

# Personal Branding for University Graduates: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

Increasing competition in the world of work continues to heighten the importance of personal branding for graduates and their career development. Personal branding initially emerged as a marketing concept and evolved over time to become a tool that graduates can now use as a strategy for the presentation of skills, identity, values and career goals. This literature review observes the relationship between personal branding and graduate employability. Emerging themes over the past decade are observed. Specifically: the definition and evolution of personal branding, its connection to employability outcomes, the influence of digital presence, the role of authenticity and self-concept, institutional support, and the critiques surrounding personal branding as an ideological construct. A key challenge that remains is one of ensuring that introverted and marginalised graduates are not forced to conform to extroverted norms. While Universities are slowly acknowledging the role of personal branding, its integration into curricula and career services remains a challenge. It is therefore encouraged that future research needs to focus on coming up with inclusive, ethical, and authentic strategies. Such strategies should consider psychological and social impact while assisting graduates to package their personal brands successfully.

**Keywords:** personal branding, graduate employability, digital presence, self-concept, authenticity, higher education

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## 1. Introduction

There's an increasing pressure on university graduates to differentiate themselves so that they stand out in a highly competitive world of work. More than academic qualifications and technical skills, the current market trend, requires graduates to demonstrate their uniqueness by branding themselves strategically (MY et al., 2023). With its roots in marketing, personal branding for graduates is about

intentional packaging and expression of identity, values, skills, and goals put together to influence recruiters' perceptions positively (Hikmawati et al., 2023). This effort requires and enables graduates to be in charge of how they manage their appearance both physically and digitally in a way that highlights their employability.

While personal branding is more popular in career development construct, its integration into graduate employability is gradually

increasing (Jackson, Riebe & Macau, 2022). Much research has observed personal branding from other constructs such as: identity construction (Gujarathi & Kulkarni, 2018; Hikmawati et al., 2023), digital self-presentation (Khedher, 2018), and self-marketing (MY et al., 2023). While this effort has broadened the understanding of the concept, there is a need to contribute to the body of literature that will enhance the understanding of how a personal brand impacts graduate employability (Allison et al., 2020; MY et al., 2023). Key questions for investigation need to focus on how graduates package their brand narratives, how alignment with recruiter expectations can be achieved, and what universities can do to facilitate this process. The prominence of social media and digital tools in recruitment, make personal branding a critical component when preparing for a career (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2020; Jackson, Riebe & Macau, 2022).

The aim of this literature review is to observe existing research on how personal branding impacts graduate employability. Key themes are identified and observed from the academic discourse over the past ten years. This would include: the definition and evolution of personal branding, its link to employability outcomes, the influence of digital presence, the role of identity and authenticity, institutional support structures, and prevailing critiques. Through these themes, the literature review aims to suggest a foundation for future research, inform university practices, and empower graduates to leverage their personal brands in the highly competitive digital world of work.

## 2. Methods

The literature review analyses existing research on personal branding among university graduates. Google Scholar was the main database used to find relevant literature. Articles published between 2014 and 2024, on current trends and perspectives were observed. The keywords considered included: “personal branding,” “graduate employability,” “university graduates,” and “digital identity.” The article titles and abstracts were manually screened to check relevance, excluding opinion pieces and blog posts.

The literature search and review process were conducted between October 2024 and March 2025. Articles considered were those written in English and which had a focus on university

graduate employability and personal branding. Selected articles focused on personal branding as it relates to employability, career development, or identity construction. Finally, thematic analysis was used on all selected papers. Each article was read to identify key patterns and concepts. Emerging themes were identified, grouped and streamlined. After constant comparison, seven core thematic categories relevant to the topic were identified.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Seven key themes were identified from the literature, after a thorough analysis of relevant articles. Below is the discussion of each theme:

### 3.1 *The Definition and Evolution of Personal Branding*

Personal branding is no longer a marketing term only. It has further developed into a personal development strategy that people use to package and express their identities professionally (MY et al., 2023). It is viewed as an intentional effort that aids enhanced public perception (Farhat, Mokhtar & Salleh, 2020; MY et al., 2023). This is achieved by positioning an individual as an authority figure with a particular specialty. As such, credibility is elevated, leading to differentiation and competitive advantage (Anh, 2019; Allison et al., 2020). Personal branding was introduced by Tom Peters in 1997 (Anh, 2019) as a concept that encourages professionals to see themselves as brands (Allison et al., 2020). The concept has since expanded to become relevant to communication strategy, identity expression, and digital storytelling (Hikmawati et al., 2023).

