

How LinkedIn is used to build Personal Brand

Topic:

To evaluate LinkedIn as a social network used to build personal brand among young professionals.

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Declaration:

I hereby declare that the Research Report submitted for the BA Honours Strategic Brand Communication degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for degree purposes.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Chapter one provides an outline and background to support the reasoning behind the research topic chosen by disclosing the researcher's rationale in the context of the real world. Likewise, chapter one provides context to and justification for the chosen topic; evaluating how LinkedIn is used to build personal brand, specifically among young users in South Africa within the legal profession.

ABSTRACT

Personal branding connotes a way in which individuals can stand out from the crowd through applying a series of self-promotion methods which emphasise on their unique selling points. LinkedIn is a social networking site widely known as a recruitment platform that offers its users the opportunity to create professional online profiles accessible to industry stakeholders. Although previous literature on personal branding and social media exists, they often highlight personal brand as a means to achieve fame and popularity and fail to address whether applying personal brand building principles and techniques can have practical implications in professional career fields. This research study aims to evaluate LinkedIn as a personal brand building platform through a content analysis of several user profiles, corroborated by in-depth interviews. The researcher seeks to explore how each of the sampled profiles makes use of LinkedIn's features to build their brand.

1.1 Rationale

The researcher's interest in personal branding developed over the course of her academic career as an honours student in strategic brand communication at the Vega institution. The researcher has acquired a vast amount of knowledge on the topics of brand and branding and has mindfully connected these learnings to real-world scenarios to not only build better brands but better societies.

Within South Africa's society, unemployment is among the key issues faced by many, particularly the youth (Stats SA Q1 Report, 2018). This study serves to begin a much larger research goal, through which, at master's level, the researcher seeks to further explore the role that personal branding could potentially play in helping South Africa's unemployed graduate population gain credibility within their chosen industries to the end of finding relevant

and sustainable employment. The focus of this study is to critically look at LinkedIn and how it enables users to build their personal brand through the platform.

1.2 Problem Statement

"South Africa's unemployment rate has risen to 27.2% during the second quarter of this year, up from 26.7% of the first 3 months of 2018" (Stats SA Q1 Report, 2018). No sector is entirely safe, including sought-after white-collar industries such as finance and law. According to an article published in Business Day, not all LLB¹ graduates will go on to do their articles in good law firms. "With the possibility of inferior career prospects hanging over their heads, law students need to equip themselves as best possible to ensure that their futures do not fade into obscurity." (Go Legal, 2018).

Although the Fourth Industrial Revolution² has brought on the emergence of several career paths and opportunities globally which previously never existed due to rapid technological advances (Schwab & Samans, 2016); many young South Africans still look to traditionally respected career paths seen to offer a better quality of life financially. In addition to this, Schwab and Samans (2016) put forward, that across multiple industries and in several countries, many of the most sought after occupations or specialties did not exist 10 or even five (5) years ago and they predict that the rate of change is set to accelerate. However currently; education, economics and business management, engineering, information sciences, medical and health professions, and law are listed among South Africa's most popular degree qualifications, according to a Stats SA Quarterly Labour Force Survey (Business Tech, 2017). The same article states that these same qualifications combined accounted for a total of 1 596 590 graduates in 2017, across South Africa (Business Tech, 2017).

While some global companies are now beginning to employ a more open-minded approach to recruitment and reconsidering the need for a university degree (Akhtar, 2019) (Sherriff, 2015), it remains that tertiary education seems to be a significant means for many young South

¹ An LLB is also known as a Bachelor of Laws and is the professional law degree awarded after completing undergraduate education. This degree gives students the fundamental understanding required to take the next steps towards practicing law (Law Studies, 2019)

² The Fourth Industrial Revolution denotes a new chapter in human development, enabled by extraordinary technology advances which merging the physical, digital and biological worlds in ways that create both huge promise and potential peril. (World Economic Forum, 2019)

Africans to uplift themselves from poverty. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than through the “Fees must fall” protests that occurred across South African universities in 2017. University students across the country showed their desperation to get an opportunity to attain a higher level of education by demanding that tertiary school fees be fully subsidised by the government (Davids & Waghid, 2016). Even so, despite achieving a degree, many graduates still battle to find employment within their respective fields of study. In 2016, graduates struggling to find employment began to bring the matter to light by standing on the side of the road in their ceremonial graduation attire begging for work making headlines and starting the “hire a graduate” movement on social media (IOL, 2016). According to the Business Day, a degree and deep desire to work isn’t always enough (Business Day, 2017). With the promise of a bright future dashed by the harsh realities of the working world, which according to some recruitment experts often values connections over qualifications (IOL, 2019), it begs the question; beyond acquiring the technical and theoretical qualifications, what more can graduates do to compete in the ever-evolving job marketplace?

According to Rampersad (2008) strong and authentic personal branding leads to a differentiated positioning within the career marketplace through actively distinguishing oneself by managing perceptions. In doing so successfully, those who employ his methods can potentially get recruiters to see them as the only solution to their problem (Rampersad, 2008).

This research study will evaluate LinkedIn, as a social networking site for professionals, and look at the features and mechanisms it has in place to assist users in building their personal brand.

1.3 Research Questions

1.3.1 What perceptions do young professionals in South Africa have of personal branding on LinkedIn?

By asking this question the researcher seeks to evaluate young LinkedIn users’ perspectives on the concept of personal brand and their intentionality when using LinkedIn to build their personal brand. The questionnaire developed for the in-depth interviews is designed to gain insight into the value if any, that LinkedIn users see in using LinkedIn both tangible and not, and in comparison to other alternative brand building platforms.

1.3.2 What are the current personal branding trends on LinkedIn?

This research question seeks to understand the prevailing patterns among young professionals on LinkedIn, with insights being gained both from an unobtrusive content analysis of the sample profiles and from developing a thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews. By understanding these platform usage trends, the researcher expects to evaluate these against LinkedIn's prescribed best practice to evaluate where gaps may lie.

1.3.3 Has the personal branding trend influenced the usage of LinkedIn as a personal branding tool amongst the young professional population in South Africa against Dr Rampersad's Authentic Personal Branding Model?

Rampersad's personal branding model comprises four stages which he prescribes as the necessary steps to take towards building a strong and authentic personal brand. These steps will guide the coding of the unobtrusive content analysis to explore how LinkedIn's platform and features fulfil Rampersad's requirements. By understanding user perspectives of personal branding on LinkedIn, assessing trends visible on the platform and uncovered from in-depth interviews, the researcher intends to bring the data together to evaluate how LinkedIn facilitates persona brand building for its users.

1.4 Research Objectives

1.4.1 Evaluate the existing perceptions of personal branding on LinkedIn among young professionals in South Africa.

The objective here is to gain insight into whether or not the concept of personal brand is valued among young professional users of LinkedIn.

1.4.2 Assess current personal brand building trends being used on LinkedIn.

The objective is to observe current patterns of use on the LinkedIn platform, within the natural context of the social site and through in-depth interviews with LinkedIn users.

1.4.3 Explore the extent of influence the personal branding trend has had on the use of LinkedIn.

The objective is to evaluate whether users' perceptions around the value of a personal brand have influenced current usage of and trends on LinkedIn, using Rampersad's personal brand building model as the framework.

