



An Exploratory Study of Post-Graduate Students' Perspectives of the Importance of Personal Branding in the Workplace

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I hereby declare that the Research Report submitted for the Bachelor of Arts Honours in 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.

Abstract

How one presents oneself online and offline can have repercussions. If young individuals were more aware of this, they would possibly be able to create and control their personal brand and, therefore, increase their chances of acquiring a job. The purpose of this study is to explore post-graduate students' perceptions of personal branding and the role it plays in today's workplaces. This research used a qualitative exploratory research approach to gain a deeper understanding of the students' perceptions of social media and personal branding and how they possibly influence each other. A case study methodology was used as the foundation for collecting the data from a focus group which comprised of 6 participants. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which identified 5 themes: Contextual Factors, Degree of Familiarity, Impressions: Online and Offline Personas, Micromanagement, and Authenticity. It was determined from the research that post-graduate students present themselves consistently online as they do offline because they have learned the importance of creating a unique personal brand. This research was limited in scope and could benefit from enlarging the scale to incorporate post-graduate students studying different degrees to increase the diversity of the responses.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Contextualisation

Peters (1997) identifies the concept “personal branding,” which can be understood in the way that individuals present themselves, because how individuals present themselves will ultimately determine their own unique brand. When an individual meets someone for the first time, they make sense of the situation by identifying the other individual through their character, the way they behave, and the way they dress, in order to know what to expect from that individual in the future (Goffman, 2008). This is important to be mindful of because, as Peters (1997) states, every individual creates their own personal brand. However, if an individual fails to take control of and develop their personal brand, the power to create that brand is given to someone else who could create a brand that does not correspond with the individual's idea of their personal brand (Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011). Therefore, Peters (1997) explains that an individual's personal brand should be made up of the particular qualities that the individual believes makes them stand out from others. This understanding of a personal brand corresponds with how one presents oneself to others, whether that is consciously or unconsciously, online or offline.

People have become more aware of personal branding due to the development of social media and the use of the internet as individuals now have a digital world where they can construct their personal brand (Krämer and Winter, 2008). Individuals are now able to create a personal brand both online and offline, even though there is more control over self-censorship with an online profile or interaction than there is in a face-to-face or offline, interaction (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006). Individuals and companies, need to embrace social media and use it to their advantage as it is a powerful tool that can assist in advancing personal or company goals (Dutta, 2010). Creating a strong personal brand is exceptionally important for young individuals that are about to enter the workplace, as it is one factor that could influence whether or not they get employed.

1.2. Problem Statement

The concept of personal branding has grown in importance due to the development of social media, as the power to control one's presentation is now in the hands of each individual creating their own online profile (Peters, 1997). This power gives individuals the opportunity to share only the best aspects of themselves and keep the less impressive information private as they intend to only present what is positive, thereby managing the impression

they make on others (Krämer and Winter, 2008). As Rampersad (2009) states, self-presentation determines an individual's brand, and if that brand is a positive, professional one, it will attract success. However, Rampersad (2009) goes on to argue that the number of individuals that are aware of how they present themselves to others is remarkably low. As a result, individuals are not managing their self-presentation correctly as one's personal brand should be an authentic, consistent, positive promotion of oneself (Rampersad, 2009).

Self-presentation plays an important role in everyday life since the way people present themselves affects the way others treat them, which can, therefore, affect whether or not they obtain or maintain a job (Wittkower, 2010). In terms of young individuals looking for work, their self-presentation should provide a positive image in the eyes of others as it can contribute towards finding employment. This includes both online and offline self-presentations as decisions on hiring and firing have been influenced by online profiles. Many employers screen candidates through social networking sites the prospective or current employee may have in order to make sure there is no inappropriate content (Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadavi, Gruber, Komarova, Loureriro and Solnet, 2013). In addition, an online profile should be an authentic representation of the individual because making a good impression online and presenting a different image of the self in face-to-face interactions, could potentially become a problem when the two do not correspond, especially in terms of employment (Shepherd, 2005).

1.3. Rationale

Self-presentation can affect employment opportunities for young graduates as many employers form impressions of prospective employees based on social media sites. Rampersad (2009) states that individuals need to remember that companies are interested in an authentic brand, one that is true to the individual because everyone's brand is unique. It is possible for individuals to present different aspects of themselves depending on the situation, however, an individual's brand should be one that is clear and consistent across all platforms because having multiple self-presentations could contradict with one another and might affect prospective employer's decisions (Shepherd, 2005).

Due to the development of the social media, a wider range of young individuals seeking employment now have the opportunity to build their own personal brand and the ability to market themselves internationally (Dutta, 2010). Giacalone and Rosenfeld (2013) state that self-presentation has gained a lot of importance in the world of work because individuals

would like to be viewed as productive and capable individuals. The development of technology has given individuals the power to benefit from social media, as it has become an advantage to their personal brand and workplace opportunities (Dutta, 2010). An example of this is LinkedIn as it has given job seekers a platform to find employment (Dutta, 2010). The global reach of the web and social media has impacted employment because individuals can present themselves as they seem fit, and apply for many different types of jobs based on the profile they present online.

Young individuals searching for employment may still be unaware of the importance of how they present themselves. The lack of research on the importance of how these individuals convey themselves and what information they choose to disclose online is a strong motive for conducting this research because gaining more knowledge of how these individuals present themselves may possibly help fill the gap in the literature. Graduates will be exposed to different modules in their undergraduate degree and, therefore, different methods to approach situations. As a result, graduates who were not exposed to the importance of self-presentation both offline and online in their degree, could possibly benefit from being exposed to it.

How one presents oneself online and offline can have repercussions. If recently graduated individuals were more aware of this, they would possibly be able to control the outcome by protecting their image and increasing their chances of acquiring a job (Bye, Sandal, van de Vijver, Sam, Cakar and Franke, 2011). The importance of self-presentation or personal branding, especially for young individuals entering the workplace, cannot be overemphasized. By understanding how post-graduate students present themselves online, the role that personal branding plays in today's workplace, and the importance of it for graduates to understand and take care of, this research could potentially provide the researcher with a better understanding of the role of personal branding especially among post-graduate students as they are the next generation to enter the workplace. In addition, this research could potentially make the population group more aware of personal branding, however, the purpose is to rather engage with the students in order to understand how they present themselves online, either consciously or unconsciously.

1.4. Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore post-graduate students' perceptions of personal branding and the role it plays in today's workplaces. This research will use a qualitative

exploratory research approach in order to gain a deeper understanding of the students' perceptions of social media and personal branding and how the two could possibly influence each other. In order to do so, this research will use a case study methodology as the foundation for collecting the necessary data from a focus group and to analyse the data through thematic analysis. The result will be a descriptive account of the students' understandings and perceptions of personal branding. Personal branding will be defined generally as how individuals present themselves to others, (consciously and unconsciously) both online through social media and offline.

1.5. Objectives

The key research questions regarding personal branding are identified as:

- A. How do post-graduate students present themselves?
 - 1. What are post-graduate students' perceptions of personal branding?
 - 2. How do post-graduate students present themselves online and offline?
 - 3. What value do post-graduate students attach to personal branding?

This research study is primarily interested in investigating how aware post-graduate students are of the importance of personal branding and explore their understanding of the relationship between personal branding and future employment. The objective of this research is to identify post-graduate students' understanding of personal branding both online and offline. This entails exploring their perception of its importance, the values they attach to it and how it affects opportunities in the workplace.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theory

2.1.1. Presentational Self Theory

Erving Goffman's Presentational Self Theory uses a theatrical metaphor to explain how individuals put on a performance in order to impress an audience (Littlejohn and Foss, 2011). In this theory, individuals are viewed as actors, settings are viewed as a stage, and the actors reveal or conceal certain aspects of the self, as actors on a stage would do (Goffman, 2008). This theory explains that an individual will behave in a certain way in the presence of others in order to obtain a desired response from the audience, whether that response is to gain acceptance from the audience, or for the audience to view the individual in a certain way. The individual will act a certain way because he or she consciously intends to evoke a specific response from the audience, or unconsciously creates an impression in the minds of the audience (Goffman, 2008). Depending on whether the individual consciously or unconsciously acts will influence how the audience responds as they may be aware of it and, therefore, respond in a way that is opposite to the response that the individual desired (Goffman, 2008). The following key concepts from this theory will be discussed in order to gain a better understanding of this theory.

Concept 1: Self-Presentation

Goffman (2008) explains that when an individual enters a situation with an audience, they can influence how everyone involved may interpret the situation, and in response to their presentation and impression, the audience will, in turn, be able to interpret the situation. The act that the individual performs to an audience is his first impression, and most individuals agree that it is extremely important. This is because from a first impression, individuals are able to perceive the person's personality and traits which creates an understanding of that person's self-presentation and as a result, will assist in responding to the individual.

