
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Why Professional Branding: What difference will it make for me (as Gen Z)?

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| ABSTRACT

This article discusses professional branding that is rooted in marketing aimed at helping professionals differentiate themselves from others through personal branding to project their uniqueness and related values. It streamlines the process behind creating a robust profile that enhances simple elements of a resume by providing distinctive information to corporations or target markets. Furthermore, the article highlights the two broad theoretical underpinnings of personal branding: marketing-based and self-presentation behaviors. Marketing-based definitions frame the individual as a product to be marketed, while self-presentation-based definitions emphasize the formation of a person's public persona through strategic relationship management. Additionally, the article portrays personal branding as a defined set of individual characteristics, attributes, values, and beliefs crafted into a narrative and imagery that establishes a competitive advantage by influencing the perceptions of a targeted audience. It concludes that professional branding is an effective personal tool for individual differentiation and advancement in a highly globalized employment environment, particularly for Gen Z individuals with Arab cultural backgrounds in STEAM professional fields.

| KEYWORDS

Professional/ Personal Branding, Marketing, Self-Presentation Behaviors, Marketing-Based, Gen Z Individuals, Strategic Relationship Management,

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The contemporary dynamics and competition in the world of work today have required individuals to adopt a market-oriented strategy to position themselves effectively and develop a competitive edge over their peers. One of the strategies that has emerged and gained significant popularity is personal professional branding. Professional branding provides individuals with a means of differentiating themselves from others on the basis of their uniqueness and values (Gorbatov et al., 2019). It helps individuals create a more robust profile about themselves that extends beyond the resume in order to provide important additional information about them to corporations or target markets. Due to its popularity and perceived benefits, professional branding has received significant attention in research. This literature review explores how professional branding, and its importance are conceptualized in existing research, aiming to provide insights into the benefits for Generation Z (Gen Z) individuals, particularly those with Arab cultural backgrounds in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM). Overall, professional branding is an effective tool for individual differentiation and advancement in a highly globalized employment environment as it enhances the visibility, credibility, and career opportunities of individuals. The tool is particularly critical in an age of digital flux, where fluency and multicultural competencies are influencing hiring decisions by firms in increasingly diverse work and business environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Meaning and Theoretical Conceptualization of Professional/Personal Branding

Many scholars have provided varying definitions and conceptualizations of personal branding within the professional context. Generally, personal branding traces its roots to traditional marketing literature, particularly the concept of brand equity that is associated with consumer products (Gorbatov et al., 2020). Vallas and Christin (2018) assert that personal branding emerged as a response to the rise of new communication technologies that revolutionized all aspects of people's lives and work, and the changes in the labor market that altered the relationships between employers and their employees. As a marketing concept, brand equity focuses on the value added to a product through the perceptions of consumers, encapsulating the concepts of familiarity, uniqueness, strength, and favorability that consumers hold about the product in their memories (Gorbatov et al., 2020). In a synthesis of existing literature on the conceptualizations of personal branding, Gorbatov et al. (2018) demonstrated the lack of definitive clarity regarding personal branding, despite its widespread usage. In the review, they delineate two broad theoretical foundations of personal branding: those rooted in marketing and those derived from self-presentation behaviors. Marketing-based definitions of personal branding frame the concept such that the individual is presented as a product to be marketed (Gorbatov et al., 2018). The key concepts aligning with this conceptualization of the individual as a product include differentiation, meeting customer needs, and adding value—terms typically associated with commercial transactions.

The self-presentation-based definitions emphasize the construction of an individual's public persona through strategic impression management, focusing on their strengths, uniqueness, and reputation. These attributes are used to manage and control how others perceive the individual (Schlosser et al., 2017). According to Gorbatov et al. (2018), personal branding draws from a variety of related concepts within its nomological network, including human branding, impression management, self-promotion, image and reputation enhancement, and employee branding. Based on these conceptualizations, they defined personal branding as the set of an individual's characteristics—attributes, values, beliefs—crafted into a narrative and imagery that establishes a competitive advantage by influencing the perceptions of a targeted audience (Gorbatov et al., 2018). This definition resonates with Johnson (2017), who described personal branding as the practice of marketing oneself to society. Moreover, Vallas and Christin (2017) conceptualized personal branding as an intentional career behavior that individuals exhibit, reflecting the aspect of personal differentiation in the labor market. Therefore, based on existing literature, personal branding encompasses self-promotion and the adoption of a comprehensive strategy to position oneself in the labor market.