1.5 Limitations and Delimitations

1.5.1 Limitations

Limitations are factors outside of the researcher's control which have a limiting effect on the research study itself which subsequently affect the conclusions drawn thereof (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014:275). Examples of limitations to a research study include, but are not limited to, financial and time constraints. Constraints to this study include location; the researcher's population and sample are localised to the Johannesburg area of South Africa. This is due to a lack of resources and time to explore other potential participants across South Africa. Having a wider geographical reach could have potentially increased the accuracy of the conclusion drawn on the findings because a wider data which is set more representative of South Africa's national population across demographics and socio-graphics would have been made available to the researcher.

The time in which the research study needs to be completed also poses as a limiting factor to the depth and richness of the data collected and analysed. As the researcher has been given a period of two months to research after developing the theoretical foundation; only a certain depth of insight was viable to uncover with a limited amount of time.

1.5.2 Delimitations

Unlike limitations, delimitations are factors within the researcher's control and are a direct product of the various and specific decisions made by the researcher to clearly define the scope of the research (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014:276). In other words, delimitations set boundaries clearly defining the central focus of the study; identifying what the study is and is not about to guide the study and subsequent findings.

The parameters in which the study has taken place are confined to LinkedIn among many various potential personal brand building platforms available within the digital space. This has been done to specifically target the sample of the population pursuing personal brand building in a professional career capacity, in line with their tertiary qualification and LinkedIn makes this information readily available for evaluation. The study is focusing on young professionals within the legal sector only, as this career path is ranked among the topmost desired

qualifications in South Africa (Business Tech; 2017). Young in the case of this study is based on the time passed since the participant completed their LLB qualification up until now; i.e. years of professional experience and in this case years of experience has been limited to less than 10 years in order to ensure that the research is consistent with the real-world problem facing the greater South African youth population. The researcher has chosen only to look at profiles of law professionals that have obtained their LLB at a public university, as opposed to a private college. LinkedIn provides a filtering option by the school, of which only five of South Africa's public universities are listed. The researcher will focus the study on these five options to exhaust variables in the study which may skew the data findings.

1.7 Key Concepts

1.7.1 *Brand*

This research study has adopted the definition of brand as per Ashley Friedlein, who submits that brand is "the total of how someone perceives a particular organisation and branding to be the process of shaping that perception" (Cohen, 2011). This definition has been adopted in line with Rampersad's theory which states that effective personal branding is about intentionally shaping and managing perceptions of the relevant stakeholders within the job marketplace (Rampersad, 2008)

1.7.2 *Personal Brand*

The definition adopted for this particular study is Rampersad (2008) who proposes that "successful personal branding entails managing the perceptions effectively and controlling and influencing how others perceive you and think of you. Having a strong personal brand seems to be a very important asset in today's online, virtual and individual age. It is becoming increasingly essential and is the key to personal success." This definition falls in line with the nature of the study which takes place on LinkedIn, an online platform.

1.7.3 *Personal Brand Communication Platforms*

From the various pieces of literature read by the researcher, several conclusions were drawn concerning personal brand building platforms however for this research the definition adopted for personal brand communication platforms comes from Shaker and Hafiz (2014). They propose that the virtual space provides different platforms for individuals to brand themselves

and build their personal brand identity through Web 2.0 technology. According to Shaker and Hafiz (2014), online personal websites and social media platforms are driven by Web 2.0 technologies, encourage individuals to provide user-generated content and through this process, the internet has become a platform for maintaining personal brands. In line with the personal brand definition adopted by Rampersad (see section 1.7.2), having a strong personal brand in today's virtual age is an asset.

1.7.4 Social Networking

Social networking has many varying definitions; however, for this research study the researcher has adopted the definition given by Marketing Terms (2019) which defines the term as "the process of creating, building, and nurturing virtual communities and relationships between people online." This definition, out of the different definitions that the researcher looked at, touches on the prevailing argument addressed earlier in the problem statement (see section 1.2) which suggests that more is required to connect qualified graduates to their desired career path, beyond having the relevant qualification. The literature review (see chapter 2) goes into greater detail as to what more possibly entails in this case. This definition ties in with the nature of the study taking place on LinkedIn which is a platform for users to connect with other like-minded people and build relationships online (virtually).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter serves to consolidate and integrate the various pieces of literature read and reviewed to ground the research problem and validate the viability of the research topic. The researcher has built a theoretical foundation to guide the study to explore an area of personal brand research which has not already been researched before, to add to the existing body of knowledge on the topic. This review covers the concept of brand in broad strokes to give context to the main concept of personal brand. New and old theories on personal brand have been looked at to give a holistic perspective on the concept. The researcher looked at the various platforms – blogs, YouTube, websites, social media – which are being used to build personal brand by an amateur, professional and celebrity personalities. Finally, the literature is narrowed down to social networking sites, in particular, being used to build personal brand.

Introduction

Statistics showed that in the first quarter of 2018 the South African youth remained vulnerable in the labour market irrespective of education level; with the unemployment rate for skilled, graduated youth between the ages of 25 and 34 sitting at 10.2% (Stats SA Q1 Report, 2018). In the same year, Jacki Lloyd published an article concerning alternative career paths for law graduates and according to this article, typically sought-after white-collar industries, which require highly skilled practitioners, such as finance and law are not impervious to the greater youth unemployment problem in South Africa. With some law graduates possibly facing inferior career prospects, Lloyd admits candidates need to equip themselves to ensure that they remain relevant within the industry beyond their standard qualifications (Lloyd, 2018).

Several studies have been conducted both nationally and internationally, concerning who millennials are perceived to be in the context of today's society. In 2014, Jen Hubley Luckwaldt advised that there were three reasons why employers today are hesitating to hire newly graduated employees, with the number one reason being what she described as the overall branding problem around the millennial generation (Luckwaldt, 2014). The article suggests that perceptions such as the millennial generation being difficult to manage and inexperienced, tended to pose as obstacles in the employment process.

Rampersad (2008) theorises; through actively distinguishing oneself by intentionally managing perceptions and building a strong personal brand, candidates can differentiate

themselves within the job marketplace. This cross-sectional qualitative phenomenological research study seeks to evaluate LinkedIn as a social networking platform used to build personal brand among young South African professionals within the legal sector. This research will investigate current perceptions young professionals have of the concept of personal brand; existing personal branding trends on LinkedIn and explore whether personal branding trends have influenced the usage of LinkedIn among young professionals using Rampersad's Authentic Personal Branding Model (2008) as a framework.

2.1 Brand

The concept of brand has evolved over the years and continues to do so today as brand becomes more of an integral part of the overall business strategy for some of the world's most pervasive global brands. The concept of brand is said to be century's old, linking back to a time when brand was known as the act of identifying ownership of livestock with unique burn marks (Klopper & North, 2015:15). Today, we have come as far as having companies like Interbrand that evaluate brand equity for global brands, which has allowed businesses to tangibly measure the effects of marketing a branded product versus an unbranded product thus understanding the value of their brand (Klopper & North, 2015:43). When it comes to measuring brand equity, many different models exist which look at the various intrinsic and extrinsic qualities that make up a brand. For example, Keller (2008) suggests that the quality of a brand should be taken from an outside-in perspective, based on the customer perceptions, covering aspects such as brand identity; brand meaning; brand response and brand relationships (Klopper & North, 2015:41)

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), a brand is a "name, term, sign, symbol or design or a combination of them, intended to identify goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate from those of the competition" (Klopper & North, 2016:15). Alternative and more philosophical definitions such as that of Ashley Friedlein, submit brand to be, "the total of how someone perceives a particular organisation and branding to be the process of shaping that perception" (Cohen, 2011). Although these two definitions may differ in their emphasis, a common thread among them and various other brand perspectives are that brands must be distinct and easy to set apart from competitor brands whether through visual elements, service and product offering or organisational experience.