Using this theatrical metaphor, the performance that the individual presents to the audience does not include the individual's complete character or personality because the audience is limited to the performance that occurs on stage and is not able to observe what happens backstage (Goffman, 2008). This demonstrates how an individual will not disclose everything about himself and will keep that for when he is backstage. When the individual is backstage, he can act out of character as he is not concerned with the audience observing

this. If the audience were to observe the backstage behaviour, it would most likely contradict the first impression that the audience received on stage. This theory demonstrates how an individual manages their presentation, which therefore explains how self-presentation is aimed towards impression management (Goffman, 2008).

Concept 2: Impression Management

Impression management and self-presentation are often used synonymously, however, self-presentation is concerned with the self and how to manage impressions of the self, as opposed to impression management which includes the management of other's impressions (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Impression management involves behaving in a certain way to control the images others' have on them (Bolino and Turnley, 2003). With regards to presenting oneself in a certain manner, the individual attempts to act in a certain way to invoke his desired response. However, an individual may act in a certain way, but receive the opposite response (Goffman, 2008). The reason for attempting to manage other's impressions of the self is because that individual wants to be viewed and treated in the manner in which he desires (Leary and Kowalski, 1990).

Leary and Kowalski (1990, p 35) elaborate on impression management to include "impression motivation" and "impression construction." The former explains how individuals have this desire to control how other's view them, while the latter explains how individuals change their behaviour to affect other's view of them (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). This concept is an extension of self-presentation because, in order to influence other's reactions to them, individuals will present themselves in a certain way depending on the audience (Goffman, 2008). Both concepts can be used as a foundation for personal branding as individuals are concerned with how they present themselves to others and the impression that they have formed in the minds of others.

2.1.2. Critique of the Theory

The Presentational Self Theory focuses primarily on face-to-face interactions and theatrics, however, because of the development of web 2.0, individuals do not require face-to-face interactions in order to present themselves. With that being said, individuals have the ability to personally construct what they would like others to see online, even if it is true or false (Krämer and Winter, 2008). If an individual creates a brand online that does not hold true offline, there can be serious consequences. Personal branding is about creating an authentic, consistent brand that holds true in all aspects of an individual's life (Labrecque,

Markos and Milne, 2011). Therefore, this theory creates a foundation of the importance of being aware of personal branding and impression management to possibly help graduates create an authentic and consistent brand that holds true on stage, backstage, and due to the web 2.0, online.

Goffman's theory emphasizes the ways in which an individual will interpret a situation rather than the actor attempting to shape the audiences' interpretation of his or her own behaviour (Jones and Pittman, 1982). The focus is therefore on how an individual will interpret a situation and lacks an emphasis on attempting to get others to like him or her (Jones and Pittman, 1982). This theory is critiqued because of the focus only being on the individual's perspective and is neglecting the audience's perspective. Jones and Pittman (1982) discuss how Goffman's theory has been expanded to incorporate a cognitive element in order for the individual to get the audience to like him or her.

In addition to the focus on the audience, Leary and Kowalski (1990) discuss how this theory lacks the inclusion of psychological factors. Leary and Kowalski (1990) explain that this theory is rather concerned with the impressions that an individual will give off to others, therefore, the external factors of the situation. Goffman was a sociologist, so his focus was on how self-presentation could influence how individuals construct social reality, thus, he neglected to incorporate the psychological factors (Leary and Kowalski, 1990).

2.1.3. Relevance to Personal Branding

Understanding how important first impressions are, learning how to perform to a certain audience, and concealing certain aspects of the self for the backstage area only, are important aspects that graduates should be aware of when entering the workplace since these could influence opportunities for employment. Goffman's theory explains how individuals can go about revealing and concealing certain aspects of the self (Goffman, 2008). Using this theory as a foundation to personal branding by understanding certain concepts such as self-presentation and impression management, allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of how post-graduate students present themselves, both consciously and unconsciously.

First impressions are exceptionally important in everyday life because it is what sets the tone for how others understand or identify an individual (Goffman, 2008). A first impression will either set a positive or negative view of an individual and because of that, individuals

need to take control of their own brand in order to construct it in a way they seem is best for them (Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011). This theory provides an understanding of how to manage first impressions and how best to present oneself (Rampersad, 2009). Personal branding relates to this theory because it is how one presents oneself to others, whether that is the first impression or not. Self-presentation is an important concept to grasp, and this theory uses a great metaphor to assist individuals in understanding what to present to others, and what to keep for backstage only.

2.2. Context

The development of the web 2.0 changed the way individuals used the web as they were no longer viewing static HTML sites (O'Reilly, 2009). Individuals began creating their own content through blogs and began networking through social media websites (O'Reilly, 2009). The advancement of the web has allowed for a collaborative platform where individuals from all over the world have the chance to generate and share content (Rollett, Lux, Strohmaier, Dosinger and Tochtermann, 2007). The web 2.0 has created a platform where individuals can share information and connect with others through the use of social networking sites. As a result, individuals have gradually become more aware of the importance of the image they present of themselves to others (Van Dijck, 2013).

Since individuals can generate their own content through social media, they are able to create a profile and upload information about themselves, therefore, allowing them to personally construct how others view them (Krämer and Winter, 2008). The ability to upload certain content grants individuals the power to be in control of their own brand and to market themselves in a way that they seem fit (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). This relates to the theoretical framework outlined above because having the power to control how other's view them is easier online than it is offline because individuals can upload any information online, true or false.

Tom Peters (1997) was the first individual to popularise the term "personal branding" on an American website which generated the majority of the research on this concept today. In doing so, Peters (1997) used a website to write this article which gained a lot of media attention which led to personal branding to become a globalised concept. This allowed for many other researchers to investigate self-presentation, particularly online. Information about creating a personal brand online is much more well-known and understood than creating a personal brand in person because of the vast number of websites that allow for

the personal construction of this phenomenon (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). The use of social media has allowed for branding to move from being primarily attached to business, to being applied to individuals (Gall, 2012).

With regards to online self-presentation, much of the research is focused on online dating (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006). Individuals hold the opinion that online platforms are a place where they can express themselves more freely than in face-to-face interactions because there is more control over self-censorship (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006). Due to having user-generated content, businesses are searching for different ways to make a profit through the use of social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). This demonstrates how individuals themselves or businesses use social media and how they are more expressive in the content that they post online (Krämer and Winter, 2008). However, if individuals are interested in taking their online profile seriously, there needs to be a balance between online self-expression and self-promotion (Van Dijck, 2013). This is especially important for individuals who are about to enter the workplace because employers are only interested in hiring people who express authentic behaviour (Van Dijck, 2013).

Linking social media and personal branding can be demonstrated through LinkedIn, which is a professional network where individuals can present professional identities (Van Dijck, 2013). LinkedIn differs from Facebook as it intends to limit self-expression which could be detrimental to one's professional image, whereas Facebook provides an individual's life story (Van Dijck, 2013). Social media is an important element in this research as it is an international platform where individuals can personally craft their self-image (Van Dijck, 2013). How post-graduate students express themselves or construct a personal and professional self-image is of particular interest in this research.

The articles and information identified are limited to America and Europe as there is little to no research in the local context. These articles intended to uncover information about how individuals present themselves online and the reasons for doing so. However, Bolton et al. (2013) discuss how nearly a quarter of the population in South Africa do not own a phone and are therefore unable to use social media, as is the case for other developing countries. In addition, the most commonly used social media application that was used is to teach mathematics (Bolton et al., 2013). This demonstrates how developing countries possibly use social media for educational rather than entertainment purposes, and as a result, their knowledge of personal branding may be further behind than other countries. However, due

to the fact that this research will be focusing on a specific group of individuals that are attending a private tertiary institution, all of the participants do have access to the web, and therefore social media. As a result, social media platforms play a huge role in the specific context that this research will be focusing on. This research focuses specifically on the context of post-graduate students at a private tertiary institution.

This research hopes to make a contribution towards this gap in research between developed and developing countries, and possibly be the foundation for further research on a larger scale.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

3.1.1. Conceptual Approach

Due to the nature and purpose of this study, a qualitative approach will be used as it aims to collect and interpret data that has been explored and understood from the participants' perspective (Malterud, 2001). A qualitative approach focuses on the participant's understanding in order to gain essential information about a certain topic, whereas quantitative research focuses on explaining or predicting a certain phenomenon by using certain quantities (Bryman, 2012). This research will not employ a quantitative approach as it is not focused on measuring certain variables, nor is it focused on causal relationships (Bryman, 2012).

