PERSONAL BRANDING AND SOCIAL MEDIA FOR STUDENTS IN TODAY'S COMPETITIVE JOB MARKET

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Abstract

Problem: *Because personal branding is important to recruiters and employers when hiring job candidates, business educators must help students develop their personal brand.* **Research Questions:** *This research study addresses the online/offline elements that hiring managers focus on during the recruitment process and how educators can help students integrate these components using pertinent business communication into developing their personal brand.* **Research Methods:** *Study 1 employed analysis of qualitative interviews of human resource professionals. Study 2 consisted of an online survey of recruiters.* **Data Analysis:** *Semiotic analysis of interview transcripts and frequency distribution analysis of survey data revealed trends and empirical results.* **Findings:** *Recruiters used social media to include and/or exclude candidates from a search. The majority used LinkedIn profiles to find candidates.* **Conclusions/ Recommendations:** *Students need a personal brand to help secure employment in today's competitive job market. Educators can help students develop their brand using a LinkedIn profile through course assignments.*

Introduction

People can be considered as brands; everyone has a personal brand (Khedher, 2014; Peters, 1997). *Personal branding* consists of integrated marketing communication in which an individual communicates about himself/herself as a product. People might promote themselves via new business communication technology, or perhaps via social media (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). For students entering the job market, a personal brand consists of current technology tools and other activities during their college career, and it is important that students understand and utilize all of these tools for a successful job search.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the personal branding components that are perceived important by recruiters and employers when hiring job candidates. Effective business communication personal branding elements and social media technologies are identified based upon executive perceptions.

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The following research questions are answered:

1. What do recruiters and employers look for in job applicants' personal brands?
2. What marketing communication tools should business graduates integrate into developing their personal brands?

How can educators promote the use of business communication technology, inc3. luding social media, as tools for students in developing their personal brands?

Literature Review

While the use of social media, search engines, and other online tools streamline and enhance the effectiveness of the recruitment process; little empirical research has been done to date (Gershon, 2014; Ollington, Gibb, & Harcourt, 2013). Further, minimal research has been conducted on the context of social networking sites and its effects on job prospect outcomes and whether personal branding management can actually promote the applicant's profile (Paik, Shahani-Denning, & Griffeth, 2014).

Personal Brands Market Students

The most important product a student will market is himself or herself (Stanton & Stanton, 2013); in fact, personal branding is the key to personal success (Rampersad, 2008). Personal branding is a form of marketing communication that was pioneered by Tom Peters (1997) who stressed that individuals are marketers of their own brand and CEOs of their own company. Personal branding is a strategic marketing concept of creating a positive profile as a job candidate, specifically communicating expectations, goals, and values (Ollington et al., 2013). Personal branding is an intentional process for students to promote or market themselves for entry into the job market (Khedher, 2014; Lair et al., 2005). A personal brand is the public's perception of one's personality and abilities (Montoya, 2002; Rampersad, 2008; Stanton & Stanton, 2013). Personal brands are based upon reputation—whether one wants it or not. A major concern is if students do not manage their own personal brand, then someone else will manage it for them (Kaputa, 2003). Many students don't have a firm grasp of their personal brand and do not manage it strategically, consistently, and effectively (Rampersad, 2009).

By engaging in certain activities, individuals create a brand in a way similar to how companies brand a product (Lair et al., 2005). Branding success is determined by how students' internal sets of skills, aspirations, and interests are arranged, