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Article

The Psychological Motivations Behind Entrepreneurial Branding and Instagram Engagement

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Abstract

Entrepreneurial branding on Instagram has emerged as a strategic practice through which entrepreneurs construct, communicate, and reinforce their professional identities while engaging directly with audiences. This study examines the psychological motivations that drive entrepreneurs to invest in personal branding activities on Instagram and the mechanisms through which these motivations shape user engagement. Drawing on theories of self-presentation, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and social identity, the paper explores how needs for autonomy, competence, recognition, and social belonging influence branding behaviors such as content curation, storytelling, authenticity signaling, and interaction patterns. The analysis further considers how psychological drivers affect engagement outcomes, including likes, comments, shares, and follower loyalty, by shaping perceived credibility and emotional connection. By synthesizing insights from entrepreneurship research, psychology, and digital marketing, the study provides a conceptual understanding of why entrepreneurs engage intensively with Instagram branding and how psychological motivations translate into sustained audience engagement. The findings offer implications for entrepreneurs seeking to align branding strategies with authentic psychological drivers, as well as for scholars examining the human factors underlying digital entrepreneurial activity.

Keywords: entrepreneurial branding; Instagram engagement; psychological motivation; self-presentation; social identity; digital entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Motivation

The increasing integration of social media into entrepreneurial activity has fundamentally reshaped how entrepreneurs build, communicate, and sustain their brands. Unlike traditional branding models that emphasize organizational identity, entrepreneurial branding places the individual entrepreneur at the center of brand meaning. Instagram, as a visually driven and interaction-oriented platform, has become a particularly influential space where entrepreneurs present professional identities, narrate personal journeys, and cultivate relationships with audiences. Through images, short videos, and interactive features, Instagram enables entrepreneurs to blend personal expression with commercial communication in ways that were not previously possible. Entrepreneurial branding on Instagram extends beyond promotional objectives. Many entrepreneurs actively engage in content creation, storytelling, and audience interaction as a means of expressing values, gaining social recognition, and establishing legitimacy within competitive markets. These activities are closely tied to psychological motivations, including the desire for autonomy, self-expression, social belonging, and validation. The visual and narrative affordances of Instagram amplify these motivations by providing immediate feedback and public visibility, reinforcing branding behaviors through emotional and social rewards. As digital environments become increasingly saturated, understanding why entrepreneurs invest sustained effort in Instagram branding requires attention to the psychological processes that underlie these practices. Branding decisions are not only strategic responses to market demands but also reflections of internal

motivations and identity-related needs. Examining these motivations offers deeper insight into how entrepreneurial brands emerge, evolve, and maintain engagement over time.

1.2. Research Problem and Objectives

Despite growing scholarly interest in social media marketing and digital entrepreneurship, existing research has largely focused on performance indicators such as follower growth, engagement metrics, and sales outcomes. While these measures provide valuable insights, they offer a limited explanation of the underlying psychological drivers that motivate entrepreneurs to engage in branding activities on Instagram. As a result, the internal processes shaping branding behavior and engagement strategies remain insufficiently explored. The central research problem addressed in this article is the lack of theoretical integration between psychological motivation and entrepreneurial branding on Instagram. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following question: What psychological motivations drive entrepreneurs to engage in branding activities on Instagram, and how do these motivations influence audience engagement?

To address this problem, the objectives of the study are:

- To examine the psychological motivations underlying entrepreneurial branding on Instagram.
- To analyze how these motivations shape branding behaviors such as self-presentation, storytelling, and interaction.
- To explore the relationship between entrepreneurial identity expression and engagement outcomes on Instagram.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the literature on entrepreneurship, psychology, and digital branding by shifting the analytical focus from observable engagement outcomes to the motivational foundations of entrepreneurial branding. By integrating psychological theories of motivation, self-presentation, and identity with social media branding research, the article offers a more holistic understanding of entrepreneurial behavior in digital environments. From a practical perspective, the findings provide entrepreneurs with insights into how psychologically grounded branding strategies can foster authentic engagement and long-term audience relationships. Rather than relying solely on algorithm-driven tactics, entrepreneurs can benefit from aligning branding practices with intrinsic motivations and personal values. In doing so, Instagram branding becomes not only a marketing tool but also a sustainable and meaningful extension of entrepreneurial identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Psychological Foundations of Entrepreneurial Branding

