Employer-oriented personal branding: methods and skills for Indian business school students

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper was to provide a framework of methods and skills for employer-oriented personal branding among business school students to create an effective digital curriculum vitae for employment and to test the students' awareness of personal branding techniques.

Design/methodology/approach – This was a mixed methods study which followed an exploratory model, where the findings of the qualitative first stage helped develop the hypotheses for the second (quantitative) stage of the study. The rich detailed data collected from the qualitative phase were used to develop the instrument for stage 2. Responses based on Likert scale were used in stage 2 to test the hypotheses.

Findings – The study tested hypotheses relating to personal branding, demonstrating that most of the skills and methods studied are held in high esteem by business school students. The study clearly establishes that these students possess a high degree of awareness about the need for employer-oriented personal branding and use various methods and skills to build their brand, validating our hypotheses.

Research limitations/implications – This study focused only on two top-tier Indian business school students. A larger and more inclusive study in other emerging market nations may validate its findings. Students from non-business disciplines could be studied to find out differences in approaches to employer-oriented self-branding.

Practical implications – Students may be able to brand themselves better through the use of the methods and skills tested in this study. Within the business schools, faculty mentors can use this methodology to support students in further consolidation of their brand with the help of social media profiles such as LinkedIn, Facebook and others. The skills learnt in the business school will stand the student in good stead, and the company will benefit from their personal branding efforts translating into commercial benefits for the firm.

Originality/value – This paper provides a structured approach towards employer-oriented personal branding of students, missing in earlier studies.

Keywords Personal branding, Employer-oriented, Social media, Indian business school students, Skills and methods

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The practice of personal branding has become extremely relevant in the digital age, especially in the context of young professionals all set to enter the market. Romaniuk *et al.* (2004) have stated that one of the first brand awareness methods to receive attention is top of the mind brand recall in response to product category cue. "Brand recall requires that consumers correctly recall the brand from memory" (Ha *et al.*, 2009, p. 5). Incidentally, brand awareness is one of the key ideas in any branding exercise as people tend to gravitate towards or recommend ideas/ people/ products/ organisations that reside at the forefront of the mind (Keller, 1993; Ya-Hsin *et al.*, 2014; Aaker 1997).

Right from the time Tom Peters wrote *The Brand Called You* (1997), personal branding has been a subject of discussion. With the onslaught of social media, which as a group democratised the branding of individuals, it has received even more attention. Peters has claimed that "We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most

important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You" (Peters, 1997; Para 5). The growing need in individuals to project themselves in ways that generate impact has made this concept applicable on a daily basis.

Traditionally, personal branding has been the sphere of attention and interest largely for CEOs and celebrities, particularly those in politics, films and sports, who have used the tool to enhance and project their very public personas to their advantage. "Unlike companies or products, individuals possess intrinsic personal branding as a result of personality qualities, past experience and development, and communication with others – whether they know it or not. In this sense, every person already has a personal brand of some kind. The challenge is to manage that brand strategically" (Rangarajan *et al.*, 2017, p. 657). Vijungco (2014) insightfully observes that maintaining a consistently positive and memorable impact on bosses, co-workers and employees increases the chances of getting hand-picked for the best opportunities when they come knocking and paves the way to career growth and success, which in turn generates commercial/economic impact.

The presence of online personas has made it easier for people to develop their personal brands and promote self-marketing for individuals (Shepherd, 2005). While there are increasing concerns regarding privacy and data theft, millennials have a growing digital footprint in the arena of self-expression and identity construction online. In this regard, then, consistency of the image created becomes the most important concern. According to Dolan's (2017) study in MIT, this image should showcase the most important skills which the students want highlighted for their potential recruiters and employers. This consistency needs to be maintained in all spheres of communication such as verbal, written and virtual. A strong online presence can push an individual's brand by many leagues. Wee and Brooks (2010) have stated that the strategic moves of personal branding are targeted at developing reflexivity as they encourage individuals towards careful and critical self-assessment about their relative strengths and weaknesses. The primary objective is to use the acquired self-knowledge and control the way in which one is perceived. In order to achieve this influence, it is seminal that the skills that highlight the brand of a student are showcased.