Much literature also highlighted personal brand's relational nature. Researchers have demonstrated that personal branding does not only impact resumes or in-person interviews—but it also individuals' online presence and digital footprint (Iskandar & Omar, 2021). Digital tools like LinkedIn, Instagram, and personal websites offer platforms for graduates to position brand narratives that reflect their competencies, values, passions, and aspirations (Khedher, 2018; Anderson & Tomlinson, 2020; Mainga et al., 2022). Personal branding thus enables a process of authentic self-presentation, where there is an alignment between individual's internal identity with external perception. This transition highlights the strategic role that personal branding plays in assisting graduates to

navigate the world of work.

### 3.2 *Personal Branding and Employability*

A growing body of research confirms a connection between personal branding and graduate employability (Allison et al., 2020; Mainga et al., 2022). Personal branding is becoming more of a strategic tool that enhances individual visibility in the world of work which is saturated and highly competitive. It also aids recruiters in identifying talent that is appealing to them (Jackson, Riebe & Macau, 2022). Personal branding enables graduates to highlight their unique value propositions and soft skills which aid differentiation in instances where qualifications and technical skills are similar (Byrne, 2020). Alignment of a graduate's values with that of a company is also enabled by personal branding, thereby creating an advantage for the graduate.

Research confirms that a personal brand is influential on recruiters' perceptions during early stages of hiring (Dominique-Ferreira, Rodrigues & Braga, 2021; Jackson, Riebe & Macau, 2022). It has been reported that such signals confidence, clarity, and readiness for the world of work (Kanasan & Rahman, 2024). Graduates who express themselves through personal statements, digital portfolios, and consistent online presence—are perceived as more employable compared to those who do not engage with such (Hikmawati et al., 2023; Kanasan & Rahman, 2024). Research further supports that graduates can use personal branding as a tool for career management and goal-setting, in a way that aligns their career narratives with the demands of the world of work (Hikmawati et al., 2023; MY et al., 2023). This observation confirms that, beyond marketing, personal branding is also a critical employability skill.

### 3.3 *Digital Presence and Social Media Management*

It goes without saying that the current era requires graduates to manage their digital identities on various digital platforms, such as: LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter (now X), TikTok, and personal blogs or websites. These online platforms are enablers of how graduates position themselves as brands. In this context, personal branding has developed further to become a tool useful for storytelling, visual coherence, and audience engagement (Marin & Nilă, 2021; Kanasan & Rahman, 2024; Setyawan, Pawito & Purwasito, 2024). Graduates who

successfully compile a compelling digital narrative that highlights achievements, thought leadership, and values are able to leverage these platforms (Allison et al., 2020; Scheidt, Gelhard & Henseler, 2020; Tilaar, 2022). One of the benefits of such a deed is the attraction of interest from recruiters and expansion of networks.

Online profiles serve as connecting or referral points for recruiters and are used to evaluate graduates' employability. These are mainly relied on when assessing culture fit, soft skills, digital literacy, and communication skills (Jackson, Riebe & Macau, 2022). A professional and well managed online presence can communicate credibility. Furthermore, inconsistencies between online persona and real-life behavior can lead to reputation damage that is informed by perceptions of inauthenticity (ISKANDAR & OMAR, 2021). Such harms perceived employability. It is therefore important for graduates to ensure that their digital self-presentation is congruent with their offline identity. Such alignment strengthens personal brand authenticity and enables strong and sustainable professional relationships (Khedher, 2018; Hikmawati et al., 2023).

