

I Do Not Want To Be Perfect: Investigating Generation Z Students' Personal Brands on Social Media For Job Seeking

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This research explores Generation (Gen) Z's personal branding on social media when job seeking.

Design/methodology/approach – Gen Z students, in their final year of university, were interviewed about personal branding, as well as recruiters and career advisors to gain insights into the recruitment process and expectations of online personal brands. Before interviewing, Gen Z students' LinkedIn profiles were examined, and then fed into the interview process.

Findings – Using impression management theory, the findings show that Gen Z perceive online personal brands as a crucial tool to gain more advantage in job markets. A gap was found between desired and perceived selves in Gen Z's online personal brands. Strategies such as effective self-reflection, authentic communication, self-promotion processes, awareness of risks, and constantly controlling digital footprints were suggested to build stronger and more coherent personal brands. Gen Z are in favour of a more dynamic, interactive, work-in-process of authentic personal brands.

Originality – This research demonstrates the importance of authentically building online personal branding strategies and tactics to bridge the divide between Gen Z's desired and perceived images in personal branding on social media when job seeking.

Keywords – personal branding, social media, job seeking, online branding; Generation Z

1. INTRODUCTION

As Gen Z start graduating from university and entering the competitive job market, understanding how they enter the workforce is important (Aggarwal et al., 2022). Gen Z are “the generation of people born between the late 1990s and early 2010s” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021). The differentiating factor between Millennials and Gen Z is the use of technology from an early age (Bassiouni and Hackley, 2014) and has impacted their online behaviour (Ameen et al., 2022). Gen Z are always connected to digital environments through interactions with their networks, gaming, consuming videos, and creating their own content to share on social media (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020). Gen Z also often attempt to show

their authentic self to the outside world via social media (Gorea, 2021). Social media has emerged as a tool for shaping the personal brands of job-seekers (Geva et al., 2019), and impacts job market performance (Chen et al., 2021). How Gen Z attempt to represent themselves authentically online has implications for their job-seeking activities. So, personal branding has emerged as a means of attaining career success (Kushal and Nargundkar, 2020).

Personal branding strategies and values vary according to socio-demographic factors, including across generational cohorts. Thus, we perceive added value in better understanding how Gen Zers construct personal brands while seeking jobs. In the job-seeking process, personal branding represents how individuals desire to be perceived by current and potential employers, clients, colleagues, and others in ways that enhance career goals (Rangarajan et al., 2017, Vallas and Christin, 2018). Personal branding can be a tremendously helpful asset in the recruitment process (Schawbel, 2009, Geva et al., 2019, Chen et al., 2021). By adopting a holistic, strategic perspective on personal branding, individuals can greatly enhance their chances for success. Social media has transformed how people create identities (Fieseler et al., 2015). However, managing online personal brands can present obstacles that individuals struggle to control, especially on social media, where it is difficult to control one's online information (Labrecque et al., 2011). Having control over personal brands is linked with impression management, which refers to the attempt to control images presented to others, usually to increase the preference power of an individual (Lee et al., 1999).

How individuals present personal brands to employers and stakeholders critically affects hiring decisions but remains in doubt in the recruitment literature. There are many studies regarding factors that affect hiring (e.g., Roulin et al., 2014, Marr and Cable, 2014, Krings et al., 2021). Several of these studies examine the recruiter's approach, and practices toward personal branding information communication. This research is motivated by several areas as identified in the literature. First, less is known about the Gen Z student perspective, and their brand-building strategies, brand goals and motivation, and how they manage risks associated with their images when promoting on social media. Second, how brands are perceived on social media and the challenge of maintaining authenticity is rarely discussed. Third, image consistency is becoming a critical concern for Gen Z to highlight their skillsets to potential employers. Based on these gaps, we argue that image consistency is important for job seekers. Furthermore, from an information systems (IS) perspective, there are few studies that explore social media and personal branding (Geva et al., 2019). Additionally, there are no

studies in IS using impression management theory for personal branding. Therefore, this study investigated Gen Z student perceptions of online personal brands in the job-seeking process. Our research question is: *How do Gen Z students perceive their personal brands on social media with the perspective of matching employer expectations?*

The paper is structured as follows. First, a review of personal branding on social media and impression management theory is presented. Next, the research methodology is described. Following this, the research findings are presented, followed by a discussion of the research contributions and conclusions.

2. PERSONAL BRANDING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In IS, there is a small set of papers on the more general topic of branding. For example, branding through websites (Winter et al., 2003, Lowry et al., 2008), brand equity in virtual worlds (Nah et al., 2011), firm performance with branding and Web 2.0 (Yan Xin et al., 2014), how nations brand themselves (Cha et al., 2017), multichannel retail environments (Rezaei and Valaei, 2017), display advertising (Shih and Huang, 2019), B2B platforms for brand crisis recovery (Behera et al., 2022), the design of branded apps (Zhao and Huang, 2022), employer's brand value and talent attraction (Banerjee and Gupta, 2019), and brand engagement practices (Osei-Frimpong et al., 2022). However, only recently IS research has explored the concept of *personal* branding. For example, there is research on using retweets to shape an individual's online persona (Geva et al., 2019) and career outcomes on Twitter (Chen et al., 2021).

The concept of a personal brand was first introduced by Peters (1997) and relates to an individual's association in the minds of others (Gall, 2012), where the demonstration of skills and traits creates an impression, perception, and reputation about that person (Gaur et al., 2015). Similar to the branding of products or services, the branding of individuals is about how they differentiate themselves and promote personal brands to stand out (Holmberg and Strannegård, 2015). Unlike products, people possess intrinsic personal brands because of personality traits, past experiences and development, and interaction with others – whether intentional or not (Rangarajan et al., 2017). Everyone already has personal brands in different social contexts, yet not all are aware of them, and the challenge is how to strategically manage these brands (Khedher, 2014). Methods for developing strong personal brands are explained in abundant articles, self-help books, and from marketing practitioners. Rarely do authors emphasise how brands are perceived and implemented on different platforms and the challenge

of maintaining authenticity. This research gap is addressed in this study as we analyse people's perceptions of personal brands and how they develop brand identities by using online social media platforms and positioning through genuine disclosure.

Traditionally, personal branding has mainly been the sphere of attention and interest for CEOs and celebrities, particularly those in politics, movies, and sports, who use the approach to enhance and project very public personas to their advantage (Lo and Peng, 2022). However, there is a growing need for the younger generation to project themselves in ways that generate positive impacts. This has transformed the concept into everyday use, especially for job candidates in being better able to compete in competitive job markets (Kushal and Nargundkar, 2020). Personal branding has shifted from celebrities and top-tier managers to employees and jobseekers, making the ways in which people market themselves more of a conscious effort. Jobseekers today need to effectively communicate their talents to prospective employers, rendering conducting and communicating personal brands an increasingly popular way of compellingly and persuasively presenting skills (Vallas and Christin, 2018, Rangarajan et al., 2017).

Personal branding, as a strategic marketing concept for creating favourable profiles, is an intentional process for Gen Z to promote and differentiate themselves from others for entry into the job market (Khedher, 2014). Differentiation of personal brands can be communicated strategically through creating a favourable profile as a job candidate (Ward and Yates, 2013) including communicating expectations, goals, values, personality, interests, and strengths (Ollington et al., 2013). Moreover, a well-managed personal brand creates greater credibility and trust and, as a result, increases opportunities to build loyal relationships (Elmore, 2010). Social media have emerged as an important tool for managing personal brands by employers (Marin and Nilă, 2021), executives (Karaduman, 2013), and students (Johnson, 2017). However, there is a lack of studies which have empirically explored strategies of personal branding on social media in IS (Geva et al., 2019).

Social media provides the tools for various forms of communication, collaboration, cooperative interaction, and connections among users (Bowen and Bowen, 2016). For Gen Z, social media have become the perfect place to actualise personal brands (Petruică, 2016, Johnson, 2017). Chen (2013) finds social media is useful for personal brands because they can improve a candidate's job market performance when job hunting. When compared with

traditional personal branding, social media allows people to manage and present their own profiles easily and attract audiences. Social media allows people to engage in self-presentation and create online identities (Ruane and Wallace, 2013, Chen et al., 2021, Geva et al., 2019). Social media afford individuals to create a favourable personal brand. A well-managed personal brand will create credibility and trust; from there, it will increase the opportunities to build loyal relationships (Elmore, 2010). McCool (2019) observes that the more a candidate's brand stands out to employers in a positive way, the more likely they are to advance in hiring processes. However, individuals should exercise caution when developing personal brands, to ensure positive impressions and express what they stand for, and to avoid negative brand associations. There are difficulties in the process of online personal branding. Labrecque et al. (2011) argue it is challenging to develop holistic and authentic online brands that transcend social and professional distinctions because, for example, people are no longer in full control of their content as parts of profiles may be exposed to the public and content can be added without consent. This can create challenges for those who want to remain authentic (Shepherd, 2005), and may impact on a user's wellbeing (Turnley and Klotz, 2013). Among these challenges, image consistency is becoming a critical concern (Roy et al., 2019, Lee et al., 2017). It is recommended that personal branding messages be clear and consistent (Labrecque et al., 2011). However, we do not know about image consistency in how it relates to personal branding or how users deal with their conflicting desires to achieve a perfect image, or to maintain a constant image. There is still a lack of discussions around image consistency and authentic personal brands in online personal branding.

Gen Z are developing growing digital footprints in online self-expression and identity construction. Images should demonstrate the skillsets that Gen Z students want to highlight for potential recruiters and employers (Dolan, 2017). Consistency needs to be maintained in all spheres of communication, including verbal, written, and virtual. A strong online presence can push an individual's brand by many leagues. The process of individuals building a personal brand, consists of three steps: creation, communication and promotion, and auto-surveillance (Gehl, 2011). We believe that image consistency is important throughout the personal branding process. The *creation* of online personal brands can be achieved through critical self-reflection about strengths and weaknesses, then highlighting positive attributes to target audiences (Minor-Cooley and Parks-Yancy, 2020). Gehl (2011) emphasises the choice of online platform and the modes of presentation that should be considered in creating effective online identity statements. Social media platforms allow people to *communicate and promote* content by

sharing, posting news, commenting on others' posts, creating pages or participating in forum discussions (Philbrick and Cleveland, 2015). *Auto-surveillance* is the management of others' perceptions in a context where there is massive online content sharing and individuals examine others and are examined by others (Gehl, 2011), and social media is an important part of personal branding (Johnson, 2017). Various tools exist, such as Google Alerts, Klout, and SocialMention.com, to discover who has investigated people and review social media presence from an external viewpoint (Edmiston, 2014).

3. THEORY OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Impression management (IM) is how individuals attempt to control the impressions that others form (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). IM was conceptualised by Goffman (1978)'s view of social interactions, whereby individuals create and impose external impressions on targeted audience perceptions (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011). People consciously and unconsciously express themselves, and control, regulate, and manipulate behaviours for producing favourable impressions (Lee et al., 1999). IM strategy is the “vehicle by which professional image construction occurs” (Roberts, 2005 p. 689) and is considered as one of the most prominent theories regarding reputation (Srivoravilai et al., 2011).

IM has been widely used in IS research at both the organisational and individual levels. Due to the nature of this study, we will only present the individual level. IM use at this level has explored entrepreneur's resistance to crowdfunding (Gleasure, 2015). It was found that resistance comes from the fear of disclosure within business-to-business relationships and the fear of projecting desperation alleviated with greater exposure to crowdfunding. Kim et al. (2021) argue that individuals use malicious comments to attract attention and justify their behaviour as good and not harmful to victims. In a study of privacy in instant messaging, Kobsa et al. (2012) found that a desire for impression management arises through a need for privacy. For example, instant messaging platforms should allow users to view themselves from the perspective of others. More recently, some social media platforms allow this, for example, Facebook. Lim et al. (2000) did not directly use IM theory but discuss how multimedia can reduce the influence of first impression bias. We believe this paper to be an important precursor to impression management in social media. Another important precursor, is the work of Tractinsky and Meyer (1999) who argue for understanding the social circumstances of information presentation. Proudfoot et al. (2018), examined privacy concerns and social benefits of Facebook. They introduced IM affordances such as allowing users to communicate

their identity to others, and the ability to manage that identity. The authors found that perceived affordances of IM influence the perceived social benefits and disclosure and argued that IM should be enabled on social media platforms. Finally, Xiao et al. (2020) found that concerns over IM can significantly lead to social networking service (SNS) fatigue, and propose some solutions for SNS designers to reduce user fatigue, for example, allowing users to alter permissions for their posts. All these papers use quantitative methods, and IM has not been used to understand personal branding in IS research. Therefore, to achieve this, we explore IM in the context of Gen Z job seekers and their perceptions of authenticity.

When discussed in personal branding, the manipulative and regulating behaviours of IM might come across as inauthentic (Bolino et al., 2016). The issues of authenticity and the consistency between the desired image and reality have raised challenges for IM. Giddens (1991) understood authenticity as a process of reflexive identity construction, in which individuals can consistently reference a routinised self-narrative. In the employment context, Rosenfeld (1997) argued that IM can be authentic, and does not necessarily require creating false impressions. Schoenebeck et al. (2016) investigated IM as a retrospective practice, in which young adults curate past contents and engage in ‘backstalking’ on their Facebook histories to maintain the balance between their ideal selves and authentic past. The search and maintenance of this balance in IM can be also found in selecting online dating profile photos (Ellison et al., 2006). The affordance of social media leads to context collapse (Duguay, 2016), where social, temporal and spatial boundaries are blurred (Boyd, 2010), and multiple identities are increasingly difficult to manage when individuals aim to maintain a consistent image.

More broadly IM literature has mostly focused on IM strategies that emphasise self-promotion and ingratiation behaviours (Bolino et al., 2016), and how to create positive images with targeted receivers while avoiding negative images (Gardner and Martinko, 1988). Becker and Martin (1995) identified the incentives underpinning deliberate attempts to create negative impressions in workplaces, which are attributed to a variety of individual motivations, including a desire to reduce expectations and avoid responsibility. Relatively few studies have explored behaviours that might make people seem less desirable. Parhankangas and Ehrlich (2014) found that revealing weaknesses can increase trustworthiness and chances of funding by introducing interesting avenues for exploration.

Zhao et al. (2008) suggested that people's attempts to maintain impressions happen in both face-to-face and digital environments. Face-to-face self-presentation occurs through physical actions, non-verbal communications, symbols, and cues that define situations and direct others to form desired social impressions (Cho and Jimerson, 2017). In face-to-face situations, the actor receives immediate feedback and may adjust accordingly. Digital impressions are social impressions that occur online. Online images, posts, and actions influence online self-presentation and establish a pathway for digital footprints (Feher, 2016). Having a social media presence is almost a requirement to succeed in the digital age (Cunningham, 2013). A digital impression serves as a promise of authenticity and self-disclosure of one's personal self (Fieseler et al., 2015).

Digital impression management requires active and reactive measures. Users continuously tweak and assess their settings, appearances, and profiles to ensure that digital personas align with the desired social impressions (Berkelaar, 2017). However, unlike face-to-face impressions, online user performance is etched in digital footprints that cannot be manipulated or erased (Feher, 2016). Users can only build upon previous impressions. The nature of digital impressions results in some people believing they cannot influence their digital impressions due to the lack of flexibility to change digital information (Berkelaar, 2017). However, if users do not get involved in online personal branding strategically, refusing to co-create or neglect digital impressions can negatively affect personal and professional reputations (Labrecque et al., 2011). Digital impressions are unknowingly or unintentionally electronically recorded and externally constructed by others (Cunningham, 2013).

IM is considered by some as manipulative and inauthentic (Bolino et al., 2016). Goffman (1978) sees people as social actors but warns that there must be no discrepancies in the projected desired images and the realities of perceived images. Discrepancies between the two images can result in damage to an individual's reputation. In addition, the IM behaviours used to create a particular desired image may create an undesired image. Attempts to ingratiate oneself with a target audience can be perceived as sycophantic, whilst promoting oneself to be seen as competent may be seen as bragging (Bolino et al., 2016). There are two key concepts of IM, *self-monitoring*, and *audience expectations* which are discussed next.

3.1 Self-monitoring

Self-monitoring refers to how people control, regulate, and maintain behaviour to project desirable self-images to targeted audiences (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011). The way individuals monitor self-presentation tactics can significantly influence how they position their personal brands. Individuals manage and position brands that may or may not deliver desirable images. Snyder (1974) recognised two types of self-presentation profiles in social situations, high and low self-monitoring approaches.

