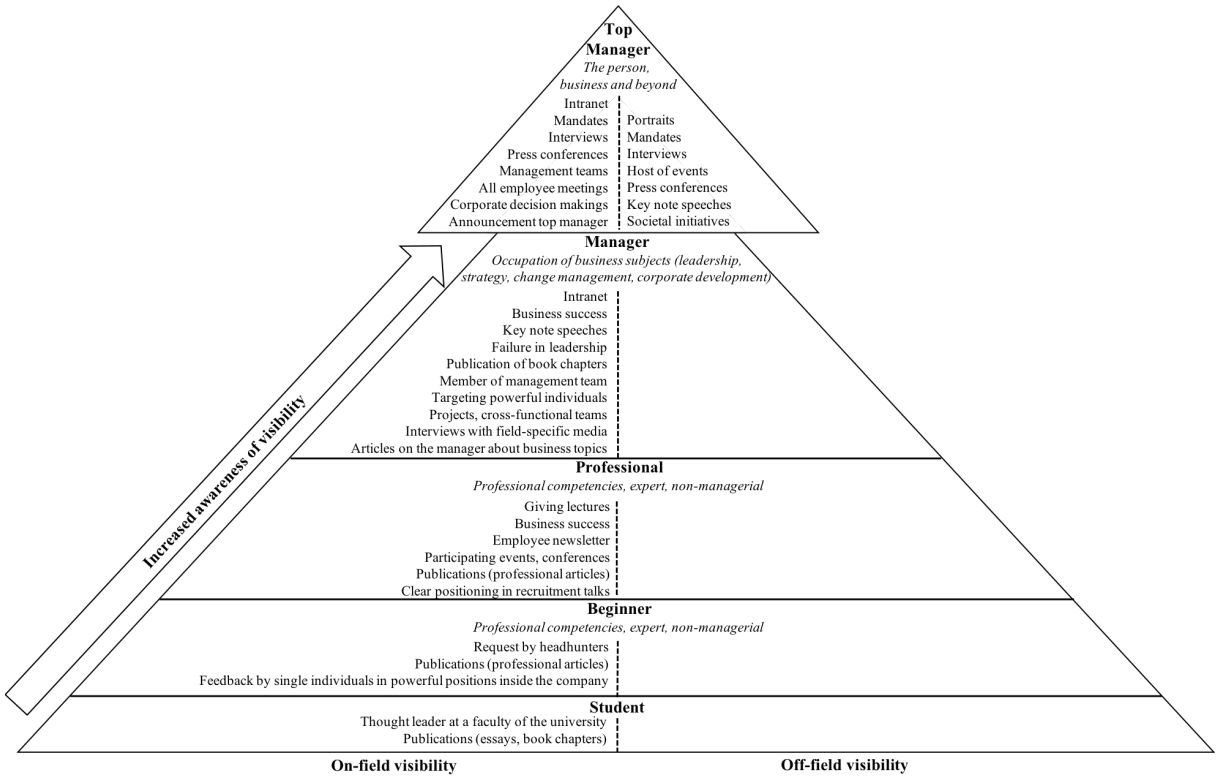
Figure 1: Visibility ladder of top managers' personal branding process over time