Entrepreneurial branding is increasingly understood as a psychologically driven process in which entrepreneurs construct and communicate meaning through their personal identities. Unlike corporate brands that rely on organizational narratives, entrepreneurial brands are shaped by the founder's values, experiences, and self-concept. Psychological perspectives suggest that branding in this context functions as a form of identity expression, allowing entrepreneurs to externalize internal beliefs and aspirations in a public digital space. Through repeated acts of self-disclosure and symbolic representation, entrepreneurs transform personal identity into a recognizable brand. Identity theory highlights that individuals actively manage how they are perceived by others, particularly in environments where visibility and evaluation are constant. For entrepreneurs, Instagram provides a stage on which identity is continuously performed and refined. Branding behaviors such as visual storytelling, tone of communication, and aesthetic consistency are not only strategic choices but also reflections of psychological needs for coherence and self-verification. When entrepreneurial branding aligns with self-concept, it strengthens perceived authenticity and reinforces emotional investment in the branding process.

2.2. Motivation and Self-Presentation on Social Media

Psychological motivation plays a central role in explaining why entrepreneurs engage persistently in Instagram branding. Motivation theory distinguishes between intrinsic motivations, such as enjoyment, creativity, and personal fulfillment, and extrinsic motivations, including financial gain, social approval, and professional recognition. Instagram simultaneously satisfies both forms by enabling creative expression while offering measurable social feedback through likes, comments, and follower counts. Self-presentation theory further explains how entrepreneurs curate content to influence audience perceptions. Entrepreneurs often balance idealized portrayals of success with relatable narratives of struggle and growth. This strategic self-presentation allows them to appear competent and aspirational while maintaining approachability. The platform's interactive features intensify this process, as audience responses function as psychological reinforcements that validate or challenge self-presentation efforts. Over time, this feedback loop shapes branding behaviors and content strategies, linking motivation directly to engagement patterns.

2.3. Instagram as a Platform for Entrepreneurial Identity Construction

Instagram's visual orientation and narrative affordances make it particularly conducive to entrepreneurial identity construction. The platform encourages storytelling through images, short videos, captions, and sequential content formats such as Stories and Reels. These features enable entrepreneurs to present coherent narratives that integrate professional milestones, personal experiences, and brand values. As a result, entrepreneurial identity on Instagram is not static but continuously negotiated through interaction with audiences. The platform also facilitates relational branding by enabling direct communication between entrepreneurs and followers. Comment sections, direct messages, and interactive tools allow entrepreneurs to engage in dialogue rather than one-way communication. This interaction fosters a sense of intimacy and community, reinforcing psychological bonds between entrepreneurs and their audiences. Such relational dynamics distinguish Instagram branding from traditional marketing channels and underscore its psychological significance in entrepreneurial practice.

2.4. Gaps in Existing Research

Although prior research has acknowledged Instagram's importance for entrepreneurship and personal branding, much of the existing literature remains focused on surface-level outcomes such as engagement metrics and commercial performance. These approaches often overlook the psychological motivations that drive entrepreneurs to invest emotional labor and identity resources into branding activities. Additionally, studies frequently treat branding behaviors as strategic responses to algorithms rather than as expressions of internal psychological processes. There is a notable lack of integrative frameworks that connect motivation, identity, and engagement within entrepreneurial branding contexts. This gap limits understanding of why certain branding strategies feel authentic and sustainable while others result in burnout or disengagement. By foregrounding psychological motivation, the present study seeks to extend existing research beyond performance indicators and toward a deeper explanation of entrepreneurial branding behavior on Instagram.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design aimed at exploring the psychological motivations underlying entrepreneurial branding on Instagram. Rather than emphasizing quantitative engagement metrics, the research focuses on understanding meaning-making processes, identity expression, and motivational drivers embedded in branding practices. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's emphasis on psychological constructs such as self-presentation, authenticity, and emotional engagement, which are best examined through interpretive analysis. The research design is conceptually informed by psychological theories of