Manai and Holmlund (2015) describe self-marketing especially in the context of business students' self-marketing in Helsinki, Finland, stating that it is a process that the students use to formulate and communicate their abilities and skills to stand out in a crowd especially in situations involving job hunting, networking and/or developing a career, which in turn increases employment likelihood. In the year 2012, Wetsch discusses the case of Newfoundland and points out that we inhabit a world of constant transition, which makes it obligatory that educators and professors facilitate the move of their students from possessing social media knowledge to the active use of social media intelligence. More recent analysis by Jobvite (2014) shows that social media profiles such as LinkedIn are gaining ascendancy in the space of recruiting. In this context, close analysis of LinkedIn and other social media platforms has become the mainstay of business school recruitments. This connection between Wetsch's formulation (2012) and Jobvite's current analysis (2014) demonstrates the progress from ideation to action and the entry of newer digital media in the recruitment space. This paper attempts to cater to this need in the recruitment space through its structured approach to the methods and skills of employer-oriented personal branding used by business school students in India. With the current digital branding options such as Facebook and LinkedIn, faculty mentors can assist students to enhance their brand using the methodology in this paper. A strategic branding exercise changes depending on the sphere of influence of the individual who is attempting to create a personal brand. While CEOs and celebrities might be able to exert a much larger influence (Rein *et al.*, 2006), this paper studies the manner in which employer-oriented personal branding techniques can be leveraged by students of business schools.

Objectives and methodology of the study

This study examined the awareness of personal branding and the practical methods and skills that management students use to create an image, which aids them in branding themselves for better acceptability and likeability in the business school. Ilies (2018), in her study of a university in Romania, highlights that academic life is the ideal life state at which young adults and professionals must focus on developing their brand. In student life, individuals have ample time for introspection, reflection and research, all of which are key elements in promoting a personal brand and self-marketing. The purpose of the current study was to examine students from Indian business schools to see if they recognise the role of a good image, networking skills, and building effective relationships with people because businesses are co-dependent (Griffin, 2014) and need constant navigation through these bonds. Keeping this in mind, the current study was undertaken with three primary objectives:

(1) To study the awareness of personal branding techniques among business school students.

(2) To specifically measure the importance of various employer-oriented personal branding methods.

(3) To determine which employer-oriented personal branding skills were considered important.

There are four reasons as follows for selecting business school students as the area of focus:

(1) This kind of research has not been attempted before, though personal branding as a concept has been around for a few years now. In particular, specific skills and methods used by Indian business school students for employer-oriented personal branding have not been studied.

(2) The main reason for focusing on business school students was that placement processes tend to be more well set, streamlined and contemporary as compared to schools of other disciplines in India. Because the major purpose of this study was to look at employer-oriented personal branding, this group with its processes provided the most effective sample.

(3) Based on the students' choice of business school to attend, Seth Godin (2006) observes that students are primarily in business schools for branding and networking purposes. This study attempts to investigate this line of thinking as the researchers have personally witnessed some of these self-branding attempts.

(4) This study may prove useful for faculty members to mentor students in branding themselves better. Some of these elements could perhaps be used by faculty members in branding themselves as well.

The primary research for this study was conducted in two top Indian business schools and was based on observing and documenting of practices and behaviours that students display in these environments.

This was a mixed methods study which followed an exploratory model. In such a design, the findings of the first stage (qualitative) help develop/ inform the second stage of the study (quantitative) (Greene *et al.*, 1989). This is a two-pronged approach and is often referred to as the exploratory sequential design (Creswell *et al.*, 2003). Further, this study used the instrument development model of the exploratory design, first qualitatively exploring the data and then designing the instrument based on these explorations and qualitative findings (Creswell and Plano, 2007). In line with this mixed methods approach, the rich detailed data collected from the qualitative phase informed the instrument design and allowed the researchers to anticipate the challenges that they may face in the survey stage of the study.

Stage 1

A total of 20 participants were interviewed in the first stage of the study. They were MBA participants of two top Indian business schools. These schools are ranked in the top 10 list of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (NIRF, 2019). The respondents were interviewed at length (up to 40 min each with individual interviews ranging from 25 to 40 min) to ascertain their views about personal branding, its importance and how they could promote or enhance their personal brand. The researchers then analysed the interview data for common patterns, and further insights were developed. Through this analysis, they arrived at two major categories of strategies employed by students: the methods used for personal branding and the skills that are useful for personal branding. These insights in turn informed about the instrument design for the quantitative phase of the study. For instance, in the interviews, participants repeatedly highlighted their use of certain methods, e.g. case study competitions, to build their personal brand and some skills that they develop for personal branding, such as presentation skills among others. These were included as scaled items in part 2 of the study.

The qualitative study helped build the instrument for the quantitative stage of the study. The qualitative stage of the study indicated that personal branding was important to students. Majority of the respondents stated that it is essential that management students engage in the activity of personal branding because it creates recall and may even open up avenues of professional gains. The statements made by student respondents established a repeat pattern of terms like "important", "essential", "very useful" in the context of personal branding. Because the qualitative stage involved unstructured interviews about students' use of personal branding strategies, the scope of further enquiry was limited to two categories: skills and methods useful for personal branding. This resulted in inclusion of most of the items discussed by the respondents, barring a few which did not fall in either of these categories such as academic performance, attitude and levels of exposure.

Stage 2

In stage 2, the instrument was administered to a total of 120 respondents (MBA participants) at the same two business schools, between 21 and 25 years of age. This is the general age group of students in Indian business schools as a majority of them join MBA programmes soon after their Bachelor's degrees, with little or no work experience. Our sample was representative of this majority trend where students join MBA programmes with zero to two years of work experience. These students were different from the ones interviewed in stage 1 of the study, but belonged to the larger group being studied. All questions were on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being the least important and 5 being the most important.

While the qualitative data from the first stage of the study were used to arrive at one parent hypothesis and thirteen other hypotheses arranged as per methods and skills used, the quantitative stage was designed to test these hypotheses. These hypotheses are listed below:

Parent hypothesis (H): Personal branding is important to an MBA student

Methods-based hypotheses (HM):

HM1. In-class interactions with professors promote a student's personal brand.

HM2. Outside class interactions with professors promote a student's personal brand.

HM3. Peer interactions outside class promote a student's personal brand.

HM4. In-class group projects promote a student's personal brand.

HM5. Case study/business competitions promote a student's personal brand.

HM6. Extra-curricular activities promote a student's personal brand.

Skills-based hypotheses (HS):

HS1. Presentation skills are important for students' self-branding efforts.

HS2. Accessing and curating content is important for students' self-branding efforts.

HS3. Writing skills are important for students' self-branding efforts.

HS4. Mastery of technology is important for students' self-branding efforts.

HS5. Building social media profiles like LinkedIn, Facebook and others is important for students' self-branding efforts.

HS6. Interpersonal Skills are important for students' self-branding efforts.

HS7. Social media skills are important for students' self-branding efforts.

Results
The data were collected for 120 participants, and the mean values for all the hypotheses were then ascertained. Table I provides the mean values of all the methods-based hypotheses (HM1 to HM5)

As the results from Table I show, students rated all the methods as effective in building their personal brand, with externally conducted case studies/business competitions receiving the highest importance, followed by peer interactions and extracurricular activities (tied at a mean value of 4.22). Group projects done as a part of in-class assignments were the next highest, closely followed by interactions with professors in the class. The last among these was outside class interactions with professors but still with a rating of 3.39 on a 5-point scale.