### 3.4 *Self-Concept, Identity, and Authenticity*

Research demonstrates that self-concept moderates the development, expression and perception of a personal brand (Allison et al., 2020). Self-concept clarifies individual strengths, values, and aspirations, which in turn are a critical component of brand narration. Graduates are therefore encouraged to highlight their self-concept so as to be able to express authentic and compelling personal brands. Such personal brands have the benefits of communicating clearly who they are and what they offer to the world of work. Success in implementing such ensures that fragmented and uncertain self-identities leading to inauthentic brands are avoided.

Tensions between authenticity and performative demands of strategic self-presentation have been observed (Allison et al., 2020). This means that while confident professional presentation is encouraged, there is a concern that in the process, individuals may unintentionally confirm to the demands of the world of work which may not be aligned with who they are or what they individually stand for (Byrne, 2020). Confirming to such demands may lead to

self-censorship and emotional dissonance. Theories such as attachment theory (Dahling & Librizzi, 2014; Tikkanen, 2015), mindset theory (Alsquor & Al-Shoubaki, 2024), and self-concept theory (Frigerio & Rix, 2021; Ren, Topakas & Patterson, 2024) clarify psychological dynamics underlying such tensions. Graduates with high attachment anxiety may overcompensate in branding efforts (Pathmanathan & Dodamgoda, 2018). Those with a fixed mindset might be reluctant to present compelling brands (Allison et al., 2020). The ones with an ideal self-concept may pretend to be who are not (Klipfel, Barclay & Bockorny, 2014). An understanding and inclusion of such theories in personal branding can enable the development of psychologically grounded strategies that support both employability and well-being of graduates.

### *3.5 The Role of Higher Education in Personal Branding*

Structural support for personal branding by universities is still lacking even though its impact on graduate employability is becoming more evident. Few universities have embedded personal branding into formal curricula, career services, or work readiness programs (Khedher, 2018; Rodrigues, Atchiamith & Aswell, 2019). Such lack of focus leads to missed opportunities that would otherwise equip graduates with skills essential for success in the competitive world of work. This results in many graduates struggling to manage the complexities of personal branding because of lack of feedback, mentorship, or exposure to best practices.

Other universities have promising programs that are part of employability strategies (Bennett et al., 2019). These focus on reflective learning, digital storytelling, e-portfolio creation, and identity exploration (Jackson, Riebe & Macau, 2022). Students in these instances are taught to authentically align their strengths, passions, and future goals with the demands of the world of work. Other universities have courses that focus mainly on personal branding. These courses integrate psychological and communication theories to help students to maximise LinkedIn, put together their pitch and personal brand statements (Pathmanathan & Dodamgoda, 2018; Zhao, 2020). While this is progressive, there is still limited consensus on which pedagogical frameworks are relevant for teaching personal brand literacy (Oshiro, Brison & Bennett, 2021). The other challenge is posed by student backgrounds, disciplines, and career paths

which make it difficult to make personal branding a generic course. This necessitates a need for further innovation and research that will lead to the development of inclusive, evidence-based practices that will empower graduates to package compelling personal brands.

### *3.6 Barriers and Criticisms of Personal Branding*

While personal branding has potential to enhance graduate employability, it has been criticised substantially by researchers who are concerned by its ideological underpinnings and social implications (Khedher, 2018). Critics argue that, personal branding in its nature reflects and reinforces neoliberal ideals (Tikkanen, 2015; Hikmawati et al., 2023). These ideals highlight individual responsibility, self-promotion, and market-driven success narratives. It is argued that these may disadvantage introverted and socially marginalized graduates who do not naturally engage in highly visible self-presentation (Bathmaker, 2021). The result may be pressure to conform to extroverted branding norms, which if not aligned with the student, can lead to stress, exclusion, or the presentation of inauthentic identity.