People ranked high on self-monitoring have enhanced levels of adjustability to different social situations and are skilled at controlling images. They are described as highly image-conscious, sensitive to social norms and engaging in socially appropriate behaviours (Mehra et al., 2001). Those high on self-monitoring are expected to have elevated levels of judgmental ability on what or what not to express based on social and cultural acceptability. They are thought to engage in image manipulation, such as having more contacts, and posting more content on social media, to communicate more favourable pictures of themselves to audiences (Hall and Pennington, 2013). People who are low on self-monitoring are less image sensitive, less aware of and concerned with social cues, and have a low level of understanding about the acceptability of self-expression (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011). They tend to be less cautious in self-presentation tactics and may not have highly controlled social media behaviours. However, they are likely to be less image manipulative and more authentic when presenting themselves on different platforms (Day and Schleicher, 2006).

3.2 Audience expectations

Online audience expectations appear to be more difficult to satisfy than face-to-face interactions (Rui and Stefanone, 2013). A significant number of users share information to the wrong audiences without realising it can damage personal brands. However, social media permits the user to control content by making it visible or not to specific audiences. In LinkedIn profiles, users can customize settings and privacy based on their preferences. Facebook also allows users to create public or private accounts; moreover, by creating pages, individuals can connect to people with a common interest or use them for professional careers (Schawbel, 2009).

Issues and advantages appear while using both professionally and non-professionally oriented social media in recruitment processes (Nikolaou, 2014). Recruiters investigate content communicated in professionally oriented social media. Therefore, elements for exclusion are items found on non-professionally oriented social media (Hood et al., 2014). Social media brands favourably affect receipts of job offers (Minor-Cooley and Parks-Yancy, 2020) and employers may reject job candidates because of inappropriate social media content (Gurchiek, 2014). Employers tend to use professionally oriented social media such as LinkedIn for the first round of candidate selections (Hood et al., 2014). Non-professionally oriented social media can be a source of reliable information and might be used to assist in recruitment decision-making (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2014). Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2016) found that most of their employer respondents Googled applicants to determine if candidate brands conveyed on resumes, during interviews and from referees aligned with the personal brands displayed online.

Several crucial points are investigated when employers decide to peruse unofficial web sources to judge potential candidates (Harris and Rae, 2011). They identify items considered for exclusion of candidates, which are the "bad-mouthing" of former employers or fellow employees, poor communication skills, inappropriate photos or information posted on pages, information about alcohol or drug use, inaccurate qualifications, unprofessional screen names, notes showing links to criminal behaviours, and confidential information about past employers. Moreover, investigations not only focus on criminal and inappropriate behaviour (Appel, 2014), they also consider online behavioural tendencies to acquire less direct information about candidates, such as concentration issues or cognitive capabilities (Appel, 2014). Moreover, some data on social media platforms can mislead recruiters through irrelevant information, leading to inaccurate evaluations of applicants' performance potential (Paik et al., 2014).

4. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative interpretive study was used for this research (Walsham, 2006), which assumes that reality can be observed through social constructions such as language and shared meanings (Myers, 1997). Interpretive research does not predefine dependent and independent variables but focusses on human sense-making as situations emerge (Kaplan and Maxwell, 1994), and in studies of technology (i.e., social media), aims to produce an understanding of how the technology influences and is influenced by the context (Walsham, 1993). Interpretive research asks the fundamental question "what is the meaning of this text?" (Myers, 2020).

Interviews were used as a method for understanding the perspectives of Gen Z student job seekers and their uses of social media. To triangulate the findings, we also used social media observations (McKenna et al., 2017).

While positivist research aims for objectivity, interpretive research embraces the subjectivity of the researcher and the context (Myers, 2020) which requires investigators to be sensitive to their own biases (Klein and Myers, 1999). In this study, the lead researcher was also a Gen Z student job seeker, and therefore had an intimate knowledge of the context. The co-authors, having some distance from the context, were able to guide the theoretical development. The theoretical approach of interpretive research is not to test hypotheses, but rather to use theory as a sensitising device (Klein and Myers, 1999). In this paper, IM theory was employed as a lens to explore the meanings of textual data. The aim of interpretive research is not to make generalisations to a population, but rather to make generalisations to theory (Lee and Baskerville, 2003).

4.1 Data collection

Theoretical sampling was used (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), where data collection and analysis go hand in hand and therefore influence the evolution of subsequent interview questions. We recruited participants from Gen Z students, career advisors, and recruiters to gain a comprehensive understanding of the online personal branding from various aspects. Gen Z students in their final years of university degrees were interviewed about their personal branding. Recruiters were interviewed to gain insights into recruitment processes and expectations of online personal brands. We also interviewed the university's career advisors, who bridge between student jobseekers and the industry, to understand the effectiveness of social media personal branding. For the student participants, two phases of data collection were used. In phase 1, the LinkedIn profiles of the students were examined, and notes were made from these observations. In phase 2, these notes fed into the interview questions to further explore the choices students made when they created personal brands. For example, probing questions were asked such as: "On your LinkedIn, I saw you tagged some of your colleagues, employers, and friends. Why did you do that?". The participant sample selection was through personal and professional contacts and snowballing (Bell et al., 2018).

