A BLUEPRINT FOR MARKETING FACULTY ABOUT HOW TO TEACH PERSONAL BRANDING ON LINKEDIN USING IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: This research supports the importance of teaching personal branding through a blueprint for marketing faculty to advance how students can create and communicate a personal brand on LinkedIn using a well-established theory of impression management and related behaviors.
Method/Design and Sample: This research used a mixed-method approach, including focus groups with an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and an online survey. This study analyzed perceptions and experiences using personal branding strategies.
Results: The findings reveal the relevance of branding as emerging business professionals use different strategies to advance their careers. Different themes emerged, including personal branding and four impression management behaviors.
Value to Marketing Educators: Marketing faculty can contribute value by developing a module to teach personal branding earlier in a business program so students can develop their brand strategically by engaging in impression management behaviors when creating and managing their personal brand with a LinkedIn profile.

Keywords: Marketing faculty, personal branding, impression management, recent business professionals, focus groups, online survey, social networks, LinkedIn, mixed methods, and blueprint.

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INTRODUCTION

As digital social networks become integral to career placement, advancement, and professional networks, it is important for young professionals to initiate job search efforts and their network among prospective employers (Ollington et al., 2013). One of the theories used among numerous subjects facilitated by marketing scholars (Batra et al., 2009; Close et al., 2011; Noble et al., 2010; Valdez & Villegas, 2022; Zamudio et al., 2013) is to construct archetypes (Parmentier et al., 2013) to learn about the importance of promoting oneself for professional personal branding. In the literature, this concept is also called self-branding or self-marketing (Allison et al., 2020). According to Gorbatov et al. (2018), personal branding can be defined as: "a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based on a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery." (p. 6). Even though the concept of personal branding has become popular since Tom Peters' (1997) breaking ground article "Brand You," Parmentier and Fischer (2021) recognize the need for research on personal branding to be developed and advanced by individuals. Recent authors, including Swaminathan et al. (2020) and Valdez & Villegas (2022), have expressed the need for research on personal branding with worldwide high-tech communications and the mental and emotional actions as a result. The personal branding research has focused on the importance of the concept but fails to explain how students can use it to differentiate and get the desired job (Allison et al., 2020). One of the most used sociological theories cited in self-presentation in academic research is impression management, which is considered an extension of Gofman's (1959) dramaturgical approach (Gorbatov et al., 2018). However, no research has analyzed how young professionals build personal branding using impression management to develop their careers in dynamic environments such as social media, specifically LinkedIn. Also, no research has analyzed how to teach personal branding on LinkedIn using impression management behaviors.

This study contributes to personal branding literature by being the first to extend our understanding of branding strategies used by young professionals based on impression management on LinkedIn, offering a blueprint to marketing faculty about how to teach this concept. This paper also contributes to our knowledge of today's job markets by pointing out how important personal branding on LinkedIn is for future business professionals to advance their careers. Lastly, this research extends our understanding of LinkedIn, the largest social media platform for professionals (McCorkle and McCorkle, 2012), human resources managers' number one recruitment tool, and the best way to communicate personal branding online for business professionals commencing their careers. These insights are increasingly important as employers must find new ways to attract and hire human resources in the digital realm. Future employees need to understand how business professionals have developed their personal brands. Also, marketing faculty needs to be aware about this, so they can include a module or an activity in their course to teach this to future business professionals.

This paper is structured to begin with the existing body of work on personal branding, impression management, and personal branding on LinkedIn. We then describe the qualitative research, explaining the methodology, including the sample and data collection, data analysis, and findings. The following section describes the quantitative research, explaining the methodology, sample, data collection, data analysis, and findings. Then, we provide a general discussion based on the qualitative and quantitative findings and a blueprint for marketing faculty about how to teach this topic. We discussed the academic implications for marketing faculty. The conclusion focuses on limitations and suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Personal Branding

This recent phenomenon of students developing a brand to promote their abilities and traits to get a job or promotion has been labeled by researchers, including Lair et al. (2005) as personal branding. As job markets become more dynamic due to digital technologies and competition increases, job seekers for professional positions must develop their brand to promote themselves and stand out from the competition (Allison et al., 2020; Khedher, 2019). Labrecque et al. (2011) suggest personal branding promotes unique characteristics to a specific audience. The concept of personal branding has a long tradition in marketing. Ries and Trout (1981) define positioning as how a brand will be positioned in a consumer's mind. However, these authors also mention that people can use positioning to position themselves and advance in their careers. Gorbatov et al. (2018) state that the drivers of personal branding are based on individual needs for favorable reputations and work-related needs based on the needs of job-related roles. Societal trends have led to personal branding reflecting self-promotion in work and the personal lives of individuals, and Technological trends have expanded personal branding through social media (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Future business professionals can benefit from personal branding to communicate their skills, abilities, and personality to potential employers, primarily online (Khedher, 2019; Lair et al., 2005).

In our literature review we found different examples of how marketing faculty are teaching Personal Branding. For example, in one study researchers sought to develop internal and external approaches with a focus on self-awareness, they facilitated classroom activities among university students; the outcomes determined the graduate students had higher levels of intrinsic motivation and the recommendation from the researchers included focusing on assessments for undergraduates to be conducted as they are closer to graduation and seeking career opportunities (Busch and Davis, 2018). In other examples, marketing and business educators offer assessments and assignments that create a personal branding structure focused on innovative differences such as writing personal situation analyses and personal branding statements and encouraging students to create videos focused on presenting product/service-oriented pitches utilizing marketing principles applied to their personal brand and posted on their LinkedIn profile and YouTube (Edmiston, 2016; Stanton and Stanton, 2013).

In another example, Oshiro et al. (2021) conducted research on methods for marketing educators to teach students how to develop a personal brand utilizing an individual brand video, conducting a personal brand audit, creating a personal brand development video, and participating in a critical assessment of a personal branding project.

In a study conducted with senior undergraduate students and graduate students, rich pictures, integrated from drawings and written communication to reflect inferences about oneself as a personal brand, were explored as a method to expand career readiness through visual aspects that describe one as

a brand (Parrott, 2019).

The power of peer feedback on personal branding statements and analyzing the promotion of a brand name and a brand promise online for an individual are additional classroom activities that marketing educators can foster as a focus on personal branding (Stanton and Stanton, 2013; Edmiston, 2016).

We find out in our literature review different ways that marketing faculty are teaching Personal Branding; however, we did not find a study on which marketing faculty teach personal branding on LinkedIn using one of the most cited theories in this subject, impression management (Gorbatov et al., 2018). We decided to find out how young professionals manage their personal brand on LinkedIn and what impression management behaviors they incur so we can develop a blueprint about how to teach this subject in a way that has not been done before. In the literature on personal branding, the theoretical framework that is more referenced is Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory about impression management (Khedher, 2019). In this study, we focus on the theoretical concept of impression management as future business professionals become more aware of the relevance of appropriate impression management in their careers (Strutton & Holmes, 2002).

Impression Management

Impression management is defined by individuals' drive to frame how others perceive them. In this theory, individuals manage the impression they convey to others to reflect the desired image (Goffman, 1959). An individual will use impression management, specifically proactive impression management, to reduce discrepancies between desired and perceived professional image (Roberts, 2005). More specifically, impression management is the series of actions employed by an individual to develop, sustain, and adjust their image to a specific targeted group's mind. Business students can proactively engage in impression management by adopting four strategies: enhancement, self-promotion, exemplification, and ingratiation (Bolino et al., 2008). Enhancement is the explicit, positive, and biased communication of an individual's traits and achievements. Ingratiation is the use of adulation to convey a more pleasant self-image to others. Communicating personal achievements to develop a more professional image is labeled self-promotion. Exemplification is the communication of an individual's willingness and ability to do extra or superior work to develop a sense of organizational commitment (Bolino et al., 2008).

Roberts (2005) determines that impressions are constructed from perceptions, discrepancies, and desired images in diverse settings. All these efforts serve to impress others. At the individual level, employees focus on impression management when responsibilities are evaluated in appraisals and career opportunities are available (Bolino et al., 2008). Also, these authors suggest that there is much greater research on impression management at the individual level while more is needed at the organizational level; the authors indicate that leaders and representatives of organizations use impression management to influence perceptions from others about their companies (Bolino et al., 2008). The individual brand of each employee affects the company's brand image (Young et al., 1994). Chief marketing officers are good examples of how their personal brand online, with work and no work-related content, affects the company image (Sihi and Lawson, 2018). Leary and Kowalski (1990) indicate that goals and values influence the impressions one seeks while managing the discrepancies between perceived and known images of an individual. They also indicate that individuals construct impressions when targeting values, establishing beliefs about themselves, creating desired and undesired images, portraying roles with constraint, and managing one's current or potential social image.

Aligning classroom activities to self-efficacy, authentic personal branding, and self-actualization with career aspirations can promote impression management behaviors, including enhancement, self-promotion, and exemplification if students feature explicit traits and achievements that promote the ability to meet specific job requirements and the desire to focus on transcending organizational efforts to exceed at such requirements. These are potential outcomes inspired by the analysis and modeling study on personal branding authenticity and self-actualization (Allison et al., 2020).