Another criticism is one that mentions that personal branding commercialises the self (Gujarathi & Kulkarni, 2018). In other words, an individual's identity is turned into a packaged product, that is marketed, and consumed by recruiters. This approach places full responsibility of employability on the graduate. When this happens the structural inequalities such as race, class, gender, or institutional bias which all impact access to job opportunities are ignored (Jackson, Riebe & Macau, 2022). In a country like South Africa where graduate unemployment is high, personal branding may be perceived as a superficial solution to deeper systemic barriers. Additionally, some researchers mention that personal branding promotes a culture of constant performance (Pathmanathan & Dodamgoda, 2018; Anh, 2019). Such entangles self-worth with visibility, likes, and followers instead of enabling genuine personal growth and societal contribution. Intrinsic motivation may plummet leading to emotional dissonance in graduates who feel pressured to put together aspirational versions of themselves that are not aligned with their authentic selves (Stratford, Watson & Paull, 2023). It is therefore important to have a more inclusive approach to personal branding where



all students will be empowered without reinforcing existing inequalities and undermining authenticity of those who are wired differently.

### *3.7 Future Trends and Interdisciplinary Directions*

Since the world of work is becoming more digital and individualised, personal branding needs to evolve accordingly. The emerging technologies, social behaviours, and interdisciplinary innovations requires such if graduates are to be relevant candidates of choice. A quick emerging trend is one of artificial intelligence (AI) which ought to be considered as one of the tools when building a personal brand (Tikkanen, 2015; Crittenden, Biel & Lovely, 2018). There are already AI-generated CVs, branding chatbots and predictive algorithms which assist to optimise LinkedIn content. Currently, technology enables graduates to build professional personal narratives that are more precise and have a wider reach (Khedher, 2018; Hikmawati et al., 2023). AI also has analytics that: monitor personal brand performance, provides feedback on audience engagement, and tailors messages on different platforms. AI therefore presents a powerful opportunity for efficiency and customisation. However, concerns about algorithmic bias, authenticity, and ethical use still remain.

Other forms of promoting the self digitally, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have reshaped audience engagement for graduates. The rise of micro-influencing has become a viable career path which blurs boundaries between personal branding and content entrepreneurship (Allison et al., 2020; Iskandar & Omar, 2021). Gamification and branding in immersive virtual spaces such as the Metaverse is gaining traction (Blunden & Brodsky, 2024). This allows users to build avatar-based brands, host virtual portfolios, and network in real-time digital environments. Research needs to explore the psychological costs of this heightened self-presentation culture, digital fatigue, cyber-vulnerability, and the impact on mental health. Given that graduates are expected to maintain constant visibility on various platforms, research needs to focus on how innovation and well-being can be balanced. These observations indicate that personal branding will not only be limited to employability but will expand to ethical, technological, and psychological inquiry

engagement.

## **4. Conclusion**

This literature review confirms that personal branding is growing in its relevance to graduate employability. While traditional indicators of employability are becoming less predictive of success in the world of work, personal branding is becoming a viable alternative. One that offers graduates an avenue to express their value propositions uniquely and strategically. Success in doing so, will enable graduates to be aligned with employer expectations. The literature also acknowledges a significant gap between the need for personal branding skills development and the limited support from universities. While recognition for its importance is growing, few universities have structured programs that help students to package and position their personal brands in authentically.

The process of personal branding is informed by interrelated factors, such as self-concept, identity development, digital fluency, and access to institutional resources. Digital platforms offer opportunities for self-presentation and professional engagement, with some risks involved. Risks such as misrepresentation, digital fatigue, and psychological pressure to perform are significant and need to be managed accordingly. Added to the complexity of personal branding are the structural barriers. These include socioeconomic inequality, algorithmic bias, and cultural norms. If these are not considered there can be a limitation in terms of who benefits most from personal branding as a strategy for success in the world of work. Beyond cultivation of technical skills, graduates need to be empowered with emotional intelligence and ethical awareness so that they can manage this complex terrain of personal branding. Graduates who develop personal brands that are relevant contextually and individually, have improved access to job opportunities. Furthermore, they can develop meaningful professional relationships and possible be able to sustain long-term employability.

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