Table II records the mean values obtained for all the skills-based hypotheses (HS1 to HS7)

From the second table, it can be seen that barring mastery of technology which has a relatively low score, all other skills come out as important, with scores ranging from 3.66 for

Hypothesis number	Hypothesis statement	Mean value (5)	
HM1	In-class interactions with professors	3.73	
HM2	Outside class interactions with professors	3.39	
HM3	Peer interactions	4.22	
HM4	In-class group projects	3.75	
HM5	Case studies/business competition	4.57	**Table I.**
HM6	Extracurricular activities	4.22	Methods used for
Note(s): *n* = 120			personal branding and their importance

Hypothesis number	Hypothesis statement	Mean value (5)	
HS1	Presentation skills	4.62	
HS2	Accessing and curating content	4.13	
HS3	Writing skills	3.74	
HS4	Mastery of technology	3.28	
HS5	Building social media profiles (LinkedIn etc.)	3.81	
HS6	Interpersonal skills	4.54	**Table II.**
HS7	Social media skills	3.66	Skills important for
Note(s): *n* = 120			personal branding

social media skills, to the most important, presentation skills (score 4.62). The others, in order of their importance rating, are interpersonal skills, accessing and curating content, building profiles on social networks such as LinkedIn and writing skills.

The list of methods and skills considered important involves a wide range of both, and the results seem to indicate that business school students use various techniques in order to build an employer-oriented personal brand. On the overall question about how important is personal branding on the parent hypothesis H, the mean importance rating of 4.34/5 indicates that they consider the activity very important. Thus, all the hypotheses are supported by the results.

Discussion of results

The enterprise of personal branding is quite similar to the manner in which products/companies brand themselves, with the overall objective being differentiation and identification. Quast (2013) delineates that differentiation includes definition of personal brand and its attributes, positioning of the brand distinctly from competitors and management of all aspects of the personal brand. The mean value for the importance of this activity, when coupled with the repeat emphasis laid on it by the respondents during the unstructured interviews, suggests that business school participants between the age groups of 21–25 years are fully aware of the need for self-branding. MBA students in Indian business schools, as stated before, fall in this age bracket as a majority of them join MBA programmes with zero to two years of work experience.

The most important method to build their personal brand, as reported by these respondents, was participating in externally conducted case study/business competitions (HM5 = 4.57/5). These case study competitions, or online challenges run by different companies, require students to compete for a prize, across different business school campuses. These competitions offer the promise of a stellar job opportunity in the organisation that conducts the event, thus directly linking them with the recruitment process of the organisation. In fact, case study/business competitions are beginning to be used as substitutes for more traditional ways of recruitment by many organisations across Indian business school campuses today. Students who participate in these events are required to work in groups of three or more (with faculty mentors at times) and typically find innovative and implementable solutions to problems that are assigned. Traditionally, participation in group assignments, as tested through HM4 in this study that includes in-class group projects (3.75/5), is known to enhance teamwork skills and effective communication because of which collaboration in learning is strongly advocated (Zou and Darvish, 2006; Colbeck et al., 2000). When analysed with the high importance accorded to peer interactions (HM3 = 4.22/5) and interpersonal skills (HS6 = 4.54/5), the findings corroborate that the influence of peers helps to form the self-perceptions of impressionable young minds, as has been established repeatedly over time (O'Brien and Bierman, 1988; Cullingford and Morrison, 1997; Ryan, 2001). These various group activities, extracurricular activities (HM6 = 4.22/5) and interpersonal interactions form the major chunk of social/academic interactions for management students and these together inform their social capital, which in turn accrues to them in real and virtual worlds, precisely because of the institutionalised relationship networks of mutual recognition and acquaintance (Bordieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Prof. Sherene Aftab (2016) in *Teenager Today*, while discussing the importance of forming a lasting impression on teachers, states that a positive influence on teachers and establishing relationships with them can be profitable in the long run and that students need to act proactively in order to achieve this. The importance placed by the respondents on in-class interactions with professors (HM1 = 3.73/5) shows that business school students are aware of the need to create this impression. When coupled with outside class interactions with

professors (HM2 = 3.39/5), it becomes clear that "making a good impression" on professors results in more durable and even sustainable relationships between students and teachers and adds to the efficacy of their personal brand.