Various marketing assignments can lead to personal branding through impression management behaviors such as self-promotion and ingratiation. These may include applying the four Ps (product, price, place, and promotion) to oneself and a personal brand to communicate the product/service aspirations of a marketing graduate, the compensation and perquisites sought by a graduate, employers, and locations desired for work, and publicity about oneself (Smith, 2004).

By utilizing rich pictures, students made conscious decisions of self-promotion beyond creating a curriculum vitae (Parrott, 2019). By being explicit with images that were coherent representations of descriptive words, students chose to reflect personal brands, such as hard-working, intelligent, and happy;

students enhanced their personal brand and reflected the qualities of ingratiation (Parrott, 2019). Individual personal branding videos can serve as enhancement, ingratiation, and self-promotion, three impression management behaviors.

While personal branding may have had its origins come from individuals focused on personal impressions, it is a distinct construct that traverses various disciplines, including technology, providing opportunities for the integration of individual career efforts and organizational human resources practices in a shared ownership model (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Swaminathan, 2020), including the professional social networked called LinkedIn.

Personal Branding on LinkedIn

Social media offers many benefits to users, specifically providing them with the operational role of managing their communications (Pham and Gammoh, 2015). Using online communications and social media to develop and communicate personal branding strategies has generated academic interest (Thomson-Whiteside et al., 2018; Valdez et al., 2024) in understanding the motivators and consequences of personal branding. Also, future business professionals want to understand better how to develop effective personal branding (Vitelar, 2019). However, research has yet to investigate how young business professionals generate and communicate their brand.

This is an essential topic as researchers have documented a "digital divide," which is the difference in knowledge and abilities of professionals in using new forms of online communication, such as social media, to promote themselves (Harris and Rae, 2011; Valdez et al., 2024). While young professionals are more active on LinkedIn than older recruiters, both have similar strategies for personal branding and impression management, with the resulting strategies of older recruiters reflective of fewer updates to their LinkedIn profiles and images, leading to fewer employment opportunities than those of young professionals despite having more connections and skill endorsements (Krings et al., 2021).

These new forms of online communications enable future business professionals to develop a personal branding strategy in new ways and more intensively than in previous decades. This type of branding was done almost exclusively in interpersonal contacts (Labrecque et al., 2011). The literature points out how personal branding has evolved during the last 20 years and how new forms of online communication, especially social media, play an essential role today (Ollington et al., 2013; Valdez et al., 2024). Adding social media to the tools of professionals has also impacted companies. For example, Rangarajan et al. (2017) suggest that managers must back employees in their personal branding efforts since it will also benefit the company and them.

For personal branding, Weinstein et al. (2010) argue that online relationships are critical through email, blogs, LinkedIn networking, etc. While individuals engage in personal branding, efforts were also determined to be misdirected and inadequate when individuals portray unprofessional personal images that contrast with professional credentials posted on social media and insufficient updates regarding accomplishments that can portray an individual as not as dedicated to the cause of personal branding to align with organizational interests of employers with whom they want to connect (Labrecque et al., 2010).

Since LinkedIn has been identified as one of the most successful networks for employers and professionals seeking career opportunities, it has fostered the need for individuals to manage their personal brands by controlling their self-presentation in LinkedIn communities as an essential aspect of personal branding and professional development (Adams, 2013; Paliszkiewicz & Madra-Sawicka, 2016). Individuals create personal brands on social media with the primary goal of guiding others' impressions by managing information, photos, and videos presented in a targeted manner; by receiving feedback from other LinkedIn users, professionals scrutinize their presented images and advance and modify their personal branding to the desired depiction (Paliszkiewicz & Madra-Sawicka, 2016).

LinkedIn allows personal brands to be reflected by providing information including work, volunteer experiences, social causes, spoken languages, professional certifications, written publications, education, professional recommendations, validated skills and knowledge, social and professional interests, awards received, business achievements, affiliations with professional groups, book-reading lists, blog entries, all with an effort to use numerous strategies in social media to present personal brands positively (Paliszkiewicz and Madra-Sawicka, 2016). By including profile pictures, Edwards et al. (2015) determined that professionals were perceived as more competent. Personal brands can also be altered when professional job candidates include interests and hobbies that they list to coincide with the interests and hobbies of recruiters (Paliszkiewicz and Madra-Sawicka, 2016).

Recent business professionals must be aware and ready to develop and manage their unique personal

branding strategy to find their desired job or promotion within the company as they transition from undergraduate students to young professionals. Therefore, this research aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of recent business professionals regarding personal branding on LinkedIn to understand the motivation, behaviors, and consequences of using impression management strategies to develop a personal branding blueprint for marketing faculty to teach this important topic in college. The following research questions were developed based on the literature review: (1) What perceptions and experiences do recent business professionals have about using personal branding on LinkedIn? (2) What impression management behaviors do recent business professionals utilize to communicate their brand on LinkedIn? and (3) What best practices do they utilize to communicate their brand on LinkedIn?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research

First, a phenomenological approach was conducted to investigate recent business program graduates' perceptions and experiences regarding personal branding based on impression management behaviors (Valdez et al., 2024). Thompson-Whiteside et al. (2018) classify this approach into descriptive and interpretative stages. The descriptive stage analyzes the participants' perceptions and experiences, while interpretation allows the researcher to interpret them. We implement this methodology to describe the relevance of personal branding in the early years of young professionals and how they are doing it. We are interested in extending existing branding theories based on our interpretation of the phenomenon to offer a blueprint for marketing faculty about how to teach personal branding on LinkedIn using impression management.

Sample and Data Collection

The population of interest comprises undergraduate alumni of a business school who graduated between the Fall of 2016 and Spring of 2020 and have utilized personal branding strategies to advance their careers. This study's informants were recruited using a purposeful sample of members of a LinkedIn network associated with a large metropolitan university in the Southeast. The selection criteria included membership to the university's network on LinkedIn. The participants were recruited via LinkedIn messages and invited to participate in one of two focus group sessions. Sixteen participants were divided into two focus group sessions, with eight participants in each session. Data collection consisted of verbatim transcripts of these sessions, which lasted approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to discuss topics of interest related to the three main research questions. The questions and prompts were as broad as possible, allowing participants to share and describe their rich and distinctive experiences. Business professionals' employment industries represented a diverse set, including Transportation, Healthcare, Education, Energy, Retail, Logistics, Aeronautical, Government, Software, Beverage, Real estate, E-commerce, and Staffing. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1. Information of Business Professionals

Business Professionals	Gender	Graduation Year	Industry	Area
1	Male	Spring 2017	Transportation	Sales
2	Female	Fall 2016	Healthcare	Recruitment
3	Female	Spring 2018	Healthcare	Corporate trainer
4	Male	Fall 2018	Education	Project Management
5	Male	Spring 2018	Energy	Project Management
6	Female	Spring 2020	Retail	Product developer
7	Male	Fall 2019	Energy	Sales
8	Male	Spring 2018	Logistics	Sales
9	Male	Fall 2017	Aeronautical	Sales
10	Female	Fall 2018	Government	Business development
11	Male	Fall 2018	Software	Business development
12	Male	Fall 2018	Software	AI engineer
13	Male	Spring 2018	Real Estate	Marketing
14	Female	Fall 2019	Beverage	Sales

| 15 | Female | Spring 2017 | E-commerce | Operations management |
| 16 | Female | Spring 2018 | Staffing | Recruiter |

Data Analysis

The data was collected and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Roy et al., 2015). The focus group sessions were implemented and recorded in Zoom, the online meeting software. The session recordings were fully transcribed before the analysis by a professional service company. The transcriptions were analyzed by the researchers, applying an interpretative phenomenological approach to identify common elements that emerged in distinct themes. These themes are presented with verbatim quotes to emphasize relevant insights into the participants' branding strategies.

Findings

Some emerging themes were based on dimensions of personal branding in general and personal branding in social media. Other themes emerged out of the researchers' emergent understanding of the data. The themes that emerged from the data analysis are Impression Management Dimensions, including Enhancement, Ingratiation, Self-Promotion, and Exemplification. Other themes observed are Personal Branding, Personal Branding Strategies, and Personal Branding on LinkedIn. All these themes were analyzed by Impression Management and Personal Branding theories (Bolino et al., 2008; Khedher, M., 2019; Swaminathan et al., 2020).

Table 2. Themes Found per Research Question

(1) What perceptions and experiences do recent business graduates have about using personal branding in Social Networks? Personal branding is your identity, your reputation. Personal branding is how others perceive you based on your actions. For Personal branding, it is essential to find your passion. Personal branding showcases the value that you can bring to the table. Personal branding is your set of skills and values that define you and make you unique. Who you are as a professional and as a person. Personal branding needs to be explicit and authentic. Personal branding is dynamic.
(2) What impression management behaviors do recent business graduates utilize to communicate their personal brand on Social Networks? **Enhancement** Participants narrated enhancement behaviors as a part of their brand development. They try to look more reputable and with higher expertise in specific activities or professions. It helps to communicate their abilities to others. It helps to obtain trust. It helps to be perceived as reliable. **Ingratiation** Stand out by doing more than the rest. Constantly helping others helps to be recognized. Generates positive exposure in the eyes of contacts. Appear aggregable and team player. **Self-promotion** Promote skills and achievements to others to communicate expertise and professionalism. All information needs to be accurate. This is an ongoing effort. You need to act and look professional. Promote your toolbox of skills. LinkedIn is the best self-promotion, but it must be accurate. **Exemplification** Exemplify dedication to a job or task by doing more than is necessary. Try to do the job or task in the best way possible. Try to distinguish yourself from the rest.