2.2 The Characteristics and Professional Priorities of Generation Z

The current study focuses on Gen Z postgraduate graduates with an Arab cultural background. These individuals have completed doctoral and post-doctoral studies in STEAM that include Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Nano Science from various parts of the world. Research identifies Gen Z as the individuals born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s (Arar & Öneren, 2018; Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Kirchmayer & Fratričová, 2018; Racołta-Paina & Irini, 2021; Trang et al., 2023). This generation is recognized as the first true "digital-native" generation, due to their being the first to be immersed in a world of rapid technological advances, globalization, and major cultural transformations (Kirchmayer & Fratričová, 2018; Magano et al., 2020; Rahman, 2023). This cohort has developed unique capabilities, particularly in handling digital technologies from a very young age, which allows them to excel in fields such as AI and Nano Science. Arab postgraduates of this generation combine their tech-savvy nature with a profound understanding of complex socio-economic dynamics, characterized by high ambition, a pragmatic approach to their careers rooted in their diverse international experiences, advanced education, entrepreneurial spirit, and high motivation to expand their skills (Dobrowolski et al., 2022; Magano et al., 2020). Due to their inherent characteristics and generational positioning, Gen Z's face significant challenges and opportunities.

One of the opportunities that Gen Z's face stems from technological proficiency and expectations that they have regarding the job market. Notably, this generation has a higher familiarity with technology compared to prior generations, which affords them a significant advantage, especially in STEAM fields (Dobrowolski et al., 2022). However, some scholars indicate that this advantage is associated with significant challenges, such as a gap in soft skills like interpersonal communication and critical thinking, which are important for holistic professional development (Magano et al., 2020; Rahman, 2023). Moreover, Gen Z professionals expect a working environment that is flexible, non-hierarchical, and conducive for vertical and horizontal career advancement (Arar & Öneren, 2018). In most cases, these expectations conflict with traditional corporate structures that emphasize fixed roles and routine tasks. In addition, many Gen Zs, like the Arab postgraduates, are raised in a highly globalized context, which affords them an awareness of international and cultural issues that they are likely to prioritize in their professional lives (Rahman, 2023). Particularly, they tend to seek roles that challenge them intellectually and align with their personal values regarding sustainability and corporate social responsibility, or CSR (Dobrowolski et al., 2022; Pradeep & Pradeep, 2023). Therefore, employers must recognize and harness these attributes by providing roles that align with these ethical and cultural expectations and priorities of Gen Z. However, Gen Z's also consider diversity and inclusion as critical values that should characterize today's workplaces.

2.3 Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion is a significant value that characterizes the priorities of Gen Z's in today's workplace. Studies have shown that Gen Z is the most diverse generation in history, and they expect a greater appreciation for diversity, inclusivity, and representation in the workplace than the generations before them (Jayatissa, 2023; Mishra & Pandey, 2024). Due to the importance they attach to diversity and inclusivity in the workplace, Gen Z's prefer to work in companies that have established effective strategies and structures to ensure a diverse workforce and a culture of diversity where everyone is treated equally regardless of their race, gender, age, religion, or other traits (Hakim, 2023; Ngoc et al., 2022). The study by Ngoc et al. (2022) demonstrated that Gen Z rates CSR initiatives like diversity and inclusion higher than other aspects of their jobs, such as compensation, bonuses, and other benefits because they view their employment decisions as extensions of their personal identity and ethical values. For this reason, they prioritize organizational values that align with their personal beliefs about social and environmental responsibility.