This research will be using a qualitative exploratory approach in order to gather information about the post-graduate students' understanding of personal branding and how it could potentially affect their opportunities in the workplace. This approach was chosen because the purpose of this research is to understand how post-graduate students present themselves, rather than measure a variable. Therefore, the data will be collected from a focus group, which includes speech and observation in order to generate data which will then be analysed and interpreted (Malterud, 2001).

An inductive approach was used to interpret the findings to generate the themes that arise. A deductive approach was then used to explain the relationship between the themes identified and the theory outlined in the literature review. Thus, this research used both inductive and deductive analysis to gain a better understanding of the concepts to further aid this research as it does not intend to use the findings to generate a theory nor generalise to the larger population (Bryman, 2012). The approaches used will be discussed further in the section on data analysis.

3.1.2. Paradigm

A paradigm is a worldview that explains the nature of the world and the individual's role in it (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Choosing a certain worldview for research is essential as it forms a premise as to how reality is understood by gathering data from individuals and the environment, in order to understand and interpret their view of the research problem. This

research will use a constructivist approach because this research is interested in the participants' view and understanding of personal branding. Furthermore, as Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) state, a constructivist paradigm identifies the situation from the participants' perspective as opposed to the researcher's point of view.

Taking an epistemological position includes the study of knowledge and the different ways of knowing (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Using this position within a constructivist approach understands knowledge from the individual's understanding of their context and how they interpret the information (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This demonstrates the subjectivity in this paradigm which is important for this research as it uses a qualitative approach. An ontological position is concerned with the study of being or existing (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Viewing a constructivist approach from an ontological position views the social world as being something that is experienced differently by each individual (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This demonstrates how the belief of constructivism within an ontological position entails the social construction of reality (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). For this research, an ontological position of constructionism will be used as it is interested in how students understand or view this socially constructed phenomenon of personal branding.

Therefore, the intention of this research is to gather deep, rich data of the participants' perspectives and understandings of personal branding. A constructivist approach will allow for multiple meanings of different individual experiences to arise which will, therefore, assist in identifying the different perceptions that these students have of the importance of self-presentation (Ivankova, Creswell and Plano Clark, 2016). This approach will assist in gathering the students' subjective perspectives while excluding the perspective of the researcher due to the fact that this research is only interested in the participants' understanding and views of personal branding (Bryman, 2012).

3.2. Research Methodology

3.2.1. Population

The population for this study was defined as post-graduate students who are in their final year of studying and are about to enter the workplace. This population appeared to be the most appropriate because students at a higher level of education have been shown to have a higher desire to learn and the drive to excel as opposed to undergraduate students (Scager, Akkerman, Keesen, Mainhard, Pilot and Wubbels, 2012). Therefore, post-graduate students are more motivated to enter the workplace than undergraduate students.

To research all post-graduate students across the country is not feasible for a qualitative study, therefore, the population is defined as all post-graduate students studying at any private institution across the country. However, since this research used a qualitative approach, it focused on a small population and did not aim to make a generalisation (Bryan, 2012). For the purpose of this research, students studying a post-graduate degree in communication at a private institution in Durban is the unit of analysis.

3.2.2. Sampling

From this population, the unit of analysis that was chosen were those individuals studying a post-graduate degree in communication at a private institution in Durban and included 6 students. The reason for a small sample was due to the fact that this research made use of a qualitative approach to gain each individual's understanding of the concept "personal branding," and, therefore, had to be accessible and affordable (Bryman, 2012). The use of a small sample is not viewed as a limitation of this research as it remains within the research purpose and approach, which was not to generalise to the broader population (Maree and Pietersen, 2016).

Purposive and convenience sampling methods were used to choose the sample in the study. The reason for purposive sampling was that there was a specific purpose in mind as the participants were selected according to the aim of the research (Coyne, 1997). The participants required for this research were post-graduate students as they were most likely to be entering the workplace as they have a higher motivation to learn in comparison to undergraduate students (Scager et al., 2012).

Coyne (1997) demonstrated how convenience sampling fits under the broad term purposeful sampling as the research aimed at certain individuals, but the sample was chosen due to convenience. Any students in their final year of studying could have also been used as the sample, however, the particular people who were chosen were the most accessible population for the researcher and thus the most convenient (Maree and Pietersen, 2016).

These sampling methods were chosen because of the qualitative approach and, therefore, made use of a case study design to collect and analyse the data from the chosen students (Bryman, 2012). A case study research design is a study that collects detailed data from a single case (Bryman, 2012). As this research only used one group of individuals to collect the data from, the end result is highly context-specific (Bryman, 2012). Thus, this research

used a cross-sectional research design since this research collected data from one focus group at a certain time as opposed to collecting data from a sample over a long period of time (Bryman, 2012).

3.2.3. Data Collection Method

As this research made use of a case study design, the research could collect data in a few ways, these being documents, observation, interviews or focus groups (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a). The most appropriate data collection method was a focus group as it allowed all participants to engage in conversation with one another and debate about certain topics. This research collected data from one focus group as individuals can interact with each other more freely as well as raise points that may have not necessarily been raised in a one-on-one interview (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a). A focus group is not the same as a group interview because the participants would discuss a certain topic with other members of a group, as opposed to a group interview which does not allow for any responses to be debated (Bryman, 2012). A focus group was necessary for this research because the participants were able to debate the responses among themselves which opened up a conversation about the topic as they interacted (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a). The reason that this research did not only use several interviews to collect the data is because each interview would be different as the researcher may ask new questions that are probed from the interviewee's responses (Bryman, 2012). In addition, each interviewee may not necessarily understand the question in the same way, therefore, producing different answers (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a). As a result, the researcher's opinions and ideas were excluded from the discussion and, therefore, guided and facilitated the focus group.

This research, therefore, used one focus group to explore and understand the participants' perceptions of personal branding. The focus group included 6 individuals from the defined population. The facilitator of the focus group provided different questions and topics to guide the discussion, as identified in Appendix 1 (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a). By providing the focus group with the core topics and questions, the participants were able to engage in discussion about the topic at hand by stating their opinions and perspectives, which led to conflict, however conflict is positive in this sense as it allowed the facilitator to gain a fuller understanding of these students' perspectives, thereby assisting with the identification of certain themes or patterns (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a).

3.2.4. Data Analysis Method

To analyse the data that was collected from the focus group, thematic analysis was used. The use of a thematic analysis entailed the identification of certain themes that emerged during transcription of the collected data and the patterns of behaviour that emerged from the participants (Aronson, 1995). Since this research used a constructivist approach, which directed the focus onto the participants' perspective, a thematic analysis was useful as it allowed the researcher to interpret the findings by identifying different themes or categories (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013).

A case study research design was explained as the foundation for this research with regards to collecting and analysing the data correctly. This was because a case study design is interested in the participants, and a thematic analysis assisted this by identifying different themes under which the participants' responses were categorised into (Bryman, 2012). Thematic analysis was beneficial for this research as it constructed a detailed and rich account of the data collected by identifying the common patterns that emerged from each participant in the focus group (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013).

With regards to the main topic of this research, the thematic analysis provided different sub-themes for personal branding, social media, and the relationship between the two. In doing so, the researcher used a matrix for each theme by placing each individual's response under the correct theme and sub-theme identified (Bryman, 2012). Identifying what classifies as a sub-theme can be quite difficult as a theme must relate to the focus of the research and assist the researcher in understanding the collected data (Bryman, 2012). This data analysis method was used for this research as it classified the collected data into themes which assisted the researcher in generating the final discussion of the data collected.

4. Findings and Interpretations of Findings

4.1. Description of participants

This research focused on post-graduate students aged between 21 and 24, all of whom are interested in entering the workplace at the end of their studies or who are already employed. The sample comprised of 6 participants, 2 females and 4 males. These students were studying a post-graduate degree at a private tertiary institution and could be identified as middle-class individuals. Walkowitz (2003) explained middle class as the category that is between extreme poverty and wealth. The middle class is used to describe the participants because the majority of the participants have their own form of transport, therefore, demonstrating the relation to the upper class. However, some students still have to work to earn an income, thus demonstrating the working-class aspect (Walkowitz, 2003).

All the participants had been studying together as a class for roughly six months prior to the study being conducted, and hence had established good relationships and a sense of trust amongst themselves. Their studies had required an interactive and discursive pedagogical style and hence contributed to the dialogue and disagreements that arose during the focus group. This was because, at a post-graduate level, debates in lectures are a regular occurrence, therefore, providing each participant with the knowledge and skills of how to debate with each other in a constructive way. The focus group was therefore extremely interactive and positive as the individuals felt comfortable enough to voice their opinions.