(3) What best practices do recent business graduates utilize to communicate their personal brand on Social Networks?
Sharp resume.
Develop a 30-second elevator pitch.
Write professional emails.
Make connections by attending networking events.
Internships.
Develop relationships with mentors.
LinkedIn
Tinkering with the LinkedIn profile.
Develop portfolios with college or work projects.
Content creation on LinkedIn.
Networking on LinkedIn.
Joining groups.
Joining conversations on LinkedIn and staying active.
Looking professional.
Professional headshot for the profile picture.
Ask for LinkedIn recommendations.
LinkedIn helps to organize contacts.
An excellent resource for prospecting and researching prospective clients.
Culture connections.
Update your LinkedIn profile continuously.
Clear job title to reach the right people.
Well-organized experience and education section.
Skill section appropriate for the desired job.
Create posts and share content.

Enhancement

Individuals who use enhancement, a typical dimension in Impression Management, promote their actions as more valuable than they are. The participants in the study narrated enhancement behaviors as a part of their branding development. They felt the urge to look more reliable to others and were motivated to communicate their willingness and ability to perform above what was required to complete a task. The participants perceived LinkedIn as an opportunity to showcase the skills that make a business professional unique and different from others. Professionals using enhancement techniques look to be more reputable and with higher expertise than others in specific activities or professions. As Business Professional # 4, who works in project management, shared: "*I need to be perceived professionally if they are going to want to work with me because there is a give and take between the team and the client, and so I need to be able to bridge that gap.*" Enhancement helps individuals communicate their reliability to others to obtain the trust required to work on more challenging tasks that can help in their career advancement. There was a shared understanding of the importance of being perceived as reliable and hardworking to reinforce their brand among the participants. However, sometimes, these practices are perceived as deceiving behavior.

Business Professional #16 indicated: "*I have a good example. It is easy for me to get a job in staffing simply because I have SHRM (Society for Human Resources Management) on my resume. I was the social media marketing manager for SHRM, and it is such a big deal. You know what, guys, I did not do (much), okay? I mean, I did, but it is not that big of a deal. However, just because you have that (organizational) name on your resume, people think so much differently of you. So, it is like branding, getting those logos under your name and stuff like that. I know this is going to sound bad, but a lot of it is just like faking it until you make it. You can choose how other people perceive you, and eventually, it becomes a reality, but it does not have to be like that at first. Does that make sense?*"

Ingratiation

Participants shared different actions that suggest ingratiation; activities directed toward others to be perceived as more agreeable or pleasant; in the personal branding context, the participants shared ideas on how to stand out by doing more than the rest, such as being available at any time as reflected by the statement of Business Professional #1 working in sales: *"You do not want to be the guy that kind of say,*

"Hey, you can call me anytime." and then I am not picking up the phone." According to the participants, consistently helping others allows them to be recognized by their organization and peers. As Business Professional #9, working in sales, shared: *"I ended up meeting the CEO of so and so, and then the CEO of so and so happens to speak with the other three CEOs, and then little did you know, you are famous."* Other participants mentioned the importance of going beyond: *"People will know that your performance is exceeding expectations. And that is how your brand gets expanded, gets spread out. That is how you get promoted. That is how your career grows."* (Business Professional # 15). Ingratiation behaviors generate positive exposure in the eyes of the customers, coworkers, and superiors, so strategically, the participants try to appear aggregable or pleasant, to appear as a collaborative team player.

Self-promotion

LinkedIn users promote their skills and achievements to others to convey expertise and professionalism as a form of self-promotion. Business Professional # 4 mentioned using LinkedIn: *"It is the thing that you want people to see you professionally."* Professionals must communicate their skills and traits to potential employers to achieve this goal. It is necessary to showcase the skills and values they would offer a company. Participants indicated that LinkedIn is an excellent platform to display skills, knowledge, and experiences. However, an important caveat is that all information needs to be accurate. Business Professional # 1 suggested: *"Just kind of be true to yourself and your brand. If you are motivated, show that. Just be yourself."* As Business Professional # 7 indicated, this is an ongoing effort: "Let my customer, whoever is researching me, know *that I am very professional."* Finally, another idea suggested by Business Professional #17 is to promote yourself: *"I think passion is really important to doing a good job."* The participants agreed that working harder than anyone else is required to be recognized. Business graduates need to look and act professionally and serve others like no one else can. The study participants suggested recognizing your toolbox of skills; as Business Professional # 3 mentioned: *"So self-assessments, reflection, think about your skill set and work for ways you can showcase those skills. So that then later, it is easy just aligning it to the role that you want."* The participants agreed that LinkedIn is the best self-promotion, but everything on the personal profile must be accurate.

Exemplification

Professionals interested in promoting their brand must exemplify their dedication to a job or task by doing more than is necessary or trying to do it in the best way possible. As Business Professional # 4, working as a project manager in the education field, suggested: *"Something I do is during the first two weeks of knowing someone is to over communicate. My new manager said specifically "Bring anything that you think will impress me." I think I brought at least 100 pages of written things I wrote, including plans I made. He told me that that is Something that distinguishes me from all the other candidates because a lot of other people just did not do those things. So, if you have the opportunity, super go for it and really, really over-prepare for it."*

Interestingly, exemplification was dependent on the industry context. Participants provided concrete examples of distinguishing themselves from the rest in their fields. For example, in sales, Business Professional # 8 shared the following: *Consistency and having to be there when your client or customer is expecting you to be there. Establishing yourself as a trusted adviser for a lot of those prospects really goes a long way.* Also, in sales, Business Professional # 1 shared: *"You have to keep exceeding customer expectations and going the extra mile for them. That shows them a lot about you and your company, and you want a good reputation for yourself.*

This drive to be of service all the time can have a personal cost, becoming physically exhausting. Business Professional #13, working in marketing in real state, commented: *"I would not be in my position if it were not for my personal brand. I spent a lot of time putting in too many hours and nearly putting myself in the hospital because I was working around the clock, and that is what defined my personal brand".* Business Professional #14 commented that some of his older colleagues did not show the same dedication, yet occupy better positions: *"Unfortunately, in today's society, you see people that should not be in positions they are, and they stay there because it is not easy to fire someone. But they are not going to go much further. As long as you are determined, you are going to go somewhere if you actually care and are passionate."*

Swaminathan et al. (2020) proposed the research question about how a person can construct a personal brand approach to reach the desired professional goals. In the following section, the participants define the concept of personal branding.

Personal branding

According to the participants, personal branding is your identity, and your reputation, which determines who you are and what you do. As Business Professional # 2 commented: *"Who I am and how that is going to be perceived by other people. I think that is honestly what branding is."* This is consistent with previous research stating that personal branding communicates the individual's identity (Vitelar, 2019). According to the participants, it is what people say about you when you are not in the room. It is about how others perceive you based on your actions. Business Professional # 1 commented: *"How I am perceived as a sales executive within whatever industry I am trying to sell to and how they actually see me and what my reputation is within that industry kind."* Participants remarked on the importance of finding your passion and branching out in an area you are good at. The participants also mentioned that personal branding showcases the value you bring to the organization. Your set of skills and values define you and make you unique. Ultimately, it is who you are as a person and professional. However, this understanding of personal branding can occur early in college or almost instantaneously at work, similar to how Business Professional # 5 shared: *"I think the moment I started putting a lot of refinement into my personal brand, we had one of our team members on a really big project of ours quit and I had to fill some pretty big shoes pretty quickly."* Participants agreed personal branding is essential for several reasons. For example, this type of branding clearly defines what you are known for, positions you as a role model for others, helps build trust and reputation and allows individuals to define themselves. For example, this type of branding clearly defines crucial because it is who you are, and based on this, your coworkers or clients will know if you are a diligent worker and a problem solver and if you can meet their expectations. Participants agreed that personal branding is about perception, so it is essential to look professional, be consistent, be qualified for the job, and let the customer know you are very professional with your work. According to Labrecque et al. (2011), personal branding communication needs to be explicit and authentic. As Business Professional #16 mentioned, *"The fact that you are well known, or people respect you, they are going to assume that you are doing a good job, they are going to look at things you are doing differently."* Business Professional # 9 added: *"Personal branding is more about who I am and what I do, and personal branding is more about character and identity. Because what really defines most of us is not work; it is who we are and what we can bring to the table."* The majority agreed that it is vital to take risks, go out of your comfort zone, and offer 110%. Personal branding is a dynamic and continuous process encompassing more than professional social media, as suggested by Business Professional 2: *"Your brand is always changing, but you are always learning and trying to get better with it."* Business Professional # 13 explained, *"As you climb that ladder, your personal brand becomes so much more important because you are having to ask others to mitigate risk. You must ask (others) to follow you. You must fully lean into that personal brand to function in your position, the higher you go up.* Participants mentioned the need to clearly define how they want to be perceived by others, even in non-work-related environments. Business Professional # 17 commented: *"To me, I am trying to keep up my brand in several ways. Anytime I send an email, a text message, post something on social media, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram. I make sure that I would be okay with my dad seeing it, my boss seeing it and I would be okay with it published on the front paper".* The participants agreed that personal branding is about others' perceptions, making it essential to look professional, be consistent, have adequate qualifications, and communicate masterfulness to supervisors, peers, and customers in all tasks.