Klopper and North (2015) suggest that marketers have some brand elements at their disposal through which they can identify and enhance their product or service using brand tactfully. A brand can be looked at from a legal perspective such as a trademark of ownership, from a design and visual perspective such as a logo and a brand can also be looked at as an instrument used to reduce risk. Each of these elements, when employed, intends to further assist in distinguishing and protecting the brand identity, brand positioning and brand equity to the end of prolonging business and brand prosperity and survival within the market, where it competes (Klopper & North, 2015:7).

As stated by Klopper and North (2015) there are many types of brands; generic brands, manufacture brands, distributor brands, and online brands. Generic brands describe those brands which once were leaders in their field and became a household name and manufacture brands, which are made and owned by the manufacturer. There are distributor brands that are commonly known as supermarket or house brands, those which are labelled by their distributors but manufactured by another brand and online brands which are well-known brands built on the worldwide web. In addition to these, there are service brands, product brands, corporate brands and personal brands, which is a relatively newer concept that has been introduced and continues to emerge as an evolutionary facet of brand theory (Klopper & North 2015;16).

Peters (1997) published an article, which was perhaps before it's time, in Fast Company, titled The Brand Called You, where he suggested that people can learn a key lesson from big-name brands, a lesson which he believes can work for anyone interested in applying the basic brand theory in order to stand out and be successful in today's competitive job marketplace. According to Klopper and North (2015;19) brand is a social construct and in theory, as a brand at its core pertains to a promise made and consistently kept, people have the potential capacity to be branded within and of themselves through their distinct identities, unique offering i.e. talent and knowledge base. Therefore the strength and effectiveness of that brand as such would hinge on the consistency and ability one has to deliver on everything that one promises.

As mentioned in the theoretical analysis above, the concept of brand has transformed over time, manifesting in different shapes and forms and with each form taken on over the years, brand as a concept has shown to be versatile and widely applicable in many spheres. As the key characteristic of successful brands lies within their ability to stand out amongst others and stay top of mind within their consumer market, this study will look at how brand as a concept is applicable and practiced through personal branding in particular.

2.2 Personal Branding

Peters' (1997) perspective on personal brand is that individuals are every bit as much a brand like Nike or Coke. In a blog article Peters (2019) wrote about what personal brand is not, he goes on to say that a personal brand is a promise made to the marketplace and the world by an individual and that everyone makes these promises, therefore, having a personal brand is not a choice. However, he qualifies this by adding that the significance and power of a personal brand come from the meaning of that brand from the perspective of the individual who owns it, as well as the social context in which the individual interacts and the brand competes.

Rampersad (2008) echoes these sentiments, proposing in his Authentic Brand Building literature that, "in life, as in business, branding is more effective, powerful, and sustainable than marketing and sales and (is) an effective way to eliminate your competitors." He argues that authentic personal brand building stands to benefit those looking to stand out in their professional field by stimulating meaningful perceptions, forming a memorable identity and thus having the power to influence prospects into seeing candidates, with a distinct and authentic personal brand, as the only solution to their problem.

The concept of personal brand can more obviously be seen in celebrities like Oprah Winfrey (Rampersad, 2008), who have large and well known personal brands to the extent of becoming household names themselves. However personal branding trends point towards going beyond providing an avenue through which notoriety and fame can be accomplished to becoming a conduit through which a significant impact on the success of everyday white-collar practitioners in their professional fields can be made. The subject matter has taken on a deeper and broader meaning. A research study on the relevance of personal branding in today's globalised society conducted by Ioan, Luca and Sasu (2014), advises that a person

and all that a person offers, with regards to talent, personality traits, and character, is similar to a product and can, therefore, be marketed in order to be known.

A research study done in Romania, on the personal brand marketing of doctors on social media, suggested that due to the significant shift in the way in which patients gather medical information, from going to doctors directly to doing online research themselves first, it has since become important for doctors as well as other professionals within the service industry to have an online presence (Ioan et al, 2014). The results of the study showed that of the sample population, 70% of the doctors surveyed not only actively made use of social media to communicate professional industry-related information but also left their comment feature on, allowing patients to engage with them and the information shared openly and directly. Rampersad (2008) looks at building a personal brand that is authentic and suggests that a part of doing so successfully entails making a positive emotional connection with oneself before this can be authentically displayed and perceived by external parties. He goes on to say sustainable personal brand can be achieved by considering criteria such as authenticity, integrity, consistency, specialisation, authority, distinctiveness being relevant, visible and persistent as well as goodwill and performance.

If a personal brand does not deliver according to its brand promise and focusses only on selling and promoting oneself, this can be interpreted in a negative light and work against building a successful positive brand (Rampersad, 2008). Authenticity in building brand has become necessary for all brand types as the marketplace has become more transparent and competitive through greater information access online and the proliferation of social networks.

Arruda (2016) expands on this sentiment, putting forth that a generic job title like a doctor or lawyer is merely a word or phrase and is too broad to be the sole driver of personal brand. He suggested that having a specific statement of what an individual's brand stands for is the key to successfully distinguishing oneself within the job marketplace. Peters (1997) advocates that that prospective job candidate's start thinking like brand managers of top global brands by asking themselves "What is it that my product or service does that makes it different?" This highlights the importance of not solely focusing on one aspect of personal branding such as skills, talent or qualification but also integrating this aspect within the context of the person as a whole, inclusive of personality, strong character traits, and area of specialisation.

Like the greater branding concept, personal brand is about analysing what unique attributes an individual has, which makes them stand out among the competition and capitalising on these features to drive their brand in an authentic and meaningful way to resonate with their audience.

2.3 Personal Brand Communication Platforms

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has brought about new technologies and subsequently changes to the way society behaves and operates (Schwab, 2016). In an article published for the World Economic Forum, Schwab (2016) says that these changes will affect the human's identity and all the issues linked to it; among these changes Schwab submits that it will affect the time devoted to work and leisure, how careers paths are developed, how skills are cultivated and how relationships and networks are formed and nurtured. Technology has changed the way people shop, consume media, find information and connect with other people.

Human interaction taking place online or via a smart device is becoming the new norm with the advent of social networks and media, changing the way people stay in touch with friends and family, find love and recruit. On-demand media is becoming the new standard where consumers can now make use of YouTube and streaming services to watch what they want when they want, on the other end; it has also opened up a door for user-generated content where people can publish their own stories and content for others to find.

Today, search forms a part of daily life used for functional purposes like finding the nearest petrol station to more philosophical searches like finding out the meaning of life (Freitas, 2013). The internet as a whole has made it easier for those searching as well as those hoping to be found, to pursue what they are looking for and put themselves in public view respectively. As previously mentioned social networks have created transparency between brands and consumers which has never been seen before and in light of this has opened the door to new opportunities for its users. And users have a multitude of options when it comes to social media platforms which can be used to communicate their unique personal brand.

Digital media channels such as personal web blogs, social media, and video blogging can be used to communicate and build personal brand. Within each of the various platforms are features that allow users to get as creative and interactive as they want when communicating their brand story. Some channels offer live video streaming capabilities where users can capture an audience in real-time while others create a space for users to publish original written content in their area of interest.