The Gen Z participants were business students at a large university in the United Kingdom, who had taken branding courses and had an overall understanding and familiarity with the concept. The participants had to have LinkedIn profiles, were building personal brands on this platform, and were currently in the job-seeking process. The recruiters and career advisers were working in the United Kingdom. They had to meet the criterion of having a graduate recruitment plan, which used the LinkedIn platform to reach and evaluate candidates in the hiring process. Data were collected in 2020. In total, 11 interviews were conducted until a point of saturation was reached – when no new information could be obtained from further interviews (Fusch and Ness, 2015). In qualitative studies, the credibility of the dataset is assessed through the theoretical saturation rather than the numbers of participants, which comes from a positivist lens. The sample size was appropriate based on previous examples of qualitative research of social media studies (e.g., Schultze, 2014). Interviews lasted between 25-45 minutes. Table I shows the participant information.

<Table I. Participant Information>

4.2 Data analysis

Coding began after familiarisation with the data by listening to the interview recordings and transcribing the interviews that resulted in 35,000 words. Coding was done in multiple cycles using Quirkos software. In the first cycle of coding, provisional coding (Saldaña, 2021) was employed to establish a set of "start list" codes (Table II).

<Table II. Start list of provisional codes>

Next, theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2021) was adopted using IM theory as a sensitising lens. This second cycle of coding applied an inductive approach to suggest theoretical explanations for the phenomenon. In this stage, the codes were continuously identified and reviewed to generate themes. In total, 1,240 quotes were coded. After two coding cycles, four themes were developed for building and maintaining online personal brands (Table III), which are detailed in the next section.

<Table III. Coding Table>

5. FINDINGS

5.1 *The role of online personal brands*

Gen Z students value the importance of online personal brands and their role in recruitment processes when using professional social media platforms such as LinkedIn. While LinkedIn is an "*essential tool for talent recruiters*" (Gavin), it is still a relatively new channel for Gen Z students as most participants had been engaging with this platform for less than a year at the time of interviewing. Some were new to LinkedIn, while others had inactive accounts for years. The main reason for starting to use LinkedIn was the need to find jobs.

For Gen Z student jobseekers, an online profile affords the attachment of links, videos, and photos, thereby providing more scope for demonstrating creativity and identity. In addition, having LinkedIn profiles that people can easily find enables Gen Z students to simultaneously communicate and promote personal brands to a wider range of audiences. Although all participants considered online personal brands as crucial in the recruitment process, the effort they spent on building them varied. One reason was that for some international Gen Z students considering jobs in their home countries, an online personal brand was not popular there, and a long timeframe would be needed until brands replaced traditional methods.

Traditional methods, including printed CVs and cover letters, are still irreplaceable at this time, and Anna argued that "*social media is a supplement, but not an instead of*". In fact, most "*UK companies use a mix of online and offline channels in recruitment*" (Luke). Jarrod, from a recruiter's perspective, suggested that candidates should use personal brands to construct CVs in the right way, and they are "*a starting point for conversation*". Anna added, in the interview, candidates are expected to explain what they said on their LinkedIn profiles. This approach requires candidates to be consistent with personal branding across all platforms.

With the proliferation of social media, especially for the Gen Z students who are heavily reliant and active on digital platforms (Justae), the role of online personal brands will increase in the future as predicted by Anna: "*I think in the future, LinkedIn will be more important, because I think it has been important for the generation that is coming up through it now. So, I think there will just be more natural moves towards that.*"

According to Anna, some companies already had a "no CV basis" recruitment, reducing the influence of traditional recruitment methods by concentrating on new channels, including online personal brands. Online personal brands also have more advantages for recruiters than traditional printed CVs. The employer participants considered LinkedIn to be an essential tool for reaching more candidates and learning more about candidate opinions and how they interacted and communicated personal brands with various audiences:

"I would look at the person who has a strong personal brand that represents himself because that's how they get to impress me" (Jarrod).

5.2. Risk of using social media for online personal brands

Some Gen Z students believed that online self-presentation through any social media meant *"exposing yourself"*, which they saw as posing a particular challenge. Jason commented, *"anytime I post content on LinkedIn, I always think that it might receive negative or unpleasant feedback"*. All participants recognised the risk of social media. Concerns about engaging in online branding and being *"out there"* were attributed to fears of rejection, a desire to be liked and a resistance to being seen as *"aggressive"* (Justae).

Counter to the risk of being over-exposed are incomplete profiles, which make employers question *"if someone just puts very minimal information on it, what are they hiding?"* (Jarrod). Moreover, employers agreed that negative impressions are created that candidates might not try hard enough, not take anything seriously, or *"have a silver spoon in their mouth"* (Jarrod). In contrast, having a complete profile was seen to have many advantages. For example, it *"gives potential employers a good impression"* (Anna). These perspectives are confirmed by Elmore (2010) who found that a well-managed personal brand increased the opportunities to build loyal relationships. Complete profiles are more likely to be found on LinkedIn and thus support personal branding goals. Luke advised, *"use keywords in your LinkedIn profile, putting details on achievements, recommendations, content, posts, and so on because they are all relevant in determining your position on LinkedIn searches"*.

Another reported challenge was that perfectionism causes procrastination with personal branding activities. Most participants commented on how they are lazy and have not uploaded enough content on LinkedIn or fear of being judged and rejected when they post irrelevant

content. Ada had some creative ideas about the posts that she thought were exciting and would engage in conversations on several of her networks. Yet, she had never posted such content on LinkedIn as she was afraid that it was too contemporary and irrelevant. Justae, a Gen Z student with years of using LinkedIn and actively posting content, was afraid of receiving negative comments, which she believed would damage her brand.

5.3 *The need to be authentic*

How to engage in self-branding while remaining authentic was a key consideration for participants. All identified the tension between the desire to appear professional, competent, and credible, while being real, genuine, and authentic for audiences, and particularly employers. Managing the tension between the two emerged as a central theme occurring throughout the process of building online personal brands.