Personal branding strategies

Participants listed essential strategies to increase their personal branding, such as sharpening their resume, tinkering with their LinkedIn profile and other social media, and writing professional emails. More advanced tools included developing portfolios with college or work projects to showcase teamwork skills and work ethics. The participants improved their personal brand by engaging with others via content creation on LinkedIn, networking on LinkedIn, or making connections by attending networking events. Besides these mediated strategies, they also reflected the importance of internships and developing good relationships with mentors, as they are helpful in finding job opportunities.

Personal branding on LinkedIn

The participants shared different ways to use LinkedIn, the largest social media platform for professionals (McCorkle and McCorkle, 2012), for personal branding, including joining groups and conversations and staying active in all kinds of posting activities to get recognition. They pointed out the

importance of looking professional. One of the best ways to convey this is by using a professional headshot for their profile picture. Business Professional # 4 commented: *"If you have a nice headshot, it shows that you put effort into this."* Professional social media has allowed participants to network with coworkers and members of the same industry continuously. Business Professional # 8 explained: *"I mean, you go, and you have a conversation with somebody, it is easy for you to connect with them on LinkedIn right afterward. Even sending an email to somebody and connecting with them on LinkedIn the following day, there is still a bit of name recognition even if they did not necessarily respond to that email."* Some participants have shared their courses on LinkedIn Learning and communicated with their professional organizations. Most participants agreed that asking for recommendations posted on their LinkedIn profile, especially for recent graduates, is an innovative idea since having a teammate's or instructor's recommendations to communicate to others what you can do for them. Business Professional # 6 suggested: *"For 2020, for a data-driven class, we had to take a certification exam on Excel. So, I did it, and I passed, and aside from passing, I decided also to post it on my LinkedIn because that just sets me apart from different people that I am graduating with."* Sharing a sample of a course or job deliverable can be a form to describe vividly the abilities of individuals and how they can establish themselves as a resource for their contacts. Another new use of professional social media is its replacement of the traditional Rolodex. Business Professional #10 described how she used LinkedIn to organize her contacts, instead of keeping business cards, adding the advantage of including visuals that help her to remember how their contacts look for future meetings: *"But on top of that too on improving my brand is, I am trying to network more. I found that LinkedIn is my number one source that I use to network with. Not only the people that I work with but also the people that are my customers, which include large other builders or construction developers."* Lastly, the group agreed that LinkedIn is an excellent resource for prospecting and researching prospective clients if looking for opportunities in sales. The participants felt strongly about the need to be present and active on LinkedIn in the job market and beyond while continuously creating and revising their information, maintaining a set of positive and current recommendations, culture their connections, and keeping a professional profile picture and titles. Harris and Rae (2011) point out that candidates increase their exposure to recruiters if they actively update their LinkedIn profile.

As mentioned, personal branding must be conveyed multifaceted and dynamic. The study participants mentioned the following elements that have helped them convey their brand: (a) a professional headshot to be used in their profile picture; Business Professional # 16: shared: *"There is so much to look at with your LinkedIn profile, but your picture. You can say, "Do not judge a book by its cover," but people always do. And so, the way you portray yourself, do you have your cleavage hanging out of your shirt and in a tank top, or are you wearing a blazer and a confident position with a clear backdrop? It is all about how you want to be perceived. If you want to be perceived as an object, objectify yourself, but if you want to be perceived as a professional, look professional in your picture."* (b) a clear job title that allows them to reach the right people; (c) a well-organized experience and education section, and (d) a skillset section appropriate for the desired job. Lastly, they pointed out that it is also essential to know how active you are on LinkedIn based on your posts and shared content.

Quantitative research

The emerging results of the qualitative stage of this project suggest that young professionals frequently use impression management behaviors to communicate their personal brand on a professional social network, including LinkedIn. A quantitative study was used to confirm the interesting qualitative findings.

An online survey was developed on Qualtrics to investigate recent business program graduates' perceptions and experiences regarding personal branding based on impression management behaviors (Valdez et al, 2024). The questionnaire included the following scales or questions. Attitude toward personal brand on LinkedIn used a three-item scale anchored by the following terms (good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, favorable/unfavorable). Perceived involvement with developing a personal brand on LinkedIn also uses a similar scale with the following items: Not involved at all / very involved, not interested at all / very interested, and not engaged at all/very engaged. Behaviors related to impression management's dimensions of exemplification, ingratiation, and self-promotion were measured using a 12-item Likert scale based on Bolino and Turnley's (1999) scale. Personal brand equity was measured using a 12-item scale (Gorbatov et al., 2020). All scales used five response options. The last sections of the questionnaire included the frequency of different behaviors on LinkedIn and demographic-related questions.

Sample and data collection

In October of 2022, an online questionnaire was distributed via LinkedIn to recently graduated individuals who are members of a business degree alumni page on LinkedIn (Valdez et al., 2024). The questionnaire was available until the end of February of 2024. The final sample for this study is 125 usable responses. The sample comprised 63 men (53.4%) and 54 women (45.8%). The average age of the participants was 26.72 years old (Std Dev= 6.95). The majority of respondents worked in sales (23.5%), project management (10.9%), or marketing (10.1%). The majority of respondents indicated white (72.8%), followed by respondents who indicated Asian (7.2%) or Black/African American (6.4%) as their race. A third of the sample indicated Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin.

Data analysis and findings
The scale that measured attitude toward personal brand on LinkedIn was considered reliable (alpha=0.922). The average of this attitudinal measure was positive (Mean=4.46, Std Dev=0.668). However, the level of involvement of the respondents' personal brand development on LinkedIn (alpha=0.912) was significantly lower (Mean=3.66, Std Dev=1.04) (t=9.90, df=116, p<0.01).
Personal brand equity also was deemed very reliable (alpha=0.882) and suggested respondents' positive evaluation of this type of equity (Mean=4.05, Std Dev=0.593). About half (51.2%) of the respondents indicated using LinkedIn between once to three times a week, and rarely to very rarely updating of their profile (69.0%).79.8% reported having an accurate LinkedIn job title on their profiles; 92.4% reported having a well-organized (extremely or somewhat) experience section and t 95.8% considered having a well-organized education section.
Most participants, 86.5%, believe that their skill section is appropriate for their professional objectives. Regarding their profile picture, 88.2% believe they have a slightly professional or professional photo on their LinkedIn profile. Almost half of the participants, 45%, strongly or somewhat agreed with having a portfolio containing college or work projects on their LinkedIn profile. Only 10.1% reported that most of the time, or always, they were creating content on LinkedIn. Also, only 31.1% answered always or most of the time to the question regarding networking on LinkedIn. Another activity with relatively low use was joining groups, only 7.8% reported doing this at high frequency (always, most of the time), and 11.87% reported joining conversations at high frequency (always, most of the time). Lastly, only 5.9% reported asking for recommendations at a high frequency.
This quantitative study focuses on determining if the dimensions of impression management that emerged in the qualitative study –confirming Bolino and Turnley's (1999) results can be replicated quantitatively in the LinkedIn environment and exploring possible relationships with similar constructs, such as brand equity and individuals' behaviors while using LinkedIn. This objective was accomplished using Exploratory Factorial Analysis (EFA) due to the motivation of not developing a priori relationships between dimensions and the items developed by Bolino and Turnley (1999) for a different context.
As explained in Table 3, The results of the EFA applying a Principal Component Analysis using varimax rotation strongly suggest all items loaded in the expected factors. Factor 1 (Exemplification) comprised four items that explained 44.1% of the variance, with factors loading from 0.718 to 0.891. Factor 2 (Ingratiation) included four items that explained 14.27% of the variance, with items loading from 0.726 to 0.887. Factor 3 (Self-promotion) also included four items that explained 11.81% of the variance. For this factor, the loading of the items ranged from 0.693 to 0.833. Finally, the fourth factor (Enhancement) explained 7.29% of the variance, including three items with loadings between 0.848 and 0.904. The four factors explain 77.48% of the variance.

Table 3. Rotated Component Matrix

Item (Bolino & Turnley, 1999)	Component			
	Exemplification	Ingratiation	Self-promotion	Enhancement
Talk proudly about your experience or education.	0.154	0.242	**0.708**	0.066
Make people aware of your talents or qualifications.	0.116	0.232	**0.808**	0.265
Let others know that you are valuable to the organization.	0.188	0.393	**0.693**	0.166

Make people aware of your accomplishments.	0.099	0.153	**0.833**	0.218
Compliment your colleagues so they will see you as likable.	0.181	**0.840**	0.291	0.147
Take an interest in your colleagues' professional lives to show them that you are friendly.	0.017	**0.887**	0.191	0.097
Praise your colleagues for their accomplishments so they will consider you a nice person.	0.160	**0.818**	0.278	0.144
Do personal favors for your colleagues to show them that you are friendly.	0.315	**0.726**	0.179	0.026
You share that you stay at work late so people will know you are hardworking	**0.869**	0.196	0.116	0.109
Try to appear busy, even at times when things are slower.	**0.718**	0.143	0.202	0.149
You share that you arrive at work early to look dedicated.	**0.891**	0.105	0.120	0.196
You share that you come to the office at night or on weekends to show that you are dedicated.	**0.844**	0.131	0.075	0.185
I want to present myself in an enhanced way to others.	0.220	0.110	0.186	**0.848**
I want to make an enhanced impression on others.	0.193	0.127	0.222	**0.889**
I want to make myself look enhanced to others.	0.174	0.105	0.175	**0.904**

Table 4 presents how the four factors of impression management correlate to personal brand equity and attitudinal, involvement, and behaviors related to LinkedIn. As this table suggests, correlations were frequently strong between some dimensions of impression management, particularly ingratiation and self-promotion, and attitude, involvement, and personal brand equity, while LinkedIn behaviors had a limited number of significant correlations. Ingratiation and self-promotion had, in most cases, a strong positive correlation with these variables ($p < 0.01$), while exemplification was positively correlated to personal brand equity (r (122) =.212, $p < 0.05$), and enhancement was positively correlated to involvement with LinkedIn (r (117) =.185, $p < 0.05$).