The names of the participants involved in the study have been changed in order to protect their identity. The name of the tertiary institute has also been changed. Two participants, Hannah and Maira, have different ethnic backgrounds to the others, and this was clearly observed in how they responded to the questions and how they presented themselves. Both Hannah and Maira were raised in strongly religious households, whereas the other four participants were raised in households that did not emphasize culture and were rather open-minded about their religious choices. Hannah has a full-time job, whereas Kyle and Gabriel both have part-time jobs. Maira, Matthew, and Paul are all full-time students.

4.2. Thematic Analysis

The following section discusses the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. Five themes emerged, the first two also had sub-themes. The five themes were contextual

factors; the degree of familiarity; online and offline personas; micromanagement; and authenticity respectively.

Theme 1: Contextual Factors

The significance of context on influencing self-presentation of the participants emerged from the data as two sub-themes of geographical and organisational context, and cultural context. The participants discussed how important context is on one's personal brand. Being in a certain location would determine their brand because being at home would allow them to be themselves and dress in comfortable clothing. However, being at work meant that they would have to wear certain attire and act in a manner that is different to being at home.

Geographical and Organisational Contexts

The participants identified organisational culture as being different overseas as it is to South Africa's organisational culture. Paul used Korea as an example and explained how the organisational cultures of different countries affect what they present to others both online and offline. The following quote illustrates this:

Whereas if you look in Korea, my brother was, he would go to work, and at the end of the day, his boss would be like, hey man, let's go for a drink, let's go party, let's go to karaoke. They both literally, his boss is getting slaughtered and smashed from drinks and he's dancing with my brother and then they have a good time and take photos and stuff. And then that could go on Facebook or something, it doesn't really matter. Whereas here, if we do something like that it's like hey, woah, what are you doing this is my boss.

A company's work culture will differ to other companies in the same city, let alone across the world. However, a company's brand is likely to influence an individual's personal brand. This is because the company has a certain reputation they would like to uphold and as someone who is working for that company, that individual becomes a representation of that company. Therefore, that individual needs to act in accordance with the values that company stands by. If an individual does not act in accordance with the company's brand, there can be serious repercussions. A conversation between the participants illustrates this:

Hannah: That links directly to your question because the minute you say something bad and you're working for a company and you're a representation of the company,

and that's it. The company doesn't want negative publicity because negative publicity loses. They lose profit, they lose business, so they don't want any negative connotations.

Paul: And overall the company influences our own personal brand.

Hannah: It does. It changes your thinking.

Paul: The way you convey yourself as well.

Hannah: You think more with the business.

The quote above demonstrates that individuals take on an aspect of that company as it changes the way they think and how they convey themselves to others. Whether this company is based in South Africa or Korea, the company's values infiltrate into the individual's attributes, therefore, changing not only the way the individual conveys himself but also the way that individual thinks. These findings seem to indicate that the company the individual chooses to work for can, therefore, become a reflection of that individual.

Cultural Context

Another context which influences the way one presents themselves is one's culture. This can be understood by meeting an individual from a different culture and having certain expectations about how that individual will act, either due to previous encounters with other individuals from the same culture or from the media exposing certain stereotypes of that culture. Maira explained this by using an example of an interview between a black man and a white man, which demonstrates the expectations each of them had of each other and how the two cultures differ with regards to respect:

No, but like the thing is that it's cultural as well like how you present yourself because if you go into a job interview, um, and you're sitting across from a black man, you would expect the person to maybe comment on the culture thing... Like, if you're white, then they expect yourself to sit straight up and sit in a crucial manner etc. whereas if you're going to communicate to a black man, he would most probably be like slouching in his chair and you would think that's disrespectful...

The quote above demonstrates how individuals are identified by their culture, therefore, illustrating how one's personal brand is influenced by their culture. Fast (1988) explains this quote further by stating that all cultures should be taken into consideration when assessing

one's gesture or body language, such as slouching or sitting up straight, because they mean different things in different cultures.

Another aspect of culture is clothing. Individuals from different cultures dress differently depending on the context they are situated within. If an individual goes for an interview, they would most likely dress in what would be considered the most appropriate attire for that job. If it is an interview for a law firm, a suit or smart dress would probably be deemed most appropriate. Each individual conveys a different aspect of themselves depending on their attire and each individual is identified by that attire, as Maira illustrates below:

Well yeah you can see that through clothing, and everything around my face they would identify me as Muslim, and if they see your red string, they would say she's Hindu or one of those.

This quote reveals how culture plays a role in terms of clothing and context. Another example explaining the relationship between context and culture are females that are Muslim because they would not reveal certain parts of their body when in public, whereas females from other cultures would. Therefore, culture incorporates the topic of gender. If men and women were to act the same in one context, they would both be viewed differently according to the particular culture they are in. This is because what some consider appropriate in one culture, other cultures may disagree. Maira continues to explain this:

Like in India, the opposite genders wouldn't touch each other but they're very close in terms of like where they believe in a brotherhood kind of thing. So, it's completely normal to see two guys holding hands and like hugging and like really carrying on, in a way that you would probably say is gay here [South Africa], but there that like strong...

Different cultures expect men and women to either act or present themselves in a certain way, illustrating how both genders convey themselves differently according to the culture they are in. It is not considered inappropriate if women in South Africa were to hold hands as they are rather considered to have a close relationship. As individuals present themselves according to the context, the different presentations depend on their level of comfort with the other individuals involved, which leads to the next theme that emerged from the study.

Theme 2: Degree of Familiarity

A further finding from the data analysis was how self-presentation changed depending on how familiar one was with the person or group of people one is interacting with. Understanding how individuals present themselves according to the context they are situated in relates to what the participants have called, “levels of comfort” or “levels of intimacy”, which form the two sub-themes discussed here.

Levels of Comfort

How close an individual is with another will influence what that individual displays or reveals to the other because individuals tend to feel more comfortable to be who they really are when they know a person as opposed to when they have just met someone (Collins and Miller, 1994). As Maira states:

This comes into the levels of, uhh, comfort again where it's like if you don't know someone, ahh, that person may try to shape the good image you've described of certain things because you're not comfortable with any of them, but then as you said later on as you get to know them you can choose to reveal certain things about yourself or hide certain aspects.

Individuals tend to hide aspects of themselves that they may not believe to be appropriate in that context or individuals may hide aspects that they may feel insecure about. In most home environments, people are surrounded by family that loves them no matter what their personal character traits are. However, in an interview, an individual will not display those same characteristics as the interviewer may not view it as appropriate and may not employ the individual due to the behaviour displayed. Maira explains this quite well:

... Maybe you just learn to hide other aspects of yourself better than you would with other people. Because you're still the same person, you would still present yourself in the same way to people that you know...

Another example of this is swearing because it may be viewed as appropriate in the household but not at work. The participants explain how they have to consciously think about the way they speak depending on who they are surrounded by, as illustrated by Matthew:

Do you [Gabriel] have to like, watch yourself in terms of like language when you're talking to the 8-year-olds, because sometimes you have to catch yourself...

Matthew asked this about the work that Gabriel is currently doing. Gabriel replied by explaining how he had to remind himself when he was in a lecture, he was now around people of a different age group to the 8-year-olds. Therefore, he was able to change the topic of conversation, change his role from being a role model to now being an equal, and that he was able to relax and be more himself. He discussed how he would have to act as a different person by hiding certain qualities of himself because of the role he had to take on.

Levels of Intimacy

Individuals will, therefore, convey their best aspects to people they do not know in order to be viewed in the best possible light. The fact that individuals want their best characteristics to be seen, shows that society influences each person's own unique brand. This turns to societal expectations. The participants spoke about The Social Penetration Theory, which they had learned when they studied together. The Social Penetration Theory explains how each individual has their own sphere, where others will either penetrate the sphere to gain breadth or depth (Croteau and Hoynes, 2014). Gaining breadth indicates that an individual will learn a lot of different facts about a person, but gaining depth entails learning less about an individual, but more detailed information (Croteau and Hoynes, 2014). The participants tended to view this sphere in a different way. Instead of understanding it as a sphere getting penetrated, they explained that each individual has their own bubble that makes them who they are. As another individual, who has their own bubble, gets to know that person, the two bubbles merge because the two individuals begin taking on each other's experiences and personalities, as these quotes explain:

Paul: ... Where they made it out as if you kind of penetrate the sphere, and you can kind of learn new things. I kind of just, for an unconventional sense, instead of looking at it from a spherical sense and you penetrate it, I extended it to the belief that we are all bubbles and as a bubble does when it meets another, they converge and form a new shape, a new entity, so, I just said like, if we see each other as a bubble, when we get closer we start taking on their traits as well. We start becoming a new person.

Matthew: Like all of our experiences and personalities, like grouped into one.

This perspective seems to indicate that people are influenced by others depending on how well they know them. If individuals are unsure how to act when they are with someone, they will base that interaction on past interactions. For example, Kyle said:

Primacy is when you base all your interaction with someone by the first interaction with them... And recency is based on the most recent interaction.