Even though some studies show that students do not prefer presentations as a teaching–learning methodology (Sander and Sanders, 2005; Sander and Stevenson, 2002; Stevenson and Sander, 2002), they have proved to be a very effective skill-building mechanism as students display improved confidence, enhanced public speaking skills and heightened positive self-image after making presentations (Mabuan, 2017). In this study also, presentation skills emerged as the clear winner in terms of the respondents' understanding of skills required by business school students to build their personal brand (HS1 = 4.62/5). The high importance of this skill can be attributed to the fact that presentations allow students to master the verbal and non-verbal components of communication, with effective movement and body language playing key roles. These aspects of presentation skills were highlighted by respondents in the interviews, where they mentioned "increased confidence", "greater ease of movement" and "enhanced impact" while discussing the benefits of a well-delivered presentation. According to Morgan (2001), presentations are not only about the speech of the presenter but the movement of the presenter is also key, as an effective use of the space around with good body language can form physical connections which generate trust in the audience. Purposeful physical movements that support the content being delivered, while adding meaning and purport, contribute positively to the experience of the presentation, make the presenter more effective and bolster the student's personal brand.

Skills such as accessing and curating content (HS2 = 4.13/5) also score high on mean values of the respondents' importance quotient. Because of an explosive increase in the online content available on almost any topic, respondents stated that they face an uphill task compared to a decade ago. They have a choice which is unparalleled, but also confusion arising out of the volume of available information. Burdened with "overchoice" (Toffler, 1970), they have an unenviable task of choosing content for assignments from equivalent choices (Iyengar and Lepper, 2001). The exactitude of the skill required makes it highly sought after for business school students that were part of this study. When combined with writing skills (HS3 = 3.74/5), because curation involves paraphrasing, referencing and selecting appropriate parts of the content in two stages, first, the source article, and then the relevant part of the content from it, this skill ranks high on the list of desirables to achieve an effective personal brand.

Social media intelligence and *savoir faire* have become the order of the current rapidly expanding world. Building social media Profiles (HS5 = 3.81/5) and social media skills (HS7 = 3.66/5) emerge as clearly important skills to possess for the respondents of this study. At the same time, the relatively low priority accorded to building social media profiles when compared to other skills such as presentation skills and accessing and curating content, demonstrates that students do not fully realise the impact of social media. In this context, faculty mentors can play an advisory role to help students create better digital CVs, especially across professional platforms such as LinkedIn. They can further explain to students that it is imperative to create a formal and consistent image online just before their entry into their professional lives because "social network profile pages are the primary mechanism that people use for self-branding" (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011, p. 48). In the current environment of new social media platforms that erupt on the scene on a daily basis, capitalisation of these spaces for the construction and promotion of one's brand is a must. Jobvite (2014), a US-based recruiting platform, conducted research to study the manner in which organisations interact with candidate profiles during recruitment. They found that majority of potential recruiters tend to scour through the social media profiles of potential hires, and there is constant investment in the space of social recruiting. There are also instances where individuals have been hired directly through social media platforms and where others have been rejected due to the content posted on their pages.

Most respondents in the study were aware of the differences that they should maintain between social (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat) and professional online platforms (LinkedIn). Respondents in the interviews stated that on their social media platforms they curate, edit and "project themselves in attractive and flamboyant ways", which in turn are designed to "attract appreciation" in the form of "likes". Manzi *et al.* (2018), in their study of the expression/construction of identity through social media platforms, argue that through Facebook, people enter a shared cultural world that is also predefined and they tend to adapt to it. Yee and Bailenson (2009) have argued that the presence of virtual environments create a safe space which encourages individuals to change their self-representation dramatically and thereby control the perception created, both for self and for the other. Lee and Donsbach (2008) describe the manner in which computer-mediated and text-based communication grant greater flexibility for strategic self-presentation when compared to other communication behaviours, such as face-to-face interactions. These include positive refashioning of the self to highlight desirable aspects while diminishing the ones that might construct a negative self-image. This allows students to construct a favourable brand and promote it.