One of the factors that contributes to Gen Z's openness to, and prioritization of, the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion is that they are able to move beyond boundaries and restraints as they consider themselves global citizens. This global inclination is an offshoot of their mindset as digital natives as it allows them to effortlessly connect with diverse cultures and viewpoints across the world. According to Pinho and Gomes (2023), Gen Z is the first truly global generation as they leverage social media and digital devices to establish cross border connections. Research shows that their global mobility is also physical, with many of them willing to move abroad for international assignments (Ye, 2023). Vojvodić (2019) describes Gen Z's as global thinkers and change makers, a characterization that stems from their consciousness about current and emerging global challenges and their willingness to act responsibly to address social, economic, and environmental issues affecting the world (Ribeiro et al., 2023; Toma et al., 2023). Notably, a survey conducted by Broadbent et al. (2017) under the auspices of the Varkey Foundation, the nonprofit arm of GEMS Education, an education management company, indicated that members of Gen Z exhibit a profound commitment to global citizenship, which reflects their concern for broad issues affecting the world. According to the survey, Gen Z's global outlook is particularly evidenced by their support for migrants and refugees as they advocate for policies to facilitate legal migration and integration (Broadbent et al., 2017). Moreover, their view on global political issues demonstrates their commitment and inclination towards inclusiveness, social justice, and social unity, with many of them placing a high value on ending prejudices based on race, religion, and gender. However, research also shows that despite modernization and global mobility, Gen Z's still hold onto their traditional cultural values as they consider them critical for achieving professional success (Yunisov et al., 2023). However, the study showed that these traditional values are not static and evolve to reflect their global concerns for inclusivity, diversity, and environmental sustainability.

Nevertheless, despite their global mindset, Gen Z STEAM cohorts must adopt the approach of "thinking globally while acting locally" especially when integrating back into Saudi Arabia's various sectors. In an era where sustainable development has been given significant attention, thinking locally and acting globally has been identified as a means of ensuring that adequate attention is given to local needs and local ideas (Klekotko et al., 2018). As young professionals who have absorbed diverse and progressive values and methodologies in Western educational environments, Gen Z STEAM cohorts face the challenge of tailoring these ideas to suit the specific cultural and economic realities of the Middle Eastern context. Many of them believe that their choice of study provides them with experiences and skills that they can apply upon return to their home country, which is why many of them repatriate back to their home countries after completing their studies (Alsulami, 2020; Brutt-Griffler et al., 2020). As Saudi Arabia pivots towards modernizing and diversifying its economy in line with its ambitious Vision 2030, returning STEAM cohorts will play a critical role through their contributions in sectors like renewable energy, technology, and advanced sciences. However, the success of these contributions depends on their ability to localize global knowledge. Research shows that returning scholars often face problems that make it difficult to share their new knowledge, including reverse culture shock and difficulties in re-establishing relationships after a prolonged period of adaptation to foreign culture (Almutairi, 2018; Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020). However, some studies indicate that by localizing their knowledge, returning Gen Z STEAM cohorts can influence the development of local talent and contribute to the improvement of local systems, practices, and spur innovations (Jonbekova et al., 2022). Based on these insights, there is a need for STEAM cohorts to incorporate the aspect of "thinking globally while acting locally" in order to enhance their effectiveness with respect to the multisectoral transformation of Saudi Arabia. However, this generation must also leverage personal and professional branding to maximize these opportunities and achieve career growth.

3. Findings and Approach

3.1 Benefits of Personal Branding

Many scholars have documented the benefits of personal branding. Essentially, personal branding is a strategic process that helps to shape the public perception of an individual by aligning their identity with their professional process. In their study that aimed at educating students on the importance of personal branding using social media and creating and managing their personal brand, Johnson (2017) indicates that personal branding on social media impacts employment opportunities as employers use information from these platforms to vet potential candidates and support their hiring decisions, focusing on an assessment of a candidate's social behavior and personal conduct online. Moreover, the study indicated that personal branding enhances social capital, which refers to the benefits obtained from relationships within social networks. Social capital influences career development as it connects

individuals with industry professionals, and personal branding amplifies an individual's visibility and credibility, which in turn enhances their ability to adapt and thrive in a competitive labor market (Johnson, 2017). Thus, effective personal branding influences how an individual is perceived by potential employers in the market, affecting their employability.