According to a 2017 Qwerty Digital white paper on South Africa's digital landscape, approximately 28.6 million (52% of the population) make use of the internet in some format. South Africa's unique digital landscape has shown that a majority of the population makes use of mobile devices to access the internet. When looking at how time spent on mobile devices is allocated, the majority used it to access a social media platform. Likewise, in South Africa, Facebook, Whatsapp, YouTube, and LinkedIn rank among the top four most widely used social networking platforms, with South African between the ages of 25 and 34 leading social media usage on Facebook.

There are several different ways in which personal brand can be built and maintained over time, with many personal brand icons like Beyoncé as mentioned before, making use of several communication platforms to engage the various target audiences.

2.4 Social Networking

Networking is defined by the Business Dictionary (2019) as "creating a group of acquaintances and associates and keeping it active through regular communication for mutual benefit." Traditional networking used to only take place in person, in work settings and industry events and maintained through traditional correspondence such as the telephone. However, today networks can be created virtually, online. Social networking is internet-based networking taking place on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, among others, whereby content and ideas are shared to stay in touch with the online community for personal and professional reasons (MacMillan, 2019).

Networking, within the context of professional service industries, has traditionally been a critical success factor in career progression and has taken on a new dimension in the error of social media (IOL, 2019). Referring back to the Romanian study conducted to observe

doctors' social networking activity, the study showed the 60% of the doctors who participated spent between one hour and an hour and a half on social networks, during which time they interact with patient through answering questions and sharing medical information (Ioan et al., 2014).

Several human resources and recruitment specialists contributed to an article on the Independent Online (IOL) advising that graduates need to take advantage of networking opportunities because in today's job marketplace many are employed through referral and recommendations rather than traditional channels (IOL, 2019). In a Forbes article, Silbeck (2019) wrote about growing one's network on LinkedIn advising that "Building and maintaining valuable connections on LinkedIn is a great way to kick-start your career. To make the most of the opportunities the platform offers, devote a bit of time and effort into putting the best version of you forward. You'll reap the benefits of strong professional connections and gain a leg up on the competition." Fisher (2017) a frequent contributor to the LinkedIn Official Blog advised that more than 70% of professionals get hired at companies where they have a personal connection and that candidates who are referred by an employee are 8 times more likely to get hired. In summary, connections in the career space certainly count for something.

This research study seeks to explore how users of LinkedIn leverage the social networking site's features to open up career opportunities through personal brand building.

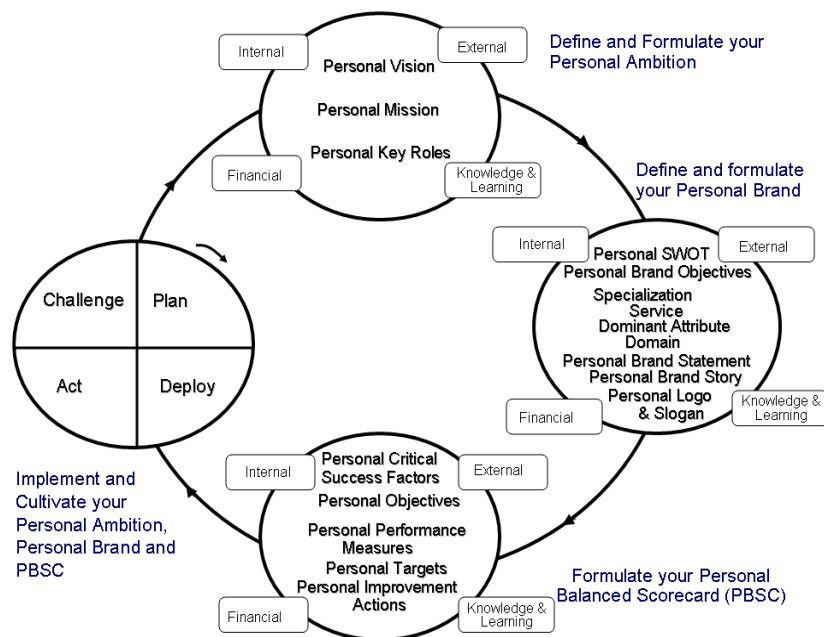
According to Qwerty Digital's 2017 digital statistics report, nearly 30% of South Africans make use of LinkedIn. Unlike general social networking sights like Facebook, professional social networks like LinkedIn have provided a platform that caters to facilitate social networking specifically for industry and business professionals. The niche platform has created an opportunity for those looking for work opportunities and those looking to advertise work opportunities to connect and engage with purpose.

2.5 Framework

Rampersad's Authentic Personal Branding Model (2008) provides a four-factor framework in creating an authentic personal brand. It focuses on defining a comprehensive personal ambition statement that communicates personal vision, mission, and key roles. Factor two looks at the beginning to build a strong personal brand through a situational analysis looking

at the various elements making up one's personal brand. Step three in the framework is to create a personal balanced scorecard regarding objectives and areas of improvement and lastly, towards building an authentic personal brand one must have an action plan to implement.

2.5.1 Rampersad's Authentic Personal Branding Model (2008)



Rampersad's model has been used in an article written in the Human Capital Review, about how to seek opportunities within a financial crisis economy through effective personal branding (Human Capital Review, 2019) to illustrate how the framework steps can help working professionals to remain relevant in their industry even in dire economic crisis.

This framework has been chosen for the study as it looks at an authentic personal brand holistically, from the inside out. The framework addresses the matter of understanding self, strengths and weaknesses, differentiating self through assessing these along with talents, experience, and skills; setting and measuring personal goals based on these assessments and finally developing and implementing a viable personal brand. The framework aims to help professionals set themselves apart in a cluttered job marketplace. The researcher, through this study, will see how these elements have shown themselves evident in how young South African professionals in the legal sector build their personal brands on LinkedIn.

Conclusion

The fluidity of brand has opened up opportunities for the concept to be adopted in many spheres, even being utilised by people to propel themselves within their chosen career paths. Today's technology has opened up the door for individuals to communicate their personal brand with relative ease through various online social networking platforms. Both of these developments combine to create opportunities for individuals to be empowered and actively take ownership of their career progression. Even more so, niche professional social networking sites such as LinkedIn have assisted in further creating viable networking opportunities online. Through this study, the researcher seeks to explore how young professionals within the legal sector in South Africa make use of LinkedIn to build their personal brand and evaluate the effectiveness of their personal brand-building efforts against Rampersad's framework. The research methodology will go into detail as to how the researcher has chosen to proceed with carrying out this study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter three addresses the research methodology, which looks at the perspective from which the research will be approached and the manner with which the research will be conducted and through this process, how the data will be collected and analysed. Now that the problem and rationale have been theoretically backed by existing literature, this chapter lays out how the research has been approached and fortified, regarding the principles of trustworthiness, credibility and research ethics necessary for a sound research study.

3.1 Paradigm

Within the field of research, there are three main perspectives from which research can be approached, each linked to a respective research design approach.

Quantitative research is defined by its objectivity and numerical characteristics (Maree, 2018: 162) and when being conducted undertakes a positivist paradigm (worldview). Positivism proposes that "only objective, an observable fact can be the basis for science" (Maree, 2018:22) thereby making theoretical claims processed through this worldview, subject to be proven by scientific law using systemic methodical procedures. Hence the nature of research taken on through this worldview is highly dependent on its measurability.

Conversely to quantitative research, qualitative research has a more subjective approach focusing on data quality and emphasising interpreting the meaning of words and symbols instead of numbers. Qualitative research approach looks at holistic interactions of humanity in the context of its surrounding environment, seeking to uncover and understand how meaning is derived through symbols, rituals, social structures and social roles (Maree, 2018: 53). Qualitative researchers take in an interpretivism worldview in their efforts to uncover and understand the meaning of data collected.