motivation, narrative identity, and social interaction. By integrating these perspectives, the study seeks to explain how entrepreneurs' internal motivations shape observable branding behaviors and audience engagement. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of entrepreneurial branding as both a strategic and psychological phenomenon.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected from publicly accessible Instagram accounts of entrepreneurs operating across diverse sectors, including lifestyle, education, technology, and creative industries. Accounts were selected based on consistent branding activity, visible audience engagement, and the use of personal narratives in content presentation. A six-month observation period was used to capture variations in content style, interaction patterns, and branding themes over time. In addition to content observation, qualitative insights were gathered from informal audience interactions reflected in comments and engagement threads. These interactions provided contextual understanding of how followers responded to entrepreneurial branding efforts and how engagement was shaped by perceived authenticity and emotional resonance. The use of multiple data sources strengthened the interpretive depth of the study.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis combined thematic content analysis with psychological interpretation. Branding content was examined for recurring themes related to motivation, self-presentation, and identity expression, such as storytelling, transparency, professional positioning, and community engagement. Visual elements, captions, and interaction styles were analyzed to identify how entrepreneurs communicated values and aspirations through Instagram branding. Psychological frameworks, including self-determination theory and narrative identity theory, guided the interpretation of findings. These frameworks were used to link observable branding behaviors with underlying psychological motivations. Engagement responses were interpreted as indicators of relational connection rather than purely numerical outcomes, emphasizing emotional and cognitive dimensions of audience interaction.

3.4. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative nature of the study limits generalizability, as findings are context-dependent and may vary across industries or cultural settings. Second, the analysis relies on publicly available content and observed interactions, which may not fully capture entrepreneurs' internal motivations or private engagement dynamics. Third, Instagram's algorithmic filtering influences content visibility and audience interaction in ways that cannot be fully controlled or measured within the scope of this study. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides valuable insights into the psychological processes shaping entrepreneurial branding. The interpretive focus enables a deeper understanding of branding behavior beyond surface-level metrics, offering a foundation for future empirical research.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Psychological Motivations Driving Entrepreneurial Branding

The analysis indicates that entrepreneurial branding on Instagram is strongly influenced by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic psychological motivations. Intrinsically, entrepreneurs are motivated by the desire for self-expression, creative autonomy, and personal meaning. Many branding activities, such as sharing personal milestones or reflecting on challenges, function as outlets for identity affirmation rather than purely promotional acts. These practices allow entrepreneurs to align their professional image with internal values, reinforcing psychological coherence and motivation. Extrinsic motivations, including social recognition, professional credibility, and market visibility, also play a significant role. Engagement indicators such as likes and

comments operate as forms of social validation that reinforce branding behavior. Entrepreneurs often interpret consistent engagement as confirmation of relevance and legitimacy, which strengthens commitment to ongoing content creation. The interaction between intrinsic fulfillment and extrinsic reinforcement creates a motivational cycle that sustains long-term branding efforts on Instagram.

4.2. Self-Presentation, Authenticity, and Engagement

Findings suggest that effective entrepreneurial branding involves a deliberate balance between strategic self-presentation and perceived authenticity. Entrepreneurs frequently present curated images of success, competence, and growth, while simultaneously incorporating personal narratives that convey vulnerability and relatability. This dual presentation enables entrepreneurs to appear credible without distancing themselves from their audiences. Authenticity emerges as a central psychological mechanism influencing engagement. Content that reflects transparency, behind-the-scenes experiences, or personal reflections tends to elicit more meaningful audience interaction than highly polished promotional material. Followers often respond positively to content that feels genuine and emotionally grounded, suggesting that authenticity strengthens trust and encourages relational engagement. This aligns with psychological theories emphasizing that perceived sincerity enhances emotional connection and reduces audience skepticism.