Slovic and Lichtenstein (1973) elaborate on this understanding of the primacy and recency effect by explaining how the average verbal items in a conversation would determine whether the individual would use the primacy or recency effect. This explains how individuals act when their level of comfort or intimacy is relatively low. When there is an unknown factor, that being the person they are unfamiliar with, they resort to using the primacy and recency effect. However, the participants did explain how one cannot simply establish their impression of another person based on their first impression because that individual will behave differently when meeting someone for the first time, as opposed to encountering that person again. Therefore, using the first interaction an individual has had with someone may assist when encountering that person again, but will only help to a certain extent because both individuals are experiencing the same thing. They both may have been nervous when meeting each other for the first time, and they both may have understood that there is no need to be nervous the second time they are meeting. Their body language and the type of language they use might change as they feel more comfortable with each other. Kyle explains this by using a similar analogy:

Yeah, cause I find, especially with your first impression people are nervous, they jittery, they're concerned. Whereas if you work on your next impression with them, I think that's one of the reasons why most companies have more than one interaction. So, they go okay cool, first interview we see what you're like. Second interview, we actually want to know what you're like in a bit more relaxed setting.

Companies are aware of the fact that individuals do not reveal all aspects of themselves in the first interview and instead, the individual displays the aspects that the interviewer wants to see. In addition to the company's knowledge of how an interviewee conveys certain aspects of themselves, the fact that individuals continuously try to reveal only their best

aspects shows that individuals care what society thinks. Therefore, an individual behaves differently depending on their comfort or intimacy level with another person.

Theme 3: Impressions: Online and Offline Personas

The development and prevalence of web 2.0 applications that enable a culture of sharing personal information has introduced another dimension to self-presentation. Individuals have the opportunity to create their profile in the way they believe brings out the best qualities in themselves.

The data from the study showed that people behave differently online and offline. They act in a certain way because they care about what people think. People do not often reveal aspects of themselves to people they hardly know because they are afraid of being judged. In each society, there is an implicit norm of what is considered the correct way to act in public. However, the internet has allowed for a vast array of different activities and traits to be displayed and accepted by society. However, the participants expressed the difference between presenting themselves online and presenting themselves offline. Kyle explains this difference:

In many cases it makes you feel safer to, um, put, throw themselves online and go, okay cool this is who I am. Or rather that they aren't scared to show off who they are, whereas, in face-to-face in society, they may dress differently... Try to be more conservative as to who they are because for fear of being outed by society.

In an online context, individuals are more comfortable in being themselves and displaying the majority of their characteristics, whereas, in an offline context, individuals feel more pressure on themselves to act in a manner that is appropriate. The above quote explains how individuals feel much more comfortable to be themselves online than they do in face-to-face interactions. In an offline presence, this is a lot less possible. Gabriel explains the idea of a real-time element:

It's a real-time element because if I'm speaking to you and I say something that might be controversial, I know that you can immediately respond...

This real-time element signifies that online, people can say anything they would like to say because if someone challenges that opinion, an individual has the time to think and

formulate a proper response, whereas, if someone were to do the same thing in person, there would be immediate consequences that the individual would not be as willing to face. This is also because social media has allowed for a diversity of perspectives to arise because individuals all over the world are able to communicate to each other and raise different perspectives. However, in the immediate society the individual is situated within, there are certain perspectives that are viewed as accepted. Therefore, individuals almost tailor their brand according to who they are surrounded by, as Gabriel states:

... So, we kind of do tailor what we like, disseminate.

Their ability to tailor what they disseminate is because when they either post something online or act in a certain way in face-to-face interactions, at the back of their minds they are thinking about the repercussions of the different things they are affiliated with. This explains how they would change their brand according to the people they are around and the environment or context they are situated within. They used the word “switch” to explain how they could effortlessly change between the different brands they have created in order to fit into the context. Personal branding depends a lot on context because individuals present themselves differently in the home environment to how they would present themselves during a lecture, or how they would present themselves during an interview. This leads to the following theme.

Theme 4: Micromanagement

Being aware of the ability to manage your behaviour and actions provides individuals with the opportunity to present themselves better across different contexts by remaining consistent. Due to the fact that individuals care about what people think and, therefore, desire this societal acceptance, individuals almost micromanage their behaviour in order to be accepted. The participants explained how they micromanage their behaviour by using an example of going for an interview:

Hannah: Well, when you're applying for a job then you've got to take all these cues into consideration.

Matthew: But you overthink it though... Like you really have to micromanage all your movements.

The participants discussed the concept “micromanage.” This entails the non-verbal cues such as their body language, posture, the way their hips face when in a conversation, eye contact, hand placement, handshakes, the type of language, and the tone they use when they speak. Being fully aware of all of these aspects is relatively difficult, however, individuals focus on these cues when they are concerned about what the other person may think. The individual is, therefore, able to switch their personal brand and how they convey themselves based on micromanaging these aspects in order to be viewed from the best perspective depending on the context they are situated within.

This ability to switch their personal brand is because post-graduate students tend to have a higher emotional intelligence (EQ) than undergraduate students. This is because as individuals get older, they learn how to better understand their emotions (Mayer and Salovey, 1993). EQ seemed to have an impact on what these students choose to share online because they were able to understand their own and other’s emotions and were, therefore, able to guide their actions and behaviour in the right direction (Mayer and Salovey, 1993). The participants say they were able to micromanage their behaviour based on their emotions and others’ emotions and, therefore, manage the impression they make on others. The concept of impression management is illustrated in Gabriel’s quote:

Mmm. Especially in the workplace. I think if you maybe start working somewhere and you can see there’s people you can get on with well, you might actually manage your impression, or manage your brand, or manage your image, because you actually care for what they might think, I would.

The participants had studied Media Law in their undergraduate degree and discussed how they were more aware of their emotions and the possible repercussions that can occur because of having studied Media Law. Although their study of this subject opened their eyes to personal branding, it is still something they do not always actively practice. It is often a subconscious process involved in their everyday life as they may become more aware of it on certain occasions. An example of this is thinking before they post online because individuals who have not been exposed to this way of thinking will be impulsive and post whatever they happen to be feeling at that moment. However, because these participants have learned about the repercussions and the effect social media has on them on a day-to-day basis, this knowledge is almost ingrained into their thinking. As a result,

managing their impression is something they often do subconsciously. The following conversation illustrates this point:

Gabriel: ... That's a good point you make though. How, what we might post online is literally at the back of our mind we are thinking about the repercussions of different things we are affiliated with, so, we kind of do tailor what we like, disseminate.

Paul: ... I don't even think we notice the impact. I don't think we cognitively or consciously realise that we all attribute some more consideration in some sense...

These participants have been exposed to the importance of personal brand management. It has become an everyday exercise for them because they manage their brand both consciously and subconsciously. This is also due to the fact that individuals begin to lose focus on micromanaging all of their behaviours when they feel more comfortable with the person because they are able to be themselves without the fear of being judged by society. However, when an individual is around someone they have just met and does not feel that strong level of comfort, the thought of micromanaging their behaviour will be at the forefront of their minds.

Theme 5: Authenticity

The final theme that emerged from the data analysis was that of authenticity. Presenting an image to society whether that is online or offline, is determined by an individual's self-confidence. If an individual is concerned about their image and is insecure about revealing certain aspects of themselves, the brand they convey to others is not their real brand because they feel as though they need to hide something. Some companies will not employ an individual if they do not have a social media account as they believe the individual has something to hide. A conversation between the participants illustrates this:

Kyle: So, I know from a personal fact, I was speaking to one of my friends who works for a sub-contractor for Deloitte, and he said that Deloitte and the company that he works for because they sub-contract to Deloitte, they won't um, employ you if you don't have a Facebook profile.

Hannah: Why?

Kyle: Because they feel like you have something to hide.

Hannah: So, you have to be an active social media user?

Having a social media account can help companies to gain more insight into who they may be hiring and since having a social media account is the norm in today's day and age, if that person does not have an account, it can be seen as a bit odd. Furthermore, because social media accounts are meant to be authentic, the participants explained that those who do not have accounts might be more likely to want to hide something about themselves. The participants discussed the importance of EQ and how it has to do with age. Teenagers, and possibly individuals still doing their undergraduate degree, may still be unaware of the possible repercussions of presenting an image to the world that they believe the world might accept or want to see. However, as these individuals mature and grow up, they try to align what they present online with what they present offline as this quote is from Hannah illustrates:

I feel like the older you get, the similar your online profile becomes to your online brand. But that's just me. Because I feel like now, the person I am in reality is the person I am online because I know where I am in my life, I know where I am with my job, and I have to be cautious in both senses: in an online sense and a reality sense.