Lastly, mixed-method research combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches in the relevant ratios according to the nature of the study. The hybrid method takes on a critical realism paradigm which purposes to make use of numerical and linguistic findings to have broader societal value, relating to gender class, race and some social issues (Maree, 2018: 23).

This particular study is a qualitative one and will be conducted from an interpretivism worldview. As qualitative research emphasises understanding rather than defining, the interpretivist paradigm is underpinned by five cornerstone assumptions that are integral to the nature of the research topic at hand, which seeks to observe the use of LinkedIn among young professionals to build personal brand.

According to Maree (2018: 61-62), this approach assumes that 1) human life can only be understood from within, though the exploration of individual subjective experiences and 2) that reality is socially constructed and greater understanding can be attained by observing people within their natural social contexts. Maree (2018:61-62) goes on to say 3) that nuances are shaped and developed within the human mind first and through exploring this process, researchers can gain insight and comprehension into meaning attributed to the social phenomena being explored. Hence, Maree (2018:61-62) concludes that 4) as knowledge and understanding of reality increases this contributes to the body of knowledge on the phenomena helping to better make sense of society and the world as 5) reality does not exist outside of human knowledge and understanding.

Through conducting this qualitative research the researcher seeks to offer additional insight to the body of knowledge on the topic of personal brand and social networking by pursuing a greater understanding of the use of social networking within the personal brand building space by young professionals in South Africa.

3.2 Research Design and Approach

The qualitative research methodology was used to conduct the cross-sectional study; focusing on gaining greater insight into the phenomena of personal branding and how LinkedIn facilitates brand building for its users. As discussed in the paradigm theory above (see section 3.1) qualitative research would be best suited to carry out this research as its nature is to pursue a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon. The researcher seeks to observe current behaviours on the platform unobtrusively to understand LinkedIn trends among young professionals. This data will be supplemented by data collected in the in-depth interviews of participants.

3.3 Population and Sampling

3.3.1 Population

A population is the “total group of people or entities from whom information is required” (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014:132).

As such the population of this research is LinkedIn as the content analysis will take place on this platform. The population specifically looks at the segment of LinkedIn users who are young South African professionals within the legal practice industry that are active on this social networking platform. On LinkedIn, there are currently over 2200 search results that appear when using the search term "lawyer" and filtering the search down to people in the "Johannesburg area, South Africa" (LinkedIn, 2019). This total population has been narrowed down to give the researcher a targeted and accessible sample, which is further detailed under the sampling procedures outlined in section 3.3.3.

3.3.2 Sampling

According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014:135), a sample is a "subset or segment of the population that is considered to be representative of the population". This is particularly the case with regards to the quantitative research method, where a representative sample which shares characteristics of the population, is required (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014:135).

Stratified purposive sampling is a hybrid approach which aims to compare the variances in the application and/or interpretation of a singular phenomenon, among selected homogeneous groups (Maree, 2018: 82).

The research study has been carried out using stratified purposive sampling to pull the sample from the accessible population of young South African professionals active on LinkedIn within the legal practice industry in the Johannesburg region. Based on the real-world problem contextualising the research and literature found suggesting that qualification on its own is not enough to guarantee a job opportunity, the researcher will be using universities to segment the sample into strata. By doing so this will test the existing literature as to whether or not a qualification gained at a specific university has an impact on the employability of a graduate.

The researcher intends will use the below-listed criteria (see section 3.3.3) to draw a viable sample of profiles to conduct unobtrusive data analysis. These steps would need to be followed accordingly to draw from the same pool of profiles. The researcher has ensured that the steps are consistent on mobile and desktop searches on the LinkedIn platform to eliminate variables to any future replications of the study.

Of the ten profiles fitting the criteria, the researcher will use convenient sampling to select two available participants for in-depth interviews. The participants being selected will be interviewed after the researcher has conducted a content analysis of their LinkedIn profile and collected the unobtrusive data to have an initial background on usage trends observed online and see how this compares to the participants' views on personal brand building on LinkedIn.

3.3.3 Sampling Procedure and Consideration Factors

- Search the term "lawyer"
- Filter – People
- Filter – Location – “Johannesburg area, South Africa”
- Filter – Schools –
 - University of Witwatersrand (Wits)
 - University of Cape Town (UCT)
 - University of Johannesburg (UJ)
 - University of Pretoria (UP)
 - University of South Africa (UNISA)
- Filter – Industries – “Law Practice”
 - The researcher has specifically looked at qualified law professionals practicing in their field of study. It should be acknowledged that LinkedIn offers the alternative “law service” as an industry filter which sounds similar to “law practice”. However, upon researching the differences, the researcher concluded that the choice is at the profile user’s discretion and according to (Wardblawg, 2011) there is little to no difference between the two categories. The researcher chose to filter using “law practice” with the expectation that this filter would result

in a population sample of graduates practicing law in a law firm as opposed to providing legal services within a corporate outside of the legal fraternity.

- Summary – a brief synopsis often used to introduce the profile user, their career aspirations and passion. In the initial search, this section of the profile shows as a summary however on the actual profile this section is under the heading "About". Throughout the research, the researcher will use these terms interchangeably as they refer to the same section of the LinkedIn profile.
- The number of connections – this indicates the number of people in the users' network on LinkedIn. It was mentioned in the literature that some recruitment specialists argue that one's network is the key to career opportunities (see section 2.4) hence this is a key sampling criterion. On LinkedIn the terms "connections" and "followers" are used to refer to the profile users' network, hence throughout this research, the researcher will be using these terms interchangeably.
- Male / Female - one of each from each institution, which has been chosen according to the highest number of connections
- Endorsed skills – a feature that allows users to display their key professional skills and allows other connections to verify their abilities through endorsement, thus giving them credibility in their field.
- Profile picture
- University in which LLB was completed – in some universities in South Africa a bachelor's degree is required before one can take the two year LLB degree (Business Tech, 2018). As some sample profile users have cited several qualifications from different universities, to ensure an accurate representation across the various universities, the researcher has validated user profiles by allocating them according to the respective university from which their LLB qualification was completed.
- Year of completion – to gauge professional experience and general age bracket the researcher looked at whether the qualification was completed within the 10-year boundary drawn out in the delimitations (see section 1.5.2)

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Both field and unobtrusive data collection methods have been used to fortify the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. The researcher has collected data from 10 profiles, evaluating LinkedIn profiles of lawyers who obtained their LLB undergraduate qualification at

one of the five (5) South African universities mentioned in section 3.3.3. The criteria go as far as considering the users' profile content such as summary as well as the number of connections and looks at both male and female profiles.