Regarding the frequency of behaviors related to LinkedIn, frequency of usage was positively correlated exclusively to self-promotion (r (118) =.246, $p < 0.01$). , while updating frequency was positively correlated to the aforementioned dimension (r (118) =.374, $p < 0.01$) and Ingratiation (r (118) =.233, $p < 0.05$). Other behaviors that exclusively correlated with self-promotion included the organization of experience section (r (118) =.242, $p < 0.01$) and appropriate skills for professional objectives (r (118) =.287, $p < 0.01$). Frequency of joining groups was exclusively and positively correlated to ingratiation (r (118) =.189, $p < 0.05$), while frequency for recommendation requests was exclusively correlated to the dimension of exemplification (r (118) =.228, $p < 0.05$). Interestingly, the dimension of enhancement did not have significant correlations with LinkedIn behaviors.

Table 4. Correlation matrix for four factors and relevant constructs and behaviors

Construct/Item	Exemplification	Ingratiation	Self-promotion	Enhancement
Attitude toward Personal Brand in LinkedIn	0.102	0.387**	0.308**	0.102
Involvement with LinkedIn	0.043	0.215*	0.322**	0.185*
Personal Brand Equity	0.212*	0.341**	0.283**	0.055
Frequency of LinkedIn use	0.07	0.06	0.246**	0.151
Frequency of LinkedIn updating	-0.019	0.233*	0.374**	0.157
Accuracy of job title in LinkedIn	-0.173	0.081	0.023	0.065
Organization of experience section in	0.007	0.062	0.242**	-0.027

LinkedIn				
Organization of education section in LinkedIn	0.129	0.101	0.104	0.04
Skills in LinkedIn profile are appropriate for professional objectives	0.119	0.049	0.287**	0.102
Professional LinkedIn profile picture	0.168	0.162	-0.016	0.006
Post of portfolio in LinkedIn	0.15	-0.061	0.101	0.051
Frequency of content creation in LinkedIn	0.063	0.282**	0.226*	0.112
Frequency of networking in LinkedIn	0.071	0.217*	0.198*	0.087
Frequency of joining groups in LinkedIn	0.159	0.189*	0.149	0.052
Frequency of joining conversations in LinkedIn	0.146	0.162	0.162	0.108
Frequency of requests for recommendations	0.228*	0.144	0.113	0.118

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

The pattern of participants' motivators, behaviors, and beliefs in this study matched the four distinct areas of impression management: enhancement, self-promotion, exemplification, and ingratiation (Bolino et al., 2008). However, exemplification was performed by fewer participants compared with the other three dimensions of impression management. Also, due to LinkedIn's dynamic nature, the patterns of these behaviors and beliefs do not clearly fall into exclusively one of the areas of impression management.

Overall, the participants agreed that it is favorable for recent business graduates to have a well-defined personal branding strategy that can benefit them in finding a job in a competitive market (Gujarathi and Kulkarni, 2018; Hood et al., 2014; Khedher, 2019; Peter and Gomez, 2019). This finding aligns with the extant personal branding literature. It expands the literature by offering a blueprint shown in Table 5 developed by the insights of young professionals so marketing faculty can teach personal branding to future generations of business professionals, including accountants (Vitberg, 2010), chief executive officers (Bendisch et al., 2013), consultants (Pagis and Ailon, 2017), female entrepreneurs (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018), professionals (Lair et al., 2005) and social entrepreneurs (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013) to mention some of the professions that can benefit from these recommendations. The experience in general of the participants was to implement strategies to enhance their brand image without too much reflection on the importance of personal branding until, by entering the professional world, they realize the importance of having a positive brand image to move forward in their business career. After this realization, they became very strategic in developing and communicating their brand persona, primarily via LinkedIn. That is why we suggest that marketing faculty teach this important subject to students during college so they can promote themselves better and obtain the internship or job positioning that they are looking for. This research aligns with the literature on personal branding, as its findings suggest how job seekers grow their exposure to recruiters if they actively interact on LinkedIn (Harris & Rae, 2011).

Using social media in job markets for professionals goes beyond the effect on individuals, as recruiters from companies can increase the impact of their budget by using social media (Wetsch, 2012). The participants agreed on the importance of LinkedIn profiles for Human Resources recruiters as it allows recent business graduates to show HR professionals what they can bring consistently. The participants also recommend that recent business graduates invest in a professional portrait since LinkedIn profiles are essential providers of first impressions to potential recruiters. Other recommended strategies include developing and practicing a 30-second elevator pitch or a personal branding statement (Shepherd, 2005) to allow recent business graduates to communicate efficiently and explain their professional skills, knowledge, and experience. Further, recent business graduates are also recommended to do a self-reflection exercise to be aware of their strengths, weaknesses, skills, and knowledge, what they want to do, and in which type of industry they would want to work. These recommendations require young professionals to invest time to create and improve their LinkedIn profiles and continue learning how to use professional social media to stay competitive. This insight matches researchers' use of the term "social media intelligence" required to use social media adequately to promote personal brands (Westch, 2012). An interesting balance of personas emerged from the participants' recommendations: on the one hand, young business professionals should develop their unique personalities. As a participant expressed, "Be yourself,

embrace it, and showcase it." On the other hand, participants also recommended appearing as professional as possible.

The results of this study suggest possible adverse effects of personal branding in social media. As other researchers have demonstrated, an increase in social media usage, in general, has been linked to adverse mental health outcomes such as anxiety and depression (Jones et al., 2016). However, the effect of professional platforms including LinkedIn may be less detrimental than image-based platforms such as Snapchat (Wright et al. 2020, 2021). The emergent results of the study suggest two significant tensions that may lead to reductions in well-being. First, online behaviors used to engage in ingratiation, and enhancement may reduce feelings of authenticity and increase anxiety (Gino et al. 2020). Second, as ingratiation and enhancement require the overstatement of positive traits and social media is available all day, every day, participants in the study demonstrated a need to be available and anxious about always presenting on-brand messages 24/7 to keep an image of an ever available and always professional member of this online community. The need to convey availability can lead to feelings of burnout (Tang et al., 2020).

Although the use of social media, in general, has been seen as a negative influence on young individuals' well-being as it may increase feelings of loneliness (Jones et al., 2016), the participants stressed the importance of social media as a catalyst to take risks, going outside of an individual's comfort zone, and challenge themselves all the time to keep on growing as professionals. LinkedIn should be used to create new relations with less fear of rejection, consistently network, and increase the number of contacts that may help achieve professional objectives. The professional connections created on LinkedIn can help later as references and mentors.