Many studies have posited employability as one of the most significant benefits of personal branding. Notably, Lysova et al. (2018) indicate that personal branding helps individuals create a professional self-image that enhances their employability. In other words, a well-defined personal brand helps articulate an individual's unique skills and professional values, which makes them more attractive to potential employers. In a study that explored the benefits of personal branding on career growth and success, Gorbатов et al. (2019) demonstrate that personal branding facilitates career satisfaction by enhancing perceived employability. However, this relationship is mediated by the proactive steps an individual takes in shaping their professional future, suggesting that personal branding is indirectly linked to career satisfaction through increased employability. Gorbатов et al. (2023) introduce an updated perspective on the role of personal branding amidst new work norms, such as remote working and the gig economy. Their studies indicate that personal branding significantly contributes to employability, above traditional factors like human capital and intrapreneurial behaviors. Overall, existing studies on the benefits of personal branding present it as a mechanism for differentiating oneself in a crowded and competitive market by enabling the articulation of a unique professional identity, increasing visibility, enhancing perception by employers, acquiring social capital, and enhancing employability and career satisfaction.

3.2 Methods of Personal Branding

Research delineates various methods, techniques, and approaches for building effective personal brands. According to Johnson (2017), effective personal branding should begin with self-awareness. Tools like personal SWOT analysis help graduates understand their skills, abilities, talent, personality, strengths, and weaknesses, allowing them to evaluate the opportunities and threats in their environment and how they can position themselves through branding to leverage or overcome them (Dingus et al., 2021; Johnson, 2017; Trang et al., 2023). Moreover, in the digital age, social media platforms have become ubiquitous and the most widely-used tools by Gen Z. Various studies have indicated that tools for personal branding on social media and other online platforms include blogging, Facebook, X, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, and others. A study by Marin and Nilă (2021) indicated that LinkedIn is an indispensable platform for Generation Z because it provides a powerful medium for personal branding and professional networking. The platform's features and functionalities, which allow individuals to showcase their skills, experiences, scholarly contributions, and interests, such as detailed profiles, endorsement capabilities, and publishing and networking features, can help Generation Z professionals craft compelling professional identities and stories that resonate with employers across a global context.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the existing literature on professional branding, focusing on its conceptualization and theoretical foundations, relevance for Gen Z in terms of career growth and development, and the methods, techniques, and approaches for effective personal branding. The findings indicate that although personal branding has no definitive conceptualization in research, it generally involves the strategic creation and management of a professional image that uniquely showcases an individual's skills, experiences, and values to the public. However, despite the lack of a uniform definition, existing literature agrees that successful personal branding shapes public perception, provides a competitive edge, social capital, and professional differentiation, and enhances the employability of individuals in various professional fields by improving their visibility and credibility, leading to career development and growth. Therefore, effective professional branding can enhance the employability of Gen Z individuals with Arab backgrounds in STEAM fields by enabling them to navigate the complexities of a globalized job market. Effective branding strategies by this demographic should leverage their digital savviness and social media platforms like LinkedIn to develop a brand identity that focuses on ethical positioning, value alignment, cultural competence, and leveraging dynamic development opportunities. In addition, Gen Z's must also weave their inherent openness to diversity and inclusivity and global mindset that is amplified by their status as digital natives into their personal branding initiatives. Their educational and cultural experiences abroad, particularly those from Saudi Arabia, provide them with a broad perspective that is increasingly essential in today's interconnected world. However, as STEAM professionals, they must find an effective way of applying globally acquired insights to foster innovation within local industries to ensure that these innovations are culturally congruent and socially sustainable.

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