5.3.1 *Creation*

All employers interviewed agreed that effective personal brands must be, first and foremost, individual, and truthful. All Gen Z participants but one took an introspective look at themselves before creating professionally oriented social media profiles. Even the one who had not engaged in self-reflection, Ada, considered sitting down with others to help to determine her weaknesses and strengths. She stressed the importance of self-reflection as she is uncertain about what she wants to do. For Jason, self-reflection involved thinking about "*who I am?*" and "*what I stand for?*" Self-reflection guides Gen Z students to define values and beliefs and how they should portray themselves on social media. Giddens (1991) emphasised the significance of the 'reflexive self' in the process of constructing an authentic identity. Ideas arising from self-reflection should be emphasised in summaries that Gen Z students often overlook or find difficult to express, according to Luke. He stated that valuable summaries highlight individual differences in personal brands:

"When I'm looking at LinkedIn profiles of students, I rarely see students talking about themselves in terms of strengths or values from the employers' perspective. I cannot see what makes this student unique. They are not saying anything within their summary in terms of what makes them unique as a person [...]. It is the summary section that really lets your values shine through in some way. And again, that's something that could make an individual unique comparing to others [...] That's what employers are actually looking for".

Self-reflection is valuable not only for Gen Z students but also for employers. For example, Gavin indicated that this helps him form “*snapshots*” of candidates to see their suitability for the job and the company’s culture. Jarrod also stated that candidates’ values and beliefs make them “*stand out from the crowd [...] and makes me stop and look at it rather than just clicking to the next profile*”. Yet, despite employers expecting to see Gen Z students’ uniqueness in summary statements, most participants did not focus on them. Some said “*laziness*” obstructed their actions; others felt uncomfortable and concerned that they would be perceived as arrogant. The differing views on summaries illuminated a major discrepancy between how Gen Z students portray personal brands and employer expectations.

Some participants felt the need to describe themselves in a narrative format on platforms such as LinkedIn. Justae stated that instead of talking about achievements, you should create a story about the process to show more about yourself and what you have been through to make people agree with you “*and then they will follow you on LinkedIn*”. Some participants recommended that profile photographs should appear professional. They suggested neutral photos that were not too formal, and that seemed “*natural*”.

By putting keywords about what they do or want to do in careers in the headings of LinkedIn profiles, Gen Z students believe that “*it is going to make people pick them out a lot quicker*” (Anna). Employers and career advisors also stressed the importance of utilising keywords in finding candidates and quickly evaluating whether they are suitable. Keywords can be creatively shown in the profile headings, LinkedIn descriptions, main contents, or profile photos. For example, Ada uses “*looking for a job*” as keywords to increase her opportunities to reach recruiters. Business management Gen Z students, including those in marketing and branding, tend to be more prepared for this kind of task than most others. Luke was concerned with Gen Z students “*underselling themselves*” and recognised that, on LinkedIn, many only present themselves with the mandatory information.

5.3.2 Communication and promotion

All participants had the capacity to promote and communicate content with various levels and reasons. Gen Z students are concerned that the formal language style on LinkedIn does not adequately reflect authentic personal brands, and some are thinking about posting

content on hobbies and non-professional daily life. Luke advised Gen Z students to consider what they want to portray on social media: *“they must also evaluate and research the industry and companies with whom they want to work, importantly, they should determine if the industry and firms have a liberal culture or if they tend to be more traditional”*. Regardless of the type of social media, the inappropriateness of certain photos and language, such as those showing drinking or swearing, should be avoided everywhere on the Internet. These are *“traps”* that Gen Z students should avoid, even *“some professional people fall for them as well”* (Luke).

Some participants avoided discussions on social media, perceiving that expressing themselves to public audiences can affect their images. However, inactivity in LinkedIn discussion groups is a *“key mistake”* when building online personal brands as Gen Z students miss opportunities of *“developing confidence to show your dedication and interest in the profession”*, and it is *“a key thing that would actually make them more unique and make their profile stronger”* (Luke).

Furthermore, some Gen Z students do not feel a need to expand personal networks by reaching out and interacting with people that they do not know. Phao indicated her fear when sending invitations to connect with new people on LinkedIn. She feels intimidated as she does not know *“how to talk with them afterwards”* and this has made her hesitate to make new connections. Some participants promoted themselves by developing and utilising LinkedIn networks. Peer Gen Z students or other jobseekers can interact with mutual connections, and frequently like, comment and share content, and always reply to comments in their posts to build greater rapport on LinkedIn. As a result, some of our participants have been approached with job opportunities from companies on LinkedIn.

5.3.3 Supplication

Some Gen Z students are experimenting with the IM behaviour of supplication – sharing their weaknesses and imperfections with audiences – to mitigate the fears and risks associated with self-promotion. This tactic is consistent with a desire to remain authentic, which allows them to promote themselves and their career desires whilst avoiding being seen as unlikeable. Ada experienced rewards for bravely showing her limitations in a LinkedIn post regarding her writing skills and how she was seeking to improve them. The post was her most popular, attracting more than 200 likes and 130 comments, including advice, encouragement,

and similar stories from her networks. Afterwards, she realised that "*I received comments from my networks when I was willing to share about my struggling, it makes my image more related and trustworthy*".