Seven themes emerged from the data to explain recent business graduates' perceptions and experiences regarding using personal branding strategies to find a job and get a promotion. Participants engaged in personal branding using enhancement, self-promotion, exemplification, and ingratiation strategies. Also, the participants engaged in personal branding, personal branding strategies, and personal branding on LinkedIn. The themes that emerged from this research suggest the need for young professionals to proactively approach personal branding, as there are multiple behaviors and strategies that they need to consider early in their careers. One interesting finding of the study is how young professionals realized the importance of personal branding at different stages in their life. In some cases, as early as high school, participants were aware of the need to create a professional image, while others found out much later, in some cases as late as during their first professional job. Regardless of this realization, participants see improving their branding image as an ongoing series of activities required to evolve as their professional standing improves. That is why it is important that the early intervention of marketing faculty teach future professionals how to develop their personal brand, especially on LinkedIn, and using impression management behaviors.
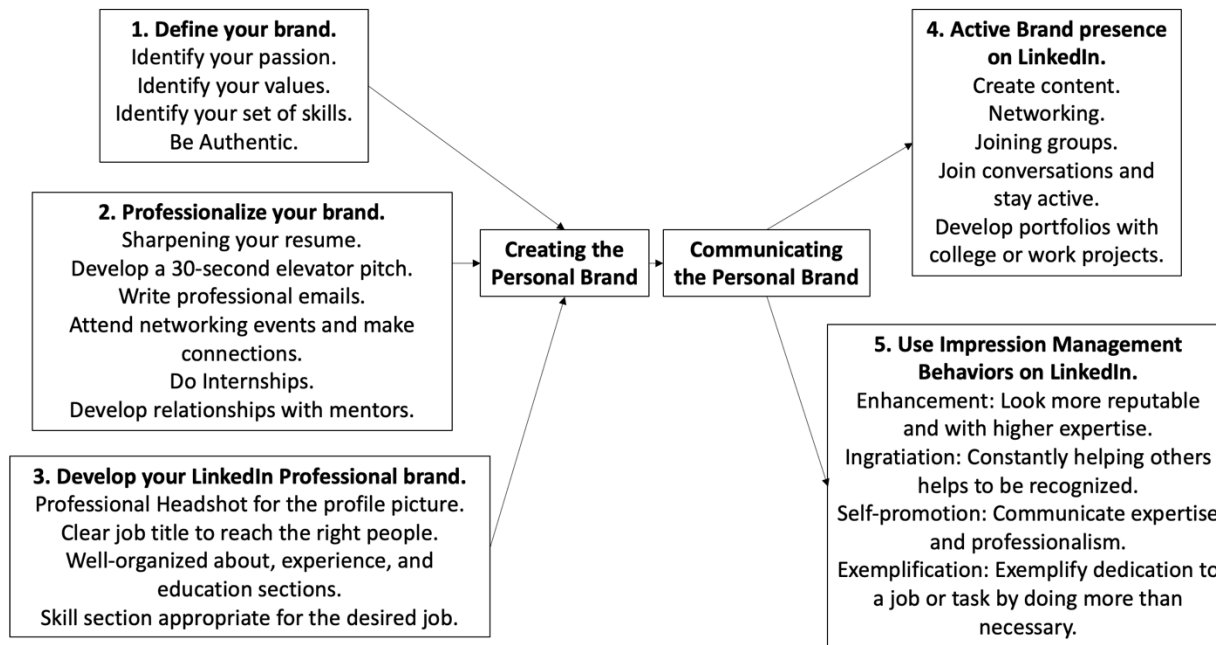
The quantitative investigation of impression management's dimensions of ingratiation, exemplification, self-promotion, and enhancement and their relationship with other constructs and LinkedIn-related behaviors affirm the themes in the study as the four dimensions emerged from the exploratory factorial analysis. The lack of clear correlation patterns between the factors found and other constructs such as attitude toward the personal brand in LinkedIn, involvement with LinkedIn, and personal brand equity suggest the factors explain a different phenomenon from these related measures.

The analysis of LinkedIn behaviors and the factors found resulted in interesting findings; for example, the strength of Ingratiation as a factor and its more frequent positive and significant correlations than the other dimensions suggest LinkedIn is a social platform used mainly for activities such as networking and conversations to make the user more agreeable or pleasant in a professional setting. In contrast, exemplification seems more related to using LinkedIn as a source of potential recommenders.

A blueprint to teach personal branding on LinkedIn using impression management behaviors

This blueprint was developed with the insights obtained from young business professionals in our mixed method approach about how they manage their personal brand on LinkedIn using impression management behaviors. This personal branding blueprint contains two parts; the first is about how students can create their brand, and the second consists of what actions can be taken to communicate that personal brand, as shown in Table 5. Each faculty can decide how to teach this blueprint, which is in one week of classes, or as a workshop or seminar or an online module. The first part, Creating the Personal Brand is integrated with three steps: Define your Brand, Professionalize your Brand, and Develop your LinkedIn Professional Brand. The second part, Communicate the Personal Brand is integrated into two steps: Active Brand Presence on LinkedIn and Use Impression Management Behaviors on LinkedIn.

Table 5. Personal Branding Blueprint

1. Define your brand. Identify your passion. Identify your values. Identify your set of skills. Be Authentic.	**4. Active Brand presence on LinkedIn.** Create content. Networking. Joining groups. Join conversations and stay active. Develop portfolios with college or work projects.
2. Professionalize your brand. Sharpening your resume. Develop a 30-second elevator pitch. Write professional emails. Attend networking events and make connections. Do Internships. Develop relationships with mentors.	**Creating the Personal Brand** — **Communicating the Personal Brand**
3. Develop your LinkedIn Professional brand. Professional Headshot for the profile picture. Clear job title to reach the right people. Well-organized about, experience, and education sections. Skill section appropriate for the desired job.	**5. Use Impression Management Behaviors on LinkedIn.** Enhancement: Look more reputable and with higher expertise. Ingratiation: Constantly helping others helps to be recognized. Self-promotion: Communicate expertise and professionalism. Exemplification: Exemplify dedication to a job or task by doing more than necessary.

Part 1: Creating the Personal Brand

1. Define your brand: The marketing faculty can start this exercise with students by asking them to identify and define these four elements: (1) Identify your passion, (2) Identify your values, (3) Identify your set of skills and (4) Be authentic.

Just as uniform branding strategies for products and services do not serve as best practices, personal branding also requires individuals to develop methods to differentiate themselves (Allison et al., 2020). To enhance oneself and for self-promotion, university students need to differentiate themselves from their peers as competition so to produce a more positive image and demonstrate explicit communication about their unique traits and achievements (Allison et al., 2020). As Busch and Davis (2018) engaged university students in a marketing leadership course in a personal branding exercise that included completing the Clifton StrengthsFinder and 360Reach assessments, students found innate understanding that aided them in enhanced relationship building through effective job interviews and positive self-promotion and enhancement efforts in their LinkedIn profiles. Students also found this assignment positively impacted their relationships and enhanced their confidence with new jobs and internships (Busch and Davis, 2018).

The purpose of completing these assessments is to initiate the process to help students create a strong personal brand to differentiate themselves by communicating their traits and achievements in enhanced ways gained from the self-awareness aspects of the assessments (Busch and Davis, 2018). A qualitative focus on one specific student who completed the assessments led the student to differentiate herself by exemplifying her talents based on her strengths, including her commitment to superior work and building strong relationships while creating strong teams (Busch and Davis, 2019).

Jones & Leverenz (2017) recommended a digital storytelling ePortfolio framework as a tool for students to develop their personal brand with a three-phased focus on building personal brand identity, establishing the personal brand, and evaluating the image of a personal brand. Marketing educators can provide assignments in which students interview professionals to inquire about personal attributes recommended to establish a personal brand along with the possibility of seeking a mentor to support such effort. Two additional aspects that can further develop a personal brand as part of the same assignment can include reflections by both the individual student and peers about the draft of their brand, followed by integrative documentation of the personal brand launched on LinkedIn and other locations. Narrative storytelling projects can be assigned to students, beginning with the About Me section on LinkedIn to focus on personal traits and aspirations, with educators reviewing that with other information provided in a LinkedIn profile for consistency with the story located throughout the profile (Jones & Leverenz, 2017).

Students can be given assignments to present themselves in class with a focus on their personal brand. In doing so, there are a variety of presentation components they can share to reflect their brand. Quick response (QR) codes, videos, and PowerPoint presentations are tools in which students can display information about themselves. These can include the results of personality-based assessments based on the Big Five theory (Sabani, 2018) and Carl Jung's perspective in the Myer-Briggs Type Indicator, used to determine individual differences (Brownfield, 1993; Cherry, 2020). The "Big Five" theory of personality traits is frequently used and universally accepted in academia for its theory of personality, including these five factors: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness (Sabani, 2018). These characteristics are steady and inherent and vary depending on circumstances and actions (Shaninah & Mohd Noor, 2024). Students can present a business card, wear professional attire, and present a network of connections they have gained among professionals aligned with similar career interests and skills. They can use colors, banner images, personal logos, distinctive quotes, email signatures, and links to other social media on presentation slides, resumes, and social media posts that consistently align with their brand. Presenting oneself with a prop that signifies a personal brand has often been a method for providing a memorable hook and close in personal branding presentations in undergraduate business classes that also include many of the aspects cited above. These also include focusing on individual strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analyses shared with audiences. All these aspects may be shown in a LinkedIn profile.

2. Professionalize your brand: After defining their brand on step 1, now they can professionalize the brand by embarking on the following activities: (1) Sharpening your resume, (2) Develop a 30-second elevator pitch, (3) Write professional emails, (4) Attend networking events and make connections, (5) Do Internships and (6) Develop relationships with mentors.

Marketing educators can create assignments that require the development of digital resumes and curriculum vitae as a means for testing the awareness and effectiveness of personal branding; in a mixed methods study of 20 MBA students interviewed and 120 MBA students who completed a survey about the awareness and uses of personal branding for career opportunities (Kushal & Nargundkar, 2019). This research led to the validation of various methods for effective personal branding, including in-class and outside-class interactions with professors about personal branding, in-class group projects, case studies, and business competitions promoting individual personal branding efforts, extra-curricular activities, and the requirements to master public speaking, writing skills, technology, developing LinkedIn profiles, various social media and interpersonal skills (Kushal & Nargundkar, 2019).

Providing course activities focused on advanced training in public speaking that enhances personal branding can occur when marketing educators provide numerous presentation requirements in courses. As most courses embark on weekly module-related topics and book chapters focused on different topics, enlisting students to provide oral presentations that communicate their knowledge and methods to apply the information in business and to their personal brand development efforts. These activities can lead to enhanced self-confidence, a critically important trait for personal branding. A comprehensive approach to public speaking with a personal branding approach included training in the concepts of public speaking, requirements for numerous external speaking engagements with communities aligned with a personal brand, inclusive of posted presentations on LinkedIn, facilitating project updates and proposals through speeches at businesses written about for class assignments, through mentorships or internships, public speaking activity news, such as likes and comments on LinkedIn about related presentations and written feedback from employer representatives, and community relations journals based on the public speaking and branding efforts provided as a service (Juwito et al., 2022).