Most respondents in interviews stated that on professional platforms such as LinkedIn, which employers may view critically, they tend to share material that highlights the "professional side of their identity". Right from the choice of picture which is used for the display, which is typically a small passport-sized photograph in formal attire, to the showcasing of their core skills online, they try to build a more serious image than the one on, say, Facebook. They also mentioned using the "online recommendations feature that is readily available within the platform" to bolster this serious and credible image. This is the platform on which they can discuss the skills acquired during their time at the business school. At the same time, the sharing of information needs to be handled with extreme care and panache because negative outcomes of misdirected branding have "greater implications for professional status, whereas insufficient branding is more critical for social status" (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011, p. 49).

Conclusion and contributions

The results emphatically demonstrate that employer-oriented personal branding is considered to be very important by the students of the business schools. A mean value of 4.34 on the parent hypothesis (H) that states personal branding is important to an MBA student, indicates the prominence of this activity in their daily lives. In their pursuit of a consistent personal brand, students use various methods and acquire new skills, which in turn help them in attaining consistency and build brand recall.

As discussed in the previous sections, various aspects of students' professional and personal interactions contribute to the brand-building exercise. A combination of these factors can generate an effective personal brand that is recognisable and differentiable. As Dolan points out, "Your branding strategy should differentiate you from others in your field and it should position you clearly in the minds of others. By focusing on your message and your mission, you project credibility, develop loyalty in your profession and create connections to others in your field" (Dolan, 2017, p. 3). Students are required to focus on what their core skills are and enhance these in order to achieve a consistent image. The most important tenet of personal branding continues to be the need to project a sustainable and cogent self, which can be accomplished only when it is real. While "social media empowers people to present themselves in a different way beyond the conventional frame imposed" (Liu and Suh, 2017, p. 18), it has also been observed that a keen knowledge of self, gained through introspection and reflection, contributes immensely in constructing a lasting brand.

This study provides a structured approach to the methods and skills for employer-oriented personal branding used by students. When used in conjunction, these methods and

skills can serve as a framework that can be used to construct an employer-oriented personal brand by business school students. These techniques include online and offline networking and positive social media perceptions on both professional (LinkedIn) and informal (Facebook, Instagram) platforms. "Once the strategic personal branding process starts, it can be adjusted and readjusted every time a person feels it is needed" (Ilies, 2018, p. 49). The point to note here is that while the personal brand that is built needs to be sustainable, it need not necessarily be fixed for all times, and the digital world facilitates the refashioning of this ever-evolving personal brand. In fact, reposting of content as seen on Twitter, also contributes to constructive self-branding. In a study that analysed the Twitter data of 3,562 active users, Geva *et al.* (2016) found that users tend to retweet material that is connected with topics that they may have introduced at some point earlier, which in turn builds a consistent personal brand that promotes a certain kind of identity and persona.

To summarise, students can build their brands quite effectively, provided they shore up specific skills, which are in tandem with their natural talents and tendencies. While there is a need to remain true to self, they must also showcase the acquired knowledge and skills through participating in specific events and activities which highlight those skills and are relevant to some aspect of their future work. Some of the skills that employers value could include co-ordination, people management and analytical and synthesising capabilities.

Most studies highlight one or two aspects of the way in which students can enhance their brand and project themselves in a more favourable manner (Manai and Holmlund, 2015; Wetsch, 2012; Quast, 2013). This paper provides a structured framework and a more comprehensive approach to this exercise, encompassing employer-oriented skills and methods used in various activities and aspects of life with which students engage. Their offline engagements and online presences coalesce in this construction, enabling them to promote a more wholesome version of themselves and create a consistent and stable brand. At the same time, support from faculty mentors can result in further consolidation of the brand that they may be trying to build in an attempt to impress future employers.

Limitations and scope for further research

The framework proposed in this study is applicable to business school students and faculty mentors in systems similar to those followed in Indian business schools, which largely follow their American counterparts. This could be a limitation because other cultural contexts have not been studied. Perhaps future multi-country studies could address this limitation in other emerging market nations or regions. The sample used to collect primary data consists of only two top-tier business schools. Students from non-business disciplines could also be studied to find out differences in approaches to self-branding targeted at employers.

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