Individuals will begin to align their online profile with their offline profile when they feel comfortable in being themselves, when they are not concerned about what others think, and when they know they have nothing to hide. Aligning these profiles will allow for the individual to be consistent across all mediums. The participants discussed an idea of an "ever-lasting impression" that is only possible when an individual is being their authentic and true self. Paul's quote demonstrates this:

Yeah, so then being yourself essentially, would be the best way to foster an ever-lasting impression.

Creating an ever-lasting impression on one person or a group of people is the best possible answer to branding oneself. Being one person online and another person in face-to-face interactions does not represent authenticity and instead, shows that the individual is insecure with who they really are. Therefore, in order to compensate, they put on an act to cover it up. One's personal brand should be presented on all platforms and in all face-to-face interactions.

In this section of the report, the data was explored in terms of five themes which emerged through inductive analysis. The following section moves towards a deductive approach as the theoretical framework is used as a lens to understand the data.

4.3. Link to Literature

The Presentational Self Theory makes use of a theatrical metaphor to explain how individuals reveal and conceal different aspects of themselves in order to impress an audience (Littlejohn and Foss, 2011). In terms of personal branding, individuals reveal and conceal different aspects of themselves depending on the audience in order to construct the best impression of themselves. By applying personal branding to this theory, it demonstrates how people are the actors, the situation or context they are situated within is the stage, and the audience are the people they are interacting with. These individuals would then conceal certain aspects of themselves if they are in an uncomfortable situation, consequently only revealing their true self when they have left that situation. If they are in a context or situation that they feel comfortable in, they would reveal most, if not all, aspects of their authentic self.

All of the abovementioned themes link to the literature. Acting in a certain way on stage depends on the contextual factors and how well the individual knows the person or people he is interacting with. The participants demonstrated how they align their online, or backstage persona, with their offline, or front stage persona, by being authentic and micromanaging their behaviour. The following section of this research will discuss the two concepts described from the Presentational Self Theory and apply the five themes identified above. It is important to note that these two concepts are quite difficult to distinguish from each other, therefore, the five themes may overlap between them.

Concept 1: Self-Presentation

Self-presentation essentially describes how individuals present themselves to others. In theme 1 – contextual factors, individuals present the aspects of themselves that are most appropriate for that context. The context is comprised of the geographical location, the individual's personal culture, and the company's culture. This means that the actors will present themselves differently depending on the stage they are on and the audience they are presenting themselves to. Actors present only certain features of themselves, with the intention of hiding other aspects, in order to fit the character they are portraying. Applying

this to the participants, they will, therefore, put on a certain performance to hide aspects that he or she may not feel comfortable revealing. Therefore, relating the participant's performance to the degree of familiarity with the audience involved. If the participant is more comfortable with the person or people he is interacting with, the individual would then micromanage his performance to fit with that audience.

The participants explained that if they have a relatively high level of self-confidence, they would be more likely to present other aspects of themselves rather than hiding those qualities for backstage. If the participant has a relatively low level of confidence in his qualities, they are less likely to present additional aspects and rather hide those features for a different audience. However, presenting more attributes will provide the audience with more information about the individual and will also allow for a more authentic person to be presented, which is of utmost importance for anyone that is about to enter the workplace.

Owing to the fact that this theory was critiqued for primarily focusing on face-to-face interactions, this concept strongly relates to offline presentations as individuals will present themselves in a certain way depending on the context and the degree of familiarity. In this sense, these participants consciously and subconsciously micromanage their behaviour as they are aware of the importance of a positive self-presentation and due to their undergraduate degrees, it is, therefore, ingrained in their thinking. Furthermore, as these participants have further developed their EQ, they understand how to act or behave in a manner that is most appropriate for the situation, and hence, present an authentic and consistent brand across all face-to-face interactions.

However, it is important to understand that self-presentation also relates to online interactions because individuals can personally craft their self-image in such a way to present themselves in the way they think is most appropriate (Van Dijck, 2013). This allows the individual to either present the person they would on stage or the person they are backstage, as these are two different characters. The participants explained how they are more likely to present their authentic self, specifically their backstage persona, online, and then present the character they are on stage in face-to-face interactions. This is because the participants feel more comfortable to be who they really are online because of the real-time element discussed above in theme 3 – impressions, as they are afraid of being judged in person because what they really desire is societal acceptance.

Concept 2: Impression Management

Impression management is often an unconscious act that occurs as the individual interprets the situation and, therefore, attempts to create an impression in the minds of others. It is important to understand the difference between the two concepts because Goffman (2008) states that self-presentation is a conscious act of presenting oneself in a certain manner with the intention of evoking a certain response, whereas, impression management is an unconscious act that focuses on creating an impression in the minds of the audience by behaving in a certain way. However, the focus group challenged this by explaining how both concepts have conscious and subconscious elements. This was because people can constantly think about micromanaging their behaviour as well as be comfortable enough in a situation to completely forget about micromanagement.

Impression management is an extension of self-presentation as it still requires the individual to present himself in a certain way, however, it supplements this presentation by including the attempt to control the images the audience forms of him (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). As the students have been exposed to the importance of personal branding both online and offline, the knowledge they have gained allows them to subconsciously act in a manner that suits the context they are in. Due to the students unintentionally tailoring their brand according to the people they are interacting with, it relates to impression management because they tend to micromanage their behaviour to control the images others have of them in order to be viewed in the best light possible and, thus, gain society's acceptance.

This concept relates to an online context as well because individuals will present themselves how they choose to, but with the intention of controlling the images others have of them. The ability to manage one's online presentation allows individuals to control how others view them. However, although the individual desires to control how others view them, it can become a problem in two ways. Firstly, the presentation the individual has created of himself online may evoke a response that was not intended. Secondly, if the presentation the individual displays online does not correspond with their offline presentation, it can become a problem. However, because these students have been exposed to the importance of consistently presenting an authentic brand, the response they attempted to evoke will more likely be an authentic response based on an authentic profile and will therefore not lead to any consequences. Furthermore, aligning one's online brand with their offline brand will provide the individual with the ability to present a consistent brand and thus, the individual does not have to constantly remember which presentation fits with which audience.

As a result, self-presentation and impression management relate to each other in terms of personal branding because being aware of the ability to manage one's behaviour and actions, provides individuals with the opportunity to better present oneself in an authentic and consistent manner.

4.4. Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness of Findings

Quantitative research studies assess the quality of their research based on reliability and validity in contrast to a qualitative research study where quality is evaluated based on trustworthiness or rigour (Bryman, 2012). Reliability and validity are not used as criteria for qualitative research as there is not one account of social reality because all individuals construct multiple views of social reality. Therefore, trustworthiness is used in qualitative research and is made up of four criteria to properly evaluate the research (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b).

The first criterion is credibility (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b). Credibility is concerned with the congruency between the research findings and reality (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b). To ensure credibility in a research study, two possible strategies will be explained: respondent validation and triangulation (Bryman, 2012). Respondent validation is when the researcher will provide the participants with the research findings in order to verify or correct errors (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b). This was demonstrated in this research as the research findings were distributed to the participants so that errors could be corrected if necessary. Triangulation includes using two or more aspects of research in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of the research (Thurmond, 2001). Triangulation was difficult to ensure in this study due to the scope of this study and the limited data collection. With a larger scope, the use of two or more aspects of research could be used, therefore, strengthening the trustworthiness.

The second criterion is transferability which is parallel to external validity in quantitative research (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative research focuses on a small sample as it is primarily interested in the particular context in order to gain information that has more depth than breadth (Bryman, 2012). This research demonstrated transferability due to the fact that the selected group of individuals are typical in the sense that there are many other post-graduate students where the context may be applicable to and hence, may be applicable to other

contexts (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b). However, other possible researchers may not find that this research is transferable and thus cannot be applied to their context.

The third criterion is dependability, which parallels reliability in quantitative research (Bryman, 2012). In order to ensure dependability, records of all phases of the research must be kept (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, this research has kept all decisions made about the data collection and analysis phase and the reasoning for doing so, the reasons for creating a certain theme or category using thematic analysis, and lastly, the documentation of the changes made throughout the process (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b).

Lastly, the fourth criterion is confirmability (Bryman, 2012). This criterion describes the degree of neutrality of the findings (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b). Confirmability can be understood as the extent to which these findings were shaped by the participants and did not include the researcher's bias (Bryman, 2012). This is known as researcher reflexivity whereby the researcher will view the findings and determine whether or not her own experiences and understandings have affected the research process (Morrow, 2005). Therefore, because this research includes the documentation of all decisions and revisions made, the researcher recognises that complete objectivity is not possible, however through the use of complete documentation and respondent validation, other researchers will be able to identify how the researcher came to these findings.