4.3. Emotional Connection and Community Formation

A key finding is that entrepreneurial branding on Instagram frequently extends beyond individual self-promotion to community-oriented engagement. Entrepreneurs who consistently interact with followers, acknowledge audience contributions, and share collective experiences foster a sense of belonging among their audiences. This relational approach transforms followers into active participants in the brand narrative rather than passive observers. Emotional connection is reinforced through shared values, aspirations, and experiences. Entrepreneurs who frame their branding narratives around common challenges, learning processes, or purpose-driven goals tend to cultivate stronger psychological bonds with followers. These connections contribute to the formation of micro-communities centered on trust and mutual identification, which enhance engagement, sustainability, and brand loyalty.

4.4. Implications for Instagram Engagement

The findings suggest that Instagram engagement is not solely driven by platform mechanics or content frequency but is deeply rooted in psychological alignment between entrepreneurs and their audiences. Branding strategies that reflect authentic motivations and coherent identity narratives are more likely to generate sustained engagement than those focused exclusively on visibility or algorithmic optimization. For entrepreneurs, understanding the psychological foundations of branding can inform more intentional content strategies. Engagement increases when branding behaviors resonate with intrinsic motivations and invite emotional participation from audiences. From a theoretical perspective, these findings highlight the importance of integrating psychological motivation into models of digital engagement, emphasizing the human dimensions of entrepreneurial branding in social media environments.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Key Insights

This study explored the psychological motivations underlying entrepreneurial branding on Instagram and examined how these motivations influence audience engagement. The findings indicate that entrepreneurial branding is not merely a strategic marketing activity but a psychologically driven process rooted in identity expression, self-presentation, and emotional connection. Entrepreneurs are motivated by both intrinsic factors, such as self-expression and personal fulfillment, and extrinsic factors, including social validation and professional recognition.

These motivations shape branding behaviors, particularly the use of narrative storytelling, authenticity signaling, and interactive engagement. The analysis further demonstrates that engagement on Instagram is closely tied to perceived authenticity and emotional resonance. Entrepreneurs who align branding practices with internal motivations and coherent identity narratives tend to foster stronger audience trust and relational engagement. As a result, Instagram functions not only as a promotional platform but also as a space for psychological connection and community formation.

5.2. Practical Implications for Entrepreneurs

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that effective entrepreneurial branding on Instagram requires more than aesthetic consistency or algorithm-driven tactics. Entrepreneurs benefit from developing branding strategies that reflect genuine psychological drivers and personal values. Content that incorporates personal narratives, transparent communication, and meaningful interaction is more likely to resonate emotionally with audiences and sustain engagement over time. Entrepreneurs should also be mindful of the emotional labor involved in digital self-presentation. By grounding branding activities in intrinsic motivation rather than constant external validation, entrepreneurs can reduce burnout and maintain long-term consistency. Understanding the psychological foundations of branding enables entrepreneurs to create authentic digital identities that support both personal well-being and brand growth.

5.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could extend this study by employing quantitative or mixed-method approaches to empirically test the relationships between psychological motivation, branding behavior, and engagement outcomes. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining how entrepreneurial identity and motivation evolve in digital environments. Additionally, cross-cultural research could explore how cultural norms influence motivational drivers and perceptions of authenticity in entrepreneurial branding. Further investigation into emerging Instagram features, such as short-form video and interactive tools, may also provide insights into how evolving platform affordances shape psychological engagement processes. By continuing to integrate psychological theory with digital entrepreneurship research, future studies can deepen understanding of the human dimensions underlying social media branding.

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Ethical Approval: This study did not involve human participants, clinical trials, or sensitive personal data and therefore did not require formal ethical approval.

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