Instead of wishing to control every element of personal brands, some Gen Z students indicated they seek collaboration with audiences akin to the improvised theatre approach. Here, the brand owner and audience engage in co-creation. The collaborative nature of the relationship with audiences, including employers, is highlighted by Jason when he commented, "*we're all developing, and actually I don't want to show employers a perfect-yet-not-me image. Instead, I'll show I'm a constant learner to improve my knowledge*". However, all Gen Z participants had feelings of vulnerability associated with this tactic as they believed they were taking risks when sharing weaknesses and imperfections. Although an authentic approach appears to build trust and rapport with audiences, this tactic is associated with potential risks to reputation.

5.4 Image discrepancies between desired and perceived images

The management of online images is a crucial part of online personal branding. Referring to the auto-surveillance process, two tendencies were found regarding the management and the control of the online self. Some participants perceived that they had sufficient control of online images. This perceived control consists of managing security settings used on social media, not only on LinkedIn but also on non-professionally oriented social media, such as setting Instagram pages to private or sharing Facebook content only with friends. Most participants explained that they are managing personal content online. Some participants engaged in the 'backstalking' practice (Schoenebeck et al., 2016) and deleted posts which they perceived as not professional enough for LinkedIn, such as content that can trigger negative comments. Some interviewees searched for their names on Google to see what appears and may correct information found there.

The main reason for controlling online images is that participants want to convey positive impressions of themselves to contacts on professional and non-professional networks. Moreover, Gen Z students are concerned with future employer expectations as most are aware of the practice of cyber-vetting, and they want to avoid any misunderstandings. Some

interviewees considered controlling their images to avoid problems, which not only might affect employability, but also future careers, because anyone can investigate them online.

Some participants did not perceive a need for controlling their images on social media. In fact, on LinkedIn, they believe all their contents show their personality. They did not express a will to self-monitor. Some consider the principle of privacy, and thus do not want to control what is appearing on what they perceive as private domains. With the blurred boundaries of social and spatial contexts (Boyd, 2010), it is getting increasingly challenging to separate and present different identities on different platforms. And purposely hiding, deleting social media posts might come across as inauthentic and mismatch with the routinised self-narrative (Bolino et al., 2016). They feel that non-professionally oriented social media should be venues for them to express themselves freely and liberally, and employers should not evaluate candidates on these channels. Furthermore, it appears that participants who are not highly engaged in auto-surveillance seem to be less informed regarding the practice of cyber-vetting and by the consequences of being less involved in personal content management.

There were some noticeable differences when comparing these two groups of participants. The high self-monitoring Gen Z students were more active in posting content and acquiring new contacts. Their LinkedIn contacts were between 400 to 500, and contents were liked 1.5 to 3 times greater than the low self-monitoring group. These findings are consistent with previous research, with high self-monitoring Gen Z students being likelier to engage in image manipulation to project more favourable images of themselves to audiences (Hall and Pennington, 2013, Mehra et al., 2001). All high self-monitoring Gen Z students reported their desired images were influenced by other people who have well managed and well-presented online personal brands. Ada mentioned several inspirational profiles and how she applied their methods in building her own personal brand. Also, when describing desired images, those influential images tend to be bigger than their own. For example, Lang stated, "*I would also want to realise and fix the typical weaknesses assumed of international students*". This may create a significant gap between desired and perceived images, as Justae's perceived the gap between her desired and current images as having "*a long way to go*". Low self-monitoring Gen Z students perceived the discrepancies between desired and perceived images to be insignificant. Some even perceived no gaps between the two images. For example, Jason wanted his ideal image to be "*authentic and as truthful as possible*".

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Previous researchers have argued that professionals tend to maintain a perfect image online, but we find that for Gen Z job seekers, an imperfect online image works better. We explored the topic of personal branding in IS (e.g., Chen et al., 2021, Geva et al., 2019), by exploring Gen Z's use of personal branding, their use of technology (e.g., Bassiouni and Hackley, 2014, Ameen et al., 2022), and in particular their entry to the workforce (Aggarwal et al., 2022). Personal branding research in IS has focused on Twitter, while previous work in other disciplines has focussed on personal branding on LinkedIn from an employer's perspective (e.g., Marin and Nilă, 2021) or social media and executives (Karaduman, 2013). In this paper, we have explored how Gen Z students perceive the usefulness of social media accounts for creating online personal brands by building on the research of Johnson (2017). Although there was disagreement on whether online personal brands will replace traditional methods in recruitment, all Gen Z participants perceived digital personal brands as an essential tool to portray themselves and project strong impressions to employers. The effort in building and managing personal brands creates win-win results for Gen Z students and employers in the recruitment process. The more Gen Z students focus on portraying their brands on platforms such as LinkedIn, the higher the probability that employers will find their profiles and be better able to evaluate candidate talents, skills, traits, and the fit with company culture. Employers highly recommend LinkedIn to Gen Z students and expect them to build LinkedIn profiles.

Whilst Gen Z students thought online personal brands provided many advantages, they also came with risks (Richey et al., 2018). This research defined the risks as being exposed, having incomplete profiles, procrastination, and inauthenticity. Although these risks harm online brands, they can be avoided; for example, by spending more time to fill in all information needed on LinkedIn and avoiding copying other branding efforts. Privacy is important for IM strategies on private social media (Kobsa et al., 2012); however, as LinkedIn is a professional social media platform often used for job seeking activities, our participants did not express any concerns over privacy.

Similar to Geva et al. (2019), authenticity was perceived to play a central role in personal branding, as well as being the most crucial characteristic of Gen Z online personal brands that employers expected to find. Social media has social benefits for impression management (Proudfoot et al., 2018), namely, authenticity which is the foundation of good,

compelling, and strong personal brands. It should be present in all personal branding measures and activities, from the first step of brand creation – self-reflection - to defining the form of presentation, choosing appropriate profile photos for LinkedIn, and being stated in the discussions and comments in the platform. Gen Z students noticeably had respect for this characteristic of personal branding and insisted on expressing authenticity in personal brands. Gen Z students used the tactic of supplication, in combination with self-promotion, to gain a greater level of trust and strengthen relationships with audiences.