During the process of unobtrusive data collection, the researcher used the sample consideration listed mentioned (see section 3.3.3) to narrow down the possible viable profiles on LinkedIn to 10 profiles representative of some of South Africa's top universities. During this process the researcher narrowed down the possible profiles by only considering profiles that met three key criteria; each profile needed to have a summary, 500+ connections and the university at which their LLB was obtained would have to corroborate with the relevant university filter. The researcher chose these criteria for the following reasons; number 1) when searching profiles on LinkedIn the list of results shows a brief preview of the user's profile, in which there is a name, title, profile image and a snippet of the first section of the user profile. The content of this snippet is depended on which section the user took the time to fill in and the researcher found that in most cases LinkedIn users tend to only focus on the section where work experience is addressed and forego filling in the summary or "About" section. However, with this research study looking at personal branding and how this is used to promote oneself, the researcher saw it necessary to only target users who took the time to write a summary about themselves, as this would be the opportune space to introduce oneself and any unique selling points. Reason 2), as mentioned in the literature personal branding can be used to boost one's network. Looking at LinkedIn as a social networking site, the researcher only looked at users who met the previously mentioned criteria and in addition to this have at least 500 connections (also referred to as followers on LinkedIn). Five hundred (500) is the maximum number that LinkedIn automatically shows on the header of the profile before further analysis of the profile. To narrow the sample down to a viable number of profiles, the researcher did not consider profiles that may have had summaries but had less than 500 connections. This minimum number of connections is a positive indication of activity on the platform; showing that the LinkedIn user intentionally and/or frequently makes use of the platform to boost his or her network, one of the key benefits of personal branding. Lastly, 3) taking into consideration the real-world problem on which the research has been founded, the researcher sampled profiles of participants who obtained their LLB at 5 different South African universities. The profiles were evaluated to verify that the LLB qualification was received from the relevant university being filtered. The criteria produced the below results:

3.4.1 Sampling Procedure Results

LinkedIn Sample as per 3.3.3 Procedures & Considerations						
School	General Results	"Law Practice" Results	w/ Summary	w/ Summary, 500+ Connections & LLB at relevant school	Male	Female
University of Witwatersrand (Wits)	383	165	54	13	6	7
University of Cape Town (UCT)	154	59	34	2	1	1
University of Johannesburg (UJ)	210	64	21	3	2	1
University of Pretoria (UP)	287	96	30	3	2	1
University of South Africa (UNISA)	293	81	23	2	1	1
					12	11

The selection of profiles was narrowed down to a total of 12 female profiles and 10 male profiles across the five (5) universities. As the researcher only sought out to evaluate a total of 10 profiles, the criteria were further narrowed down according to those who most recently graduated from their LLB keeping within the 10 years or less experience bracket defined in the delimitations and sampling criteria (see sections 1.5.2 & 3.3.3). As a result, this disqualified three (3) participants from Wits and UNISA bringing down the total viable sample to seven (7) profiles across four (4) universities, as both targeted samples from UNISA completed their qualification over 10 years ago and likewise for the male-targeted sample from Wits. The male participant from UCT was also disqualified from the sample, as this profile was no longer accessible to the researcher at the time that the content analysis took place, bringing the total accessible sample down to six (6) profiles from the 10 that the researcher initially planned to evaluate.

3.4.2 Unobtrusive Findings

Rampersad's Authentic Personal Branding Model (2008) identifies four (4) key aspects when it comes to building an authentic personal brand, more specifically with regards to building one which he theorises will "help (one) to actively grow and distinguish (oneself) as an exceptional professional" (Rampersad, 2008). These key aspects have been interpreted and condensed by the researcher as; personal ambition; brand differentiation; scorecard and implementation. The following is a series of the summarised data findings collected by the researcher presented in tabular form, categorised by the relevant key personal branding modal aspect. In chapter 4 the researcher goes into detail, discussing and analysing the findings.

3.4.2.1 Personal Ambition

LinkedIn Profile	School	Gender	Personal Ambition	
			Summary	Contact points
Profile 1	Wits	Female	Role, experience, achievement	LinkedIn URL
Profile 2	UCT	Female	Dreams, ambition	LinkedIn URL
Profile 3	UJ	Male	Role specialisation	LinkedIn URL
Profile 4	UJ	Female	Bio, personal interests, unique skills/talent	LinkedIn URL
Profile 5	UP	Female	Role specialisation, unique skills/talent	LinkedIn URL
Profile 6	UP	Male	Experience	LinkedIn URL

3.4.2.2 Brand Differentiation

LinkedIn Profile	School	Gender	Brand Differentiation							
			Premium	Endorsement	Experience	Additional Education	Volunteer	Interests	Causes & Cares	LinkedIn Articles
Profile 1	Wits	Female	No	15/15 skills	6 years	Honours	No	Industry related	0	0
Profile 2	UCT	Female	No	7/7 skills	8 years	Post Grad Diploma	Yes	Industry related	0	0
Profile 3	UJ	Male	No	1/9 skills	<2 years	Certificate	No	Not industry related	0	0
Profile 4	UJ	Female	No	10/41 skills	1 years	Masters	Yes	Industry related	0	0
Profile 5	UP	Female	No	22/22 skills	<7	Masters	No	Industry related	0	0
Profile 6	UP	Male	No	7/7 skills	3 years	N/A	No	Industry related	0	0

3.4.2.3 Scorecard

LinkedIn Profile	School	Gender	Scorecard		
			Connections	Accomplishments	Recommendations
Profile 1	Wits	Female	630	3 publications	0
Profile 2	UCT	Female	1073	4 languages	0
Profile 3	UJ	Male	500+	N/A	0
Profile 4	UJ	Female	500+	N/A	0
Profile 5	UP	Female	973	2 languages, 1 association membership	0
Profile 6	UP	Male	536	3 publications	0

3.4.2.4 Implementation

LinkedIn Profile	School	Gender	Implementation					
			Liking Occurrences*	Sharing Occurrences*	Posting Own Content Occurrences*	Profile Picture	Header Image	Headline / Title
Profile 1	Wits	Female	0	0	0	Yes	No	Formal title and firm
Profile 2	UCT	Female	3	1	0	Yes	No	Formal title and firm
Profile 3	UJ	Male	0	0	0	Yes	No	Formal title and firm
Profile 4	UJ	Female	0	0	0	Yes	No	Area of work, academic qualifications & company
Profile 5	UP	Female	5	1	1	Yes	Yes	Formal title and summary of role
Profile 6	UP	Male	0	0	0	Yes	No	Formal title and firm

3.4.3 Interview Findings

A qualitative questionnaire with open-ended questions is the tool that was used to guide and conduct these in-depth interviews. The tool has been developed objectively and was pretested to eliminate any bias and possible misinterpretation.

3.5 Data Analysis Method

The unit of analysis for the research is LinkedIn, more specifically the user profiles chosen through purposeful sampling. The unobtrusive data collected has been categorised and coded using an objectively developed codebook, using Rampersad's Authentic Personal Branding Framework. The summaries of the findings have been illustrated above in section 3.4 in tabular format however the full codebook can be found under Annexure D. The researcher goes into a detailed analysis of the findings in Chapter 4.

For the interviews, the researcher has recorded and transcribed each session and used Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis method to sort data collected from the in-depth interviews to analyse recurring themes. The table below summarises the main themes drawn from the interviews.

3.5.1 Miles and Huberman's Qualitative Data Analysis Table, Looking at In-Depth Interview Themes

Themes	Frequency	Quotes
Image	3	"a personal brand would be just a person and what they put out there and how they present themselves"
Professionalism	3	"Not necessarily a personal to say like who you are, what you like, what you're interests are but it's more professional for me"
Networking	2	"So what I'll do is I'll go on LinkedIn and just like invite a lot of recruitment agencies, these guys that work for HR in banks... So like employment that I would like to be in, so I

		associate myself with that and I think that will help in career development”
Learning	2	“I don't really share stuff, you know. I'm just there to read and observe. I'd say I'm just there observing what other people are doing and if I'm interested I'll participate.”

3.6 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

3.6.1 Trustworthiness

According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014:258), the term ‘trustworthiness’ is specifically used to measure the equivalent of what is known as ‘reliability and ‘validity’ within the context of a quantitative study; in a qualitative study. Trustworthiness is made up of four key components, namely; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014:258).