The narrow scope of this research study and hence the small data collection may have limited the trustworthiness of this research, however, if this topic was researched with a larger scope, these different aspects of trustworthiness would be enhanced and would, therefore, strengthen this study.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Addressing the Research Question

The following section answers the question, “*How do post-graduate students present themselves?*”. The sub-questions help understand the overall main question that this research focuses on. Although the findings section above has answered the research questions, this section shows more explicitly how those questions were answered.

1. What are post-graduate students’ perceptions of personal branding?

The participants’ perceptions of personal branding changed from the beginning of the focus group to the time they left. One of the reasons being was they believe that they take personal branding for granted. It is not something they constantly think about as it has become something that comes naturally to them, possibly due to their undergraduate degree in communication. This degree exposes them to the ins and outs of communication from their undergraduate degree and the repercussions of presenting themselves in a way that is inauthentic. By the end of the focus group, the individuals explained that an individual’s personal brand is not just who you are. A personal brand is everything an individual does, everything that an individual will do, and everyone the individual is associated with. The participants left the focus group with a wider perception of personal branding than they had when they arrived. They understood personal branding as being much more than how someone conveys themselves to others or how they present themselves in any specific context.

2. How do post-graduate students present themselves online and offline?

The students explained the slight differences between how they present themselves online and how they present themselves offline. However, their knowledge of aligning the two originates from their undergraduate degree. Individuals who have not been exposed to the importance of media and communication, may not be aware of ensuring that their online presentation is aligned with their offline presentation. Coordinating the two presentations relates back to theme 5 – authenticity because being consistent across contexts demonstrates authenticity.

Being consistent across online platforms and face-to-face interactions come with age, as explained by the students. The younger a person is, the less emotionally equipped that individual is as he or she will only display their best aspects for others to see. In contrast, the older an individual gets, the more realistic that person is with how they display themselves online. Thus, individuals with a higher EQ are better at remaining consistent across the different contexts, as they understand the repercussions of presenting multiple conflicting brands.

From an online perspective, the students explained how easy it is to tailor and shape the particular person they want to be viewed as. Due to the fact that people have the ability to withhold certain information that they may not want the world to know, they, therefore, have the ability to disclose certain information on their profile, thus tailoring their profile as they desire. People feel as though they can say anything online as they believe it is a safer environment to do so. In person, however, individuals are less likely to discuss those same topics due to the real-time element, because there is not enough time to form a specifically crafted response to a statement made. Thus, individuals are less cautious about what they say or present online as they do offline. However, as these students are aware of the repercussions and the difference between what one discusses online and offline, these students think before they post.

In an offline context, the students explain how they are less aware of how they present themselves, and although they have become less aware of how they present themselves, the way they act or behave is still influenced by multiple factors. One factor, which has been thoroughly discussed, is context. The context that an individual is situated within will determine their behaviour. Another factor is an individual's degree of familiarity with the person they are interacting with. A person is more likely to be their true self when they have spent time with someone and have built up a level of comfort with that person, whereby the individual knows it is acceptable to be their true authentic self. A third factor is self-confidence. The students explained that they are more confident in presenting themselves in an offline context as they find that it is easier to express who they truly are. They discuss how their authentic personality and genuine behaviour can either get lost or misinterpreted online. Lastly, they feel that in a face-to-face setting, their presentation is much more genuine because it just comes naturally to them, whereas online, they are aware of what they are typing and, therefore, become more conscious of their presentation.

3. What value do post-graduate students attach to personal branding?

Owing to the students' knowledge of the importance of effective communication, they attribute a high level of value to their personal brand as they understand that it can either make or break them. The students understand the value of being an active social media user, as well as the value of creating an authentic profile that accurately represents who they are. Once again, this reiterates the importance of consistent authenticity as one of the most important aspects the students value about a personal brand. As the students say, being authentic will create an ever-lasting impression on others.

The students attach the values of responsibility and ambition to personal branding as individuals are responsible for their personal brand, and should, therefore, have a strong enough desire to present an authentic and consistent personal brand. Displaying a consistent brand exhibits how much self-confidence that individual has because an individual's self-respect affects their confidence, and their confidence affects their personal brand and how they are conveyed to others. The value of self-respect is important because when an individual is confident in who they are, they are able to present that person across multiple contexts and remain authentic throughout.

A. "How do post-graduates present themselves?"

As a result of their undergraduate degree, the students have learned the importance of creating a unique brand for themselves. Being exposed to communication both within a business and in society in general, has given them the tools to make informed decisions about how to better convey themselves. The sociological aspect the students have gained from their undergraduate degree has allowed them to consistently present their true self across multiple online platforms and different offline contexts. The ability to be consistent in their presentation assists them in both casual settings and professional settings. This is because the information they present online is aligned with what they present offline.

When an individual is consistent with their actions, behaviour, and presentation, both online and offline, it indicates to the people that individual is associated with, that the person is genuine and not pretending to be someone that they are not. Society creates expectations of people from both their online and offline brand. By viewing someone's online profile, people can gain some idea of who that person may be, and vice-versa. Knowing someone

in person will give others the impression of who they may be online. However, if an individual presents different aspects to different people, others may question whether or not that person is being genuine with them. Being true to who they are across multiple online platforms and face-to-face situations, is much easier than trying to remember what presentation they need to put on because it changes depending on the group they are with or the platform they are on.

The students identified offline contexts being their preferred setting to present themselves because it is the context where they feel they can be themselves without the conscious thought of society's expectations. Their ability to communicate effectively and be their true self in offline settings is preferred, and moreover, due to the fact that it is something that comes naturally to them. The knowledge they have gained from their undergraduate degree has become ingrained in their minds, which results in their presentation becoming a subconscious thought. Due to this very reason, they feel more comfortable in face-to-face situations, as they feel they can be themselves without consciously thinking about how to act or present themselves which they might in an online context.

5.2. Recommendations

The purpose of this research is exploratory in the sense that it is not trying to change a certain phenomenon for the better, it is merely trying to gain a better understanding of post-graduates' views on personal branding. In addition, because this research took a qualitative approach, it provided a better understanding of this particular context and as a result, is unable to generalise to the larger population (Bryman, 2012). However, because this research has used a relatively typical context, other researchers could potentially research post-graduate students in different contexts in order to obtain a better understanding or possibly come across a contradiction to these research findings (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b).

In terms of the topic of this research, there is not a lot of research that has been done on personal branding, especially relating to the workplace. This research could potentially contribute to the understanding, importance, and consequences of personal branding as the individuals that are included in this research are the next generation to enter the marketplace. Their perspectives on personal branding and how important they believe it to be may contribute not only to fellow post-graduate students but also to employers that intend on hiring graduates.

One recommendation derived from the focus group was to expand this research to other post-graduate students. The main reason behind this is due to the participants' undergraduate degree, as these students have been exposed to communication and media with such a distinct viewpoint in comparison to the students with a different undergraduate degree. Exploring other students' views of personal branding when they have been taught to think with a business, sociological, or a law mindset, may uncover different responses to the key questions.

5.3. Evaluation and Reflection

The focus group was an interesting and comfortable method of collecting data as the students knew each other and were, therefore, more at ease when answering the focus group questions and were also more inclined to engage with each other. This made the whole process of facilitating the focus group a lot easier as the participants did not depend on the researcher to drive the momentum of the conversation. The students spoke a lot about their undergraduate degree as well as memories they have together.

Owing to the fact that these students know each other and have the same undergraduate degree, their answers were relatively consistent. This was helpful in the sense that it provided clarity of what themes were most prevalent, therefore, assisting the thematic analysis section of this research. However, a negative aspect of this was that it did not have different experiences. The students seemed to have similar viewpoints and did not challenge each other's views much.

As these students are friends and, therefore, have some preconceived idea of how each other process things, creating a focus group of post-graduate students that do not know each other and have different undergraduate degrees could be more beneficial. This is because the knowledge each student has gained from their unique undergraduate degrees will expose a diverse range of ideas and answers to each question. As a result, different themes could potentially arise and could, therefore, provide different perspectives to this research.

5.4. Ethical Implications

The first ethical consideration of this research was to gain permission from the private institution to conduct this research in the organisation. This permission has been granted, and thus the rest of the ethical considerations can be examined. Any research study needs

to consider the ethical implications so that no harm is done to the individuals participating. Therefore, informed consent had to be obtained from the participants before the focus group took place, which can be identified as the blank informed consent letter included as Appendix 2 (Bryman, 2012). This also gave the participants the opportunity not to participate as this research study explicitly stated that it is completely voluntary (Bryman, 2012). Participants were required to sign a consent form that advised them of the research study that they would be involved in. In doing so, because the participants' identity will be kept confidential, they also signed a confidentiality form in order to ensure their identity remains unknown to the general public.