In line with the research on first impression biases (Lim et al., 2000), Gen Z students also reflected on their desired and current images, and most saw gaps or discrepancies between the two. There was a difference in perceiving gaps between the high and low self-monitoring groups. The high self-monitoring put effort into controlling their images by managing online content; the low self-monitoring focused on keeping content simple and real, and tended to not care much about managing their digital footprints.

6.1 Theoretical contribution

This paper builds on the foundation works of Tractinsky and Meyer (1999) who argue for the understanding of social circumstances of information presentation, and Lim et al. (2000)'s study of first impression bias. We provide an in-depth understanding of personal branding for job seeking activities among Gen Z. Johnson (2017) provides useful tips for students to build their personal brands on social media. Our further study suggests that authentic communication (Fieseler et al., 2015, Geva et al., 2019), and self-promotion (Bolino et al., 2016), alongside effective self-reflection, having an awareness of risks, and constantly controlling digital footprints, minimises the gap between desired and perceived identities, resulting in stronger and more coherent personal brands and avoiding the risks of self-disclosure (Richey et al., 2018). Based upon our study findings, a conceptual personal branding model emerged (Figure 1).

<Figure 1: Gen Z branding for job seeking>

This study contributes to IM theory by providing an understanding of how Gen Z students enhance authenticity in their online personal brands by combining self-promotion with supplication. The findings emphasise how supplication is leveraged to show work-in-progress

personal brands and encourage co-creation. While the previous literature indicates that negative images are generally avoided (Gardner and Martinko, 1988, Kim et al., 2021), this research suggests that supplication, which risks creating a negative image, is being intentionally used by Gen Z students to enhance authenticity, contrasting to the work of Gleasure (2015) who argue that fear of disclosure influences IM. Sharing information is part of impression management (French and Read, 2013) and Gen Z students are not simply using self-promotion tools and behaviours to communicate competency, but are instead engaging with audiences (Goffman, 1978), including potential employers, to share imperfections and weaknesses. In contrast to Sezer et al. (2015) who found self-promotion combined with supplication to be inauthentic, the findings suggest that Gen Z are using this combination as a strategy to establish more significant levels of trust and engagement with employers. This strategy is reflected in the paper's title – *I do not want to be perfect*, and further contrasts with Gleasure (2015)'s work on entrepreneurs who did not want to look desperate.

We conclude that supplication is used by Gen Z students to inspire collaboration and co-creation with audiences. Rather than seeking to tightly control personal brands or fearing feedback from the audience (Kim et al., 2021), supplication effectively invites the audience to the "backstage" of brand building, engaging them in the process. By adopting this strategy, Gen Z students are engaging in what Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) described as improvised theatre. It is not necessary to have all the answers; instead, supplication used in this way offers the opportunity to build rapport and collaborate with others, thereby co-creating not only solutions but also personal brands. Social media platforms allow for the visibility of these activities through IM related affordances (Proudfoot et al., 2018), and information presentation (Tractinsky and Meyer, 1999). This study thus contributes to a more dynamic, interactive, work-in-process of authentic personal brands, which are embraced by Gen Z today.

6.2 Managerial implications

Universities should seek personal brand information from Gen Z students to understand them better and to mentor them in the unique and varied ways needed to achieve personal goals and objectives based on skills, knowledge, and opportunities for training and growth. Gen Z online personal brands not only demonstrate traits, skills, and personalities, but also reflect career goals and values. By understanding job seekers and their perspectives on personal brands, organisations will generate data to analyse the allocation of resources and the direction

of hiring, development, and strategy. A reflective perspective can help individuals create personal brands with solid foundations and continually improve these brands. Everyone is unique, and hence, we suggest using additional tools and resources to gain self-knowledge, awareness, and clarity that is aligned with unique lived experiences and characteristics as well as purposes, visions, missions, goals, and personal branding strategies.

We suggest that each job seeker create authentic personal brands, which bring considerable benefits for organisations. For example, the recruiter can immediately see unique points, examine whether candidates fit with organisational cultures, and this saves time, money and resources while acquiring the most suitable employees. To achieve this goal, the brand-building process needs the assistance and guidance of universities, organisational leadership, and managers. Universities should organise more sessions for students to gain a greater understanding of personal brands and the job market. Extracurricular activities to practice brand-building, including self-reflection, designing profiles, expanding industry networks and training about tools used in the auto-surveillance step will be helpful. Companies should utilise all possible touchpoints to engage with students, share their organisational cultures, and be open about what they are expecting from students for specific positions. As students need to handle several risks when building online personal brands, any advice, or suggestions with no judgement from employers and schools will boost Gen Z confidence to express themselves.

6.3 Limitations and future research

The Gen Z students chosen for interviews were business students with an existing understanding of branding. Luke also mentioned that there was a difference between business students who tend to have more chances to practice personal branding when compared to students from other disciplines. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, we were unable to measure the level of self-monitoring. It could only be done through observations of participant's LinkedIn profiles and through interviews. There are several areas for future research. A variation in Gen Z perceptions was recognised by country of origin. It could thus be interesting to further compare habits and attitudes towards online personal branding among Gen Z students from different countries. Furthermore, it seems relevant to study the Gen Z perceptions on personal branding over time, and to measure whether the concept tends to be understood by Gen Z from different majors. Quantitative research could also measure the level of self-monitoring.

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