Marketing curriculum can include assignments focused on enhancing relationship building among students and working professionals via LinkedIn, by increasing their LinkedIn network by a specific percentage, sharing distinct information from various publications, and following influencers (Cooper & Naatus, 2014). Marketing educators can also assign students the responsibility of connecting with at least 50 professionals in specific industries and companies to support their personal brand and the ability for external professionals to connect with the students (Cooper & Naatus, 2014).

A personal branding audit: In conducting a personal branding audit, students can evaluate up to twenty distinct aspects of work and academic accomplishments to measure the effectiveness of their personal brand by using a career readiness scale. These assessment categories can include keywords on resumes and online about oneself, relationships from networks, informational interviews, LinkedIn profile usage, volunteer experience, identification of fears to overcome with strategies for expanding beyond a comfort zone, in-class peer and professional performance appraisals, salary research and self-value-worth

alignment, online notices and postings, tours of prospective employment sites and knowledge gained from such experiences, mindset analysis about working hours, aspirations, and strategic career goals, professional development and continuing education, social media stance, mentors, distinctive competitive attributes compared to others seeking similar career opportunities, certifications earned and in-process preparation, personal branding challenges overcome, and career coaches.

3. Develop your LinkedIn Professional brand: After professionalizing the brand in step 2, now they can develop their professional brand on LinkedIn by including the following activities: (1) A professional Headshot for the profile picture, (2) A clear job title to reach the right people, (3) Well-organized about, experience, and education sections, and (4) A skill section appropriate for the desired job.

When students engage in LinkedIn and other social networks as part of classroom assignments, they find themselves more engaged and motivated (Rinaldo et al., 2013). Because of the interactivity within social media and the quick ability to edit and enhance a LinkedIn profile from genuine feedback from classroom peers and professors, students can enjoy the benefits of personal branding enhancement, ingratiation, and self-promotion. Engaging in LinkedIn as a social network for personal branding in classroom activities can create opportunities for shared career interests and goals among students (Clarke & Nelson, 2012). This can also allow opportunities for educators to serve as career mentors. As students interrelate in online social networks, including LinkedIn, it allows individuals to create and submit content while providing commentary that can advance and detract from a personal brand, making it a complex challenge at times (Allison et al., 2020).

Using LinkedIn, faculty can provide outlines of categorical aspects that allow students to fully engage in various features in LinkedIn to expand their personal brand. The outlines can include professional photos, background images, customized public profiles, completing the sections entitled "About" and "Education," employment, internship, and volunteer positions and history, work samples from academia and employment, listing at least 10 skills, endorsements from peers and professionals regarding skills, connections to external professional associations, academic clubs, and academic department LinkedIn pages, written recommendations, network updates, honors, awards, present and past courses completed, certifications, and resumes. Such outlines can also be evaluated in a personal branding audit. After completing these three steps the students have completed various personal branding aspects, so now they can move to the second part that consists of Communicating the Personal Brand.

Part 2: Communicating the Personal Brand

4. Active Brand presence on LinkedIn: The marketing faculty can start this second part with the students by asking them to complete the following activities in LinkedIn: (1) Create content, (2) Networking, (3) Joining groups, (4) Join conversations and stay active, and (5) Develop portfolios with college or work projects.

Marketing educators can provide a variety of course materials and assignments to university students to inspire them to focus on developing their personal brand; this can include conducting informational interviews with professionals with whom they network from LinkedIn profiles. When university students engage with professionals who understand their own personal brand, this has led to the authenticity of students seeing themselves as personal brands and enhancing the self-actualization of such students (Allison et al., 2020). By applying Bandura's self-efficacy theory for students to create educational and professional experiences such as completing specific additional or advanced marketing courses that align with career aspirations (advertising, sales, or marketing research, for example) and/or related internships, researchers indicated positive influences on personal brand authenticity; this effort focused on utilizing a structured equation modeling among 117 undergraduate business students (Allison et al., 2020). A focus by marketing educators on personal branding can offer students opportunities to genuinely focus on their personal brand and support the realization of post-graduation job searches. This can be particularly helpful in a competitive job market.

Marketing educators can also engage students in conducting experiential personal branding audits with their classmates through reviews of individual students online and offline about the perceptions their classmates have of them. This can include a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis conducted by students and shared in personal branding presentations and categorical ratings for the various LinkedIn features outlined above. Providing a grading scale of 30 points for 15 personal branding aspects that students can display on LinkedIn can serve as an effective personal branding audit conducted by student peers and professors while serving as a method for continual improvement.

Because people connected to a LinkedIn profile can contribute comments that may portray a negative

personal brand of another individual, the psychological impact of social media can also be a challenge and concern for students. Studies have also indicated negative emotions such as imposter syndrome related to lacking competency gained from using LinkedIn; this is when marketing educators can create activities that focus on enhancing advertising and content featuring new skills gained by students while also conveying that imposter syndrome is not uncommon, which has been shown to reduce negative emotions (Chatterjee, 2013; Marder et al., 2024).

Students can focus on key aspects of their education and experience on LinkedIn to draw the attention of prospective employers. Marketing educators can assign students the responsibility of securing recommendations and endorsements, applying the fundamentals of personal branding to respective individual LinkedIn profiles, and focusing on keywords and methods to enhance a LinkedIn profile as part of search engine optimization efforts, all of which can expand personal branding and serve as a means of differentiation (Cooper & Naatus, 2014).

5. Use Impression Management Behaviors on LinkedIn: The last step is to put in action the following strategies of impression management. (1) For Enhancement: Is recommended that the student look more reputable and with higher expertise in their profiles that their peers. Here the student can share work experience and extracurricular activities. (2) For Ingratiation: It is recommended that the student constantly help others because this helps them to be recognized. If they serve as volunteers in school activities or competitions, they can post it and share their experience. (3) For Self-promotion: It is recommended to communicate expertise and professionalism and for (4) Exemplification: It is recommended to exemplify dedication to a job or task by doing more than necessary.

Examples of Impression Management on LinkedIn

In the following section, we share some ideas we collected from the literature review that can provide different examples to marketing faculty about activities that they can incorporate to the blueprint especially in the use of impression management behaviors on LinkedIn.

- o *Impression Management behaviors from LinkedIn Digital storytelling ePortfolios:* Digital Portfolios can foster enhancement, ingratiation, self-promotion, and exemplification by sharing positive digital stories on LinkedIn. For example, a video featuring a student speaking in ways that align their personal brand with pleasant self-images, including professional mentors from certain industries in which a marketing student may present a video speaking alongside their mentor with a visual endorsement from the mentor, and from stories that reflect superior work achievements and aspirations, including awards.
- o *Impression Management behaviors from LinkedIn Extra-curricular activities:* Involvement in extra-curricular activities, including corporate executive marketing leadership mentorships and national presentations at academic conferences and marketing association meetings, and case study/business competitions serve as methods of exemplification.
- o *Impression management behaviors from LinkedIn profiles and outlines:* As students feature specific details on their LinkedIn profile that include a persuasive summary with industry experience, expertise, and education, lists of skills endorsed by other professionals, and a captivating headline, they foster enhancement. LinkedIn photos and background images often serve as forms of ingratiation. Customized logos, displays of affiliated organizations and logos, and professional certifications advertised in LinkedIn profiles all communicate self-promotion. An exemplification of individuals seen on LinkedIn profiles includes published professional presentations, volunteer leadership experiences, significant awards and achievements, and special projects that advanced organizations.
- o *Impression management behaviors from personal branding audits of LinkedIn profiles:* Challenging students to explore their strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities as part of a SWOT analysis and featuring its explicit aspects as employable and learning opportunities can serve as enhancements to a personal brand. Updating professional headshots and utilizing the skills of a graphic designer to improve background images are forms of ingratiation. Graphic design can also enhance self-promotion behaviors through consistent colors and images featured after receiving feedback from peers and professors. Outstanding letters of recommendation and strong connections to major organizations can serve as forms of exemplification.
- o *Impression management behaviors from personal branding audits from a career readiness scale:* Multiple keywords have become effective tools for the enhancement of individuals through words aligned with job descriptions and announcements featured in resumes and on LinkedIn profiles

(Marin & Nila, 2021). Conducting in-person informational interviews is a strategy educators can guide students to pursue career professionals as a means for projecting a self-image to others as a confident leader with experience while seeking opportunities to partner with related organizations. This fosters the process of ingratiation. Providing a positive brand-oriented mindset about working philosophy and quality hours to achieve major goals and aspirations can be effectively displayed in a LinkedIn profile as self-promotion. Demonstrating methods of how one has become comfortable with being uncomfortable through the accomplishment of leadership-oriented mental and physical challenges such as participating in university business case competitions, entrepreneurial launches, and executive leadership and teambuilding activities all relate to exemplification.