Credibility refers to the accuracy with which the researchers interpret the data collected and is increased by making use of triangulation, using multiple methods to collect said data (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014:258). Transferability refers to the extent to which the data can be applied to a similar situation and yield similar results (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014:258). Dependability refers to how well integrate the data collection methods, data analysed and final data theories are (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014:259). Confirmability refers to the consistency of the researcher's interpretation of the data collected concerning the findings (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014:259).

The research has been conducted in two parts to ensure that the data analysed is informed by two methods; unobtrusive content analysis and in-depth interviews, increasing the credibility of the data findings. To eliminate possible incongruences in the data, the researcher has selected interview participants from the accessible profile sample used in the unobtrusive content analysis, increasing confirmability. The researcher has used a standard method of pulling the targeted, from which the accessible sample was drawn, increasing transferability.

3.6.2 Ethical Considerations

The profiles analysed on LinkedIn are on a public domain so the data collected from LinkedIn from each of the profiles are accessible to the public and no consent is required to access and make use of the information publically available. Anonymity has been carefully considered with regards to the in-depth interviews which have been recorded. The researcher has recorded each interview session being careful not to make mention any identifying factors that may give away the identity of the interviewee. Throughout the process of requesting the interview participants to take part in the study, the researcher has made it clear that they are not in any way obliged to take part and are free to forego answering any questions which they may not be comfortable answering or opt-out of participating at any time. The researcher has ensured that written consent to the information provided in the interviews as well as the recording thereof has been given to comply with ethical research standards.

3.7 Anticipated Contributions and Conclusions

Through conducting this research the researcher intends to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the subject of personal brand building on LinkedIn in a meaningful way. By better understanding, the features that LinkedIn has put into place for its users and evaluating how young professionals make use of these features to build their personal brand, the researcher expects to gain deeper insight into how LinkedIn users can maximise their profile functions and therefore their personal branding on the platform. This information could be used to guide LinkedIn users and any gaps found in the functionality can be presented to LinkedIn for them to enhance their services and perhaps capitalise on these features in their premium membership offering.

Beyond this, the researcher ultimately anticipates uncovering some practical answers to the real-world problem being addressed by the research. The researcher hopes to assess whether or not having a strong personal brand could be a sustainable solution to the youth unemployment problem among graduates.

CHAPTER 4: DATA FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following chapter articulates the researcher's in-depth analysis of the research findings acquired from both the content analysis of the LinkedIn profiles as well as the in-depth interviews. The order of the findings and the analysis thereof is set in the same order as per the unobtrusive findings laid out in section 3.4.2 and as per the interview findings summarised in section 3.4.3.

Introduction

To contextualise the analyses to follow, the researcher would like to clarify a few things regarding how a LinkedIn profile functions: LinkedIn profiles are constructed through the use of the various sections which highlight key professional and personal information. These sections include, for example, a section about educational background, work experience, skills, interests and an about section, to introduce the profile user. Each of these sections is headlined accordingly and follows a standard sequence once completed, meaning that users have no say as to which order these sections will appear making all profiles to be read the same way. Differences in the information available on each profile will only occur in the case that the user does not fill in a particular section with the relevant information. In each of these sections, users can include as much or as little detail as they see fit.

4.1 Personal Ambition

Rampersad (2008) defines personal ambition as the exciting phase which involves defining and formulating one's personal ambition persuasively and making it visible. He goes on to say that the process of developing personal ambition requires one to identify one's dreams, identity, stance, unique selling points, differentiating factors, values and genius (Rampersad, 2008). The researcher, while looking at the LinkedIn platform and its available features, has translated this concept into two main components as set by LinkedIn's profile feature offering. Component one considers the opportunities which the platform allows the user to introduce them through a personalised biographic format which is indicated by the summary (or about) feature on the social platform. Likewise, component two considers the various opportunities created by the user, allowing for potential recruiters to get in touch with them regarding potential opportunities and this is indicated by the contact feature.

For a LinkedIn profile to be considered as part of the sample, the profile had to have a summary; otherwise referred to as the “about” section on LinkedIn profiles. The profile summary shows in the search results and offers those looking for personnel to read a line about the person before clicking through to view the full profile, making this a useful tool for users to leverage and stand out. As shown in the sampling results in section 3.4.1 the number of profiles with summaries in the search results drops significantly and in some cases, less than 16% of the total profiles searched made use of this unique feature.

After further evaluation, the researcher found that the content of the summaries often echoed some of the information which could be categorised in other sections. This meant that users were repeating information and not fully making use of LinkedIn’s categorisation system which organises the information on the profiles. Subsequently, essential information about the profile user was not being efficiently communicated. Prime profile space which could have been an opportunity for users to attract potential recruiters was misused. Three (3) of the six (6) profiles used the “about” section of their profile to emphasise their professional role with two (2) of the profiles going into specifics about their area of specialisation and reiterating their work experience. However, this information perhaps could have been better categorised under the work experience section where someone looking at the profile would expect to read this information. As mentioned in the introduction of this analysis, LinkedIn’s categorised profile information system makes it easier for people to pinpoint the necessary information on a user profile without having to read the entire profile from top to bottom. Keeping this in mind users should maximise each of the sections to highlight the relevant information.

The in-depth interview revealed that perhaps the most important part of the LinkedIn profile anatomy was the experience section which gave the researcher a bit of insight as to why as section like about would be poorly used. During this same interview, participant A suggested that personal brand is not about people getting to know you but rather them having a good understanding of what you do. This belief is contrary to the literature, which suggested that more needed to be done by young professionals to stand out and differentiate themselves within the job marketplace.

4.2 Brand Differentiation

According to Rampersad's model (2008), the brand differentiation aspect occurs as a result of assessing one's strengths and weaknesses and capitalising on attributes, characteristics, areas of specialisation specific to one's personal brand. When analysing this aspect on LinkedIn, the researcher looked at features the platform offers which are specifically designed to highlight said attributes, characteristics, and areas of specialisation.

LinkedIn offers a premium membership subscription which gives users access to greater profile performance insights, however, more importantly for the case of this study, this feature allows users to visibly highlight their status as premium members through the premium brand badge. This feature essentially offers subscribers a higher level of status versus regular LinkedIn users which allows users to differentiate themselves. Upon analysis, the researcher found that none of the user profiles in the sample made use of this feature. This could have been for several reasons; from the cost of monthly subscription as a barrier to entry to no value seen in being a premium member. However, in this instance having premium membership would have been a key differentiator among the young professionals. The in-depth interview revealed that some young professionals do not spend frequent and regular time on the platform to feel invested enough to justify the cost of having a premium account.

LinkedIn's skills endorsement feature allows users to select skills from a prepopulated set of options that will appear on their profile for their connections to endorse, thereby giving them credibility in the relevant areas of expertise and specialisation. In the case of the profiles analysed, each made use of this feature in varying degrees. Three of the profiles listed less than 10 skills, whereas the rest listed more than that with the greatest number of skills listed is 22. Four of the six profiles received 100% endorsements of all skills listed while the other two profiles did not. Although it should be mentioned that these are the same profiles which had less work experience. Reverting to Rampersad's process of brand differentiation, to build an authentic personal brand, users must determine their specialisation, concentrating on a single core talent (Rampersad, 2008). Although LinkedIn does not have a limit to the number of skills one can promote on one's profile, having too many skills can communicate the wrong message. Rather than being seen as a specialist in an area or a few areas, one can easily miscommunicate that they are a jack of all trades and thus not well differentiated as a brand within the career marketplace.