Before the focus group took place, the participants were informed about all the aspects of this research and what was required of them. This was needed so that none of the participants were getting deceived or harmed during the discussion. In doing so, the participants were informed about the use of a voice recorder to record the session in order to document all phases in the research, as well as to assist when transcribing and analysing the data. The participants were also informed of respondent validation whereby the research findings would be distributed to all the participants, before the final research report in order to ensure credibility (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b).

5.5. Limitations

The limitations of this research are the consequences of conducting a qualitative exploratory study. Due to the fact that this research is qualitative and using non-probability sampling, it cannot be generalised to the larger population. In addition, a focus group has limitations of its own such as group effects (Bryman, 2012). One type of group effect is that some individuals have powerful personalities and tend to get involved more than others and the facilitator must be aware of this in order to probe the introverted individuals to speak up and state their views (Bryman, 2012). In addition, a limited time may become a problem as having a time-constraint on a focus group session may not allow for all of the topics to be covered.

Due to this research being very limited in scope due to it being a short honours level research study, there is no opportunity to reach a level of data saturation because the scope is relatively small. A level of saturation is reached when new data is no longer providing any new insights to the research (Bryman, 2012). This limitation can only be solved by

increasing the number of participants involved or by conducting multiple studies to groups of individuals at different institutions to make a comparison between the different findings.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Data Collection Tool

Focus Group Questions:

1. Have you thought about what your personal brand is?
2. Where do you find it easier to express yourself, online or face-to-face? Why?
3. Is there a difference in terms of what you express online versus face-to-face? Why do you think this is so?
4. Online:
 - a) What social media platforms do you use?
 - b) What do you do on each platform?
 - c) What content do you share?
 - d) Do you think your presentation online may influence your chances of getting a job? Why or why not?
5. Face-to-face:
 - a) What things do you do to create a good impression?
 - b) What do you think about when you think of first impressions?
 - c) How do you maintain a good impression in the minds of others?

Appendix 2: Explanatory Information Sheet and Consent Form for Participants

To whom it may concern,

My name is Simone Robert and I am a student at a private tertiary institution in Durban. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Amanda Cox about the knowledge of post-graduate students' perspectives of personal branding in the workplace. I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of post graduate's perceptions of the importance of personal branding as these individuals are the next generation to enter the workplace.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

What will I be doing if I participate in your study?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because you are a post-graduate student. If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to conduct a focus group followed by two in-depth interviews. The two individuals participating in the follow-up interviews will only be chosen after the focus group takes place. The focus group will take approximately 90 minutes, and the interview will take about 45 minutes to an hour. It will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for all participants, and will take place at a private tertiary institution in Durban. I will be asking questions about your own perspective of personal branding.

You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions.

Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?

Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about your understanding of personal branding. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.

Do I have to participate in the study?

- Your inclusion in this study is purely voluntary;
- If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;
- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without

having to provide an explanation for your decision.

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. I would like to ask your permission to record the interviews, but only my supervisor and I will have access to these recordings. Nobody else, including anybody at a private tertiary institution in Durban, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my post-graduate degree. You may ask me to send you a summary of the research if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate.

You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:

Simone Robert
079 575 7801
simoneemmarobert@gmail.com

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

Amanda Cox
082 699 7972
coxamandajane@gmail.com

Consent form for participants

I, _____, agree to participate in the research conducted by Simone Robert about post-graduate students' perspectives of personal branding in the workplace.

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

1. I agree to be interviewed for this research.
2. My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private.
3. My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research.
4. I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview.
5. I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected.

Signature

Date

Consent form for audio-recording/ video recording

I, _____, agree to allow Simone Robert to audio record my interviews as part of the research about post-graduate students' perspectives of personal branding in the workplace.

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

1. My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private.
2. The recordings will be stored in a password protected file on the researcher's computer.
3. Only the researcher, the researcher's supervisor and possibly a transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings.

Signature

Date

Appendix 3: Ethical Clearance Letter



ADvTECH House
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2196

P.O. Box 2369
Randburg 2125

Tel: (011) 676 8021
Fax: (011) 783 2574

28 June 2017

Student name: Simone Robert

Student number: 17229479

Campus: Varsity College Durban North

Re: Approval of Bachelor of Arts Honours in Communication Proposal and Ethics Clearance

Your research proposal and the ethical implications of your proposed research topic were reviewed by your supervisor and the campus research panel, a subcommittee of The Independent Institute of Education's Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee.



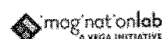
Your research proposal posed no significant ethical concerns and we hereby provide you with ethical clearance to proceed with your data collection.



There may be some aspects that you still need to address in your proposal. If this is the case, feedback will be provided to you in writing. You will need to address these aspects in consultation with your supervisor.



In the event of you deciding to change your research topic or methodology in any way, kindly consult your supervisor to ensure that all ethical considerations are adhered to and pose no risk to any participant or party involved. A revised ethical clearance letter will be issued in such instances.



We wish you all the best with your research!



Yours sincerely,




Amanda Cox
Supervisor


Leigh de Wet
Campus Postgraduate Coordinator



Directors: RJ Douglas (UK), JDR Oesch (non-executive), A Isaakidis (non-executive) **Company Secretary:** C Koopman

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Appendix 4: Gatekeepers Letter



ADvTECH House
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P.O. Box 2369
Randburg 2125

Tel: (011) 676 8021
Fax: (011) 783 2574

REF: R1317
Enquiries: research@iie.ac.za
14 July 2017

REQUEST FOR RESEARCH TO BE CONDUCTED ON AN IIE SITE/S

Dear S Robert,

The committee considered the evidence of your application and have **approved** this request - on condition that you strictly adhere to the conditions stipulated below. This approval is based on the assumption that the information you have provided is true and factually correct. Approval is granted for:

Initial and Surname:	S. Robert
Student number:	17,229,479
Institution where registered:	The IIE
Qualification:	Bachelor of Arts Honours in Communication
Year in which research will be conducted:	2017
Year in which you aim to graduate:	2018
Supervisor:	Amanda Cox
Title of study:	An exploratory study of postgraduate students awareness of the importance of personal branding in the workplace



Directors: RJ Douglas (UK), JDR Oesch (non-executive), A Isaakidis (non-executive) **Company Secretary:** JDR Oesch (Acting)



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CONDITIONS TO BE FULFILLED IN RELATION TO RESEARCH

Permission is granted to proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met and may be withdrawn should any of these conditions be flouted.

Please note: The panel has not considered the merits, accuracy or ethical soundness of the research or proposal as that has already been done by the campus ethics committee. The only merits examined are the use of The IIE as a sample. Permission is granted subject to the following conditions:

1. A copy of your final report must be submitted to the library.
2. The researcher(s) will need to obtain informed consent in writing from all of the participants in his/ her sample if not anonymous.
3. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the relevant person(s) at the brand or The IIE Central Academic Team that would be involved in the study.
4. Research may only be conducted in such a way that the normal programme of the site/ offices is not interrupted.
5. The principal/ manager must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher(s) may carry out the research at the sites that they manage.
6. The researcher(s) will only use this data for research purposes.
7. The researcher(s) will not be permitted to refer to The IIE/ brands or use The IIE/ brand's name, logo, brand or any other identifiers in any way including questionnaires, surveys, interviews, proposal, research reports, etc. The IIE/ brand needs to be referred to in a generic manner, for example 'An HE provider; ... an educational brand of an HE provider; ... etc.'
8. Should the researcher(s) wish to publish this research or in any way make the results public, such as publishing the results on social media etc., this committee will need to approve the request first.
9. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/ her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/ or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
10. No names or identifying information may be used within the research and the research must be voluntary.

The Independent Institute of Education Pty Ltd, its associated companies, employees, contractors, representatives and directors, are indemnified against all claims which may arise in connection with or as a result of any loss, damage or injury to you as a researcher entering into an agreement with a participant in the course of your research, provided that such loss, damage or injury is caused by the gross negligence or intentional act(s) or omission(s) of The Independent Institute of Education Pty Ltd, its associated companies, employees, contractors, representatives and directors.

Wishing you the very best of luck with your study.

Yours sincerely,



Maria Koonin
Research and Development Manager
The Independent Institute of Education
+27 11 676 8021

Appendix 5: Originality Report



RESM8419_2017_HBA1_VCDN1 - RESM8419_VCDN1



Assignment 5 - POE

Simone Robert on Tue, Oct 17 2017, 5:38 PM

 12% highest match

Submission ID: c31acce7-ce28-4aca-a25d-fe35cfab5e13

RESM - Simone Robert 1722...

Word Count: 15,639

Attachment ID: 182839116

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