- *Impression management behaviors from individual student classroom presentations on personal branding:* When educators guide and inspire students to facilitate various presentations in the classroom that align with student goals and aspirations, these opportunities can serve as a means of advancing the personal brand of the student. As students can share their personality through the results of an assessment based on the Big Five theory (Sabini, 2018), they can align themselves with related careers as a focused communicative effort reflective of their traits and the impression management behavior of enhancement. Going beyond the display of a professional headshot by featuring professional attire worn during several classroom presentations with subsequent video links displayed in their LinkedIn profile serves to foster ingratiation. In the integrated business master's and bachelor's degree programs at the University of Central Florida (UCF), students facilitate 20 and 40 public presentations on various business topics, respectively, and reflect their strength in communicating various soft and hard technical skills. Paul Jarley, dean of the UCF College of Business Administration, often speaks about "getting to the one," including ways in which each student should differentiate themselves to gain an individual competitive advantage when seeking career opportunities (Jarley, 2021). Posting links to exemplary unique public presentations on a LinkedIn profile allows students to demonstrate their strengths for superior and possible transcendent work and commitments, often allowing them to exemplify their commitment and aspirations.

With 35 students in a graduate marketing leadership course and 81 undergraduate business courses completing the assessments, 90% of the graduate students and 76% of the undergraduate students agreed that it inspired their ability to develop their personal brand by enhancing their communication about themselves while 75% of the graduate students and 89% of the undergraduate students helped drive impression management actions such as ingratiation and self-promotion (Busch & Davis, 2018).

Implications for marketing faculty

The study highlights several important implications for academia regarding personal branding. First is a vital topic for new marketers, young business professionals, and professionals in general. This represents an opportunity and a responsibility for marketing faculty to develop activities, workshops, seminars, and courses about personal branding that can be taken by any future professional and help them in their transition from college to the job market. Also, because it is a topic that is gaining attention in industry and academia, more research needs to be conducted by marketing faculty.

The study highlights several important implications for recent business program graduates regarding personal branding strategies to start or advance their careers. The seven emerging themes of this study can help future business professionals evaluate their current practices to shape their branding strategies. Becoming aware of the importance of personal branding could help young professionals develop better strategies similar to defining their identity, personality, skill sets, and desired job to obtain the position they are looking for or get promoted within their company. In essence, professionals starting their careers need to be taught by marketing faculty about thinking strategically about their personal brand to stay competitive. Also, a recurring theme was using LinkedIn as the online personal branding communicator for the recent business graduate. According to the participants, a recent business graduate must have a well-organized LinkedIn profile with a professional headshot and actively share, comment, create content, and make new connections on LinkedIn. Another implication is the relevance of personal branding for human resources recruiters as it is a way to find the right candidate for the right job quickly. Hence, the candidate needs to have an excellent personal branding strategy to facilitate this communication process with human resources, who expect future candidates to have a polished personal brand image in professional social

media.

This subject of personal branding can be taught in different marketing courses; Personal branding can be taught in different marketing courses; here, we provide examples for market research, business communication, and professional selling.

Market research

In a qualitative study among 20 graduate business students in a marketing course, blogging in LinkedIn was analyzed for its possibilities for students to gain new knowledge and help with understanding market research (Galan & Khodabandehloo, 2016). The findings indicated that market research skills were positively acquired from the blogging experiences and further developed the students' written communication and critical thinking skills (Galan & Khodabandehloo, 2016).

To understand the implications for marketing instruction of market research courses when discussing personal branding and LinkedIn is to consider the use of hands-on experiences for analyzing populations of people who enhance and self-promote their personal brand on LinkedIn and apply what is learned in a course on market research. In a study that compared the interests of academics and business professionals in teaching students to understand and apply market research principles, both had a high desire for reviews of statistical concepts and descriptive techniques (Stern & Tseng, 2002). For example, marketing educators can assign a study of recent university business graduates by conducting a test to analyze the differences between graduates and their first post-graduation job and the personal branding efforts of such graduates on LinkedIn.

Marketing educators can enlist students to engage in market research via LinkedIn by networking with targeted professionals and supporting academic research by recruiting LinkedIn users to participate in surveys (Cooper & Naatus, 2014). Further implications from market research can also be obtained by having students assigned to seek input and research efforts conducted among individuals in LinkedIn groups (Cooper & Naatus, 2014).

Business communication

Aspects of business communication are enhanced between university graduates within a company when each shares their personal brand by differentiating their attributes to bring value to projects; similarly, employees should understand how demonstrating their intrinsic and extrinsic cues communicate their perceived quality and develop their personal brand (Busch & Davis, 2018). In a marketing assignment in large sections of principles of marketing on how to market oneself, the written business communication and critical thinking skills of students improved through learning about their personal brand and aligning it with their career goals (Smith, 2004).

Business communication skills were also used when students and graduates demonstrate written and oral communication skills reflecting their personal brand on social media, including LinkedIn. This can include assignments on establishing an online identity and personal brand by creating a pitch-related video about themselves to share with prospective employers while understanding that using marketing principles and resources can be applied to products and themselves (Edmiston, 2016).

To expand upon improvements in business communication, marketing educators can assign a peer review of personal branding statements This can aid students in communicating their uniqueness and guide them in competing with their peers for similar career opportunities (Busch & Davis, 2018).

Communicating with common interests and companies is an aspect that marketing educators can foster among students via LinkedIn in which ideas for products and services can be provided in an assignment that requires a forum (Cooper & Naatus, 2014). Marketing educators can also require students to network with vendors and clients of specific products and services to collect feedback and conduct market research (Cooper & Naatus, 2014). Another assignment can be to utilize a company's LinkedIn profile to teach students how to update and promote new information about products and to gather information from customers; this can also inspire graduates to utilize this technique (Cooper & Naatus, 2014). To enhance global communication skills, educators can assign students a succinct article that is graded and improved upon, and then subsequently posted on a LinkedIn profile, offering possibilities for expanded connections and stronger profiles (Cooper & Naatus, 2014).

Professional Selling

When focusing on personal branding, students can learn how to apply marketing strategies often used for products and services by applying related skills to themselves. In return, they can also apply their

personal branding promotional strategies to sales training programs and become stronger as sales professionals. Marketing educators can use theories in business communication and sales to provide lessons on sales and personal branding together. Activities can allow students to practice sales presentations and personal branding pitches publicly to potential employers whose professional representatives may visit the classroom and through mentoring opportunities through public methods, including online LinkedIn featured video presentations, pitches at sales and marketing association meetings, and through professional selling mentoring sessions facilitated by alumni, educators, and professionals. This can expand into professional and mentoring recommendations, sales training modules, updates and news on sales activities, and written journals reflecting the development of sales training and personal branding efforts (Juwito et al., 2022). By featuring sales pitches and presentations on LinkedIn video posts that occur after extensive course activities aimed at improving sales training and personal brand development and pitches, students can gain psychological impacts of social media connections based on improving their confidence and competence while reducing their anxiety (Juwito et al., 2022). In an extensive study of 301 users of LinkedIn, it was determined that most had extroverted personalities and gained connections from social capital that benefitted themselves and their personal brand (Ma & Leung, 2019).

Marketing faculty can advocate and help students measure the effectiveness of their impression management through enhancement, ingratiation, self-promotion, and exemplification. Educators can also provide numerous experiential learning opportunities for university students at the undergraduate and graduate levels to focus on their personal branding. These can be conducted through initiating LinkedIn profiles, ongoing development and audits of LinkedIn profiles, classroom presentations on personal branding, and personal branding and career readiness scales.

By providing sales training while using LinkedIn, marketing educators can require students to target specific prospects as buyers, clients, and customers while utilizing the details from specific LinkedIn profiles to customize sales pitches (Cooper & Naatus, 2014). As part of the post-graduation strategy for aligning personal branding with sales training, educators can also teach how to utilize individual connections on LinkedIn to gain access to a company for business-to-business sales opportunities (Cooper & Naatus, 2014).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper discerns how recent business graduates can develop personal branding strategies to get the desired job or get promoted within a company based on recent business professionals' perceptions, experiences, and recommendations. One of the limitations of the present study is the limited sample size of the focus groups and online survey. Another limitation is the limited scope of the sample, as it included business alumni from one university exclusively. Although these limitations reduce the generalizability of the study, the emerging results are intriguing as they are helpful for academia and practitioners. Future studies should empirically test impression management dimensions and the strategies in social media found in this research. Although one university, where two of the authors of this article teach, has a departmental page on LinkedIn that provides discussion posts that support ongoing personal branding development among graduates, marketing educators can offer workshops to emphasize key marketing lessons related to personal branding.

Another limitation of this research is the difficulty of clearly differentiating impression management dimensions using the behaviors, attitudes, and strategies mentioned by the study participants. Future research should focus on young professionals' understanding of impression management dimensions and their perceived differences between these constructs. A longitudinal study would help understand how personal branding changes as young professionals evolve into mid-level managers and beyond. Cross-cultural studies can help understand the role of culture in personal branding strategies. For example, a study could investigate how personal branding is impacted by social norms and by how closely they are followed by members of diverse cultural groups (Gelfand, 2012). The development of a personal brand scale is another interesting future research. Furthermore, marketing educators can conduct quasi-experimental research conducted from pre-test and post-test designs to establish possible cause-and-effect relationships based on personal branding presentations by university students early in a course followed by marketing instruction and subsequent presentations on personal branding. The same effort may be applied after marketing instruction on personal branding audits on LinkedIn and career readiness scales focusing on LinkedIn and personal branding.

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