Another that LinkedIn assists to facilitate brand differentiation is through the education section where users can provide information about further studies beyond LLB. This feature offers users the opportunity to highlight areas of specialisation and competence. Users can also differentiate themselves by adding any volunteer programmes which they are a part of or any special causes that they care about. Only two of the profiles analysed made use of the volunteer feature and only one of the two referred to an industry-related volunteer cause while the other listed a personal cause that has no professional relevance. As LinkedIn is a niche professional social networking site users should be careful not to cross the line by providing too much unnecessary and irrelevant information which could communicate a personal brand that is not discerning and professional.

The researcher also found that an underutilised and perhaps valuable space in which LinkedIn users could leverage to differentiate their brand is the LinkedIn articles feature. This feature gives users the platform to create their written blog articles about any area of specialisation or provide their insights on a topic of interest within the industry. Although this feature could be leveraged to show the users specialist knowledge and expertise on a particular subject, none of the sample profiles made use of it. Insights from the in-depth interview suggest that although users may forego sharing their own content and engaging regularly, they can still network and make industry connections. However there was not enough data collected to indicate whether or not those connections would be more or less willing to hire or refer a user that is not active on the platform, particularly a young professional. In general, participant A did not seem to have a framework or strategy for their use of LinkedIn past inviting connections which they had hoped would help open doors to career opportunities. Rampersad's authentic brand building (2008) suggests otherwise, that only intentionally built personal brands will succeed. Peter (1997) advises that everyone has a personal brand whether they want to or not, irrespective of intentionality however the significance of the brand stems from the personal brand owners perceived value of their brand. And in this case, it seems that the insights gained from the interview show that young professionals have little to no value of actively building personal brand. This is also reflected in the observations made in the content analysis which showed that young professionals tend to stick to communication key information required to fulfil the function of an online CV. As only one interview was able to be conducted, there was not enough data collected to prove whether or not intentionality of LinkedIn use and job opportunities are linked.

4.3 Scorecard

Rampersad (2008) refers to manageable and measurable milestones which help to keep track of personal brand building progress, with regards to the scorecard aspect of his model. On LinkedIn, the researcher identified three main measurement indicators; the number of connections, accomplishments, and recommendations. Connections or followers indicate the number of people in the profile user's network. As LinkedIn is a social networking site, this is a significant indicator of successful and/or effective use of the platform, in plain terms it means that users are networking and building networks. Accomplishments, on LinkedIn, is the section under which users can update their career achievements, awards, and accolades. This is a key indicator because according to Rampersad's criteria for authentic brand building, authenticity is about being recognised as an expert in one's field, extremely talented, highly experienced, and perceived as an effective leader (Rampersad, 2008). All of the indicators take place offline but provide significant credibility to the authentic online brand. Lastly, the recommendations section is the section where connections within the user's network who have had experiences procuring the user's services, can positively verbalise their experience by giving an authentic recommendation based on first-hand experience. As with accomplishments, recommendations contribute towards recognising the user's talent and experience, providing greater credibility to their personal brand.

For the profile sample to be reduced to a workable number, each of the profiles had to meet the minimum 500 connections criteria set by the researcher. The number of connections indicates the relative access to network and audience that the profile users have to communicate their personal brand. According to Rampersad (2008) building a network of contacts is one of the key outcomes of the scorecard aspect of the framework. However, contrary to this theory, participant A proved that although they lacked intentionality and activity on the platform with regards to building their brand, they have still managed to achieve this outcome. Likewise the interview revealed that this lack of engagement could explain the lack of robust credibility to profiles of young professionals.

The accomplishments section allows users to communicate key career accomplishments. Two of the profiles evaluated did not make use of this feature, however, it is to be noted that the profiles were also the two with the fewest years of work experience. However, according

to LinkedIn (2019) accomplishments also includes the various languages that the user speaks, which some of the profiles evaluated used this space for. A few profiles listed publications off the platform in which they were featured in. The researcher believes that this could have also been an opportune place to back up any claims made in the other sections. For example, if a claim on specialisation was made in the experience section this could be used to display any career achievements which would confirm that information thus strengthening and further authenticating the user's personal brand.

4.4 Implementation

The implementation phase of the framework brings everything together and refers to the execution of articulating all of the above-mentioned areas, with commitment and passion to improve one's perceived value in the job marketplace (Rampersad, 2008). For this reason, the researcher looked at the profile users' activity on the platform, as well as what the researcher describes as "first impression cues" which are both visual and verbal.

Overall, the sample profiles showed a lack of regular activity on the platform despite meeting the sampling criteria; which means that although they all have relatively large networks to access, little to no information is being communicated to boost their personal brand. The nature of the activity that was observed was largely that of liking posts which connections shared; meaning that opportunities to share areas of interest and specialisation were being missed by the majority of young professionals, based on the sample data. Although liking posts is defined as a point of activity by LinkedIn, the researcher ranks this form of activity lower than sharing other connections' posts and posting their own content respectively because it simply endorses other people's content rather than showcasing one's expertise. These sentiments were also echoed in the interview.

As with other types of brands, visual and verbal cues are key factors. On LinkedIn users get to make a first impression with their profile image their header image and their title or headline, which is used to briefly describe what a user does professionally. All sampled profiles had profile images which were clear and professional, however only one of the profiles made use of the header image space to personalise their profile. The majority of profiles evaluated made use of standard titles as their headline, except for a few profiles which added on a few more descriptors, highlighting the field of expertise and specialisation.

During the interview, although presentation was referred to several times, no mention was made about the use of images on LinkedIn or strategy behind bringing potential decision maker to one's profile.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Revisiting the research questions, the researcher observed that although participant A verbalised the importance of personal brand, they contrarily advised that they do not actively engage on the LinkedIn platform. Perhaps this is because the participant sees value in building a professional personal brand but does not have the tools to apply it practically. It was apparent from the content analysis that young professionals are able to meet the minimum profile requirements on LinkedIn but lack the ability to strategically implement a brand building plan such as Rampersad's model draws out. Question two, regarding trends on LinkedIn; the researcher found that many of the profiles were well put together however there was a trending lack of activity by the user. The researcher also observed that the high ranking feature such as publishing an article, were not being used by young professional, which meant that an opportunity to showcase specialist knowledge and attract meaningful engagement from connection was being missed. Lastly, the third research question has been answered as per the outcomes of the previous two questions. General trends in personal brand have not been seen as filtering through on the LinkedIn platform, although young professionals claim to see its significance. The researcher believes that this could be due to the lack of overall understanding of the platform and its benefits.

To conclude, the researcher found that although LinkedIn has the potential brand building infrastructure in place, these features were not being fully utilised by young professionals for reasons including but not limited to; lack of training on how to maximise visibility on the platform; the lack of interest due to perceived unbeneficial and perhaps unnecessary effort which could be substituted by searching and connecting and lastly the seemingly unshakeable perceptions of LinkedIn being a recruitment platform and not a platform to build valuable personal brand and thus being reduced to an online CV by users.

To overcome these challenges, the researcher suggests that LinkedIn implements an interactive and easy to understand tutorial which could help new users navigate through all the overlooked sections which could help them stand out. In addition to this, LinkedIn could start using the art of storytelling to highlight the differences in benefits for intentional and active users either through videos or written case studies. Lastly, to combat historical perceptions, LinkedIn could run a campaign in which they would make suggestions to users

who may not share their own content but have a specific trend of topics they follow, by suggesting accordingly, what and how they can develop their own ideas based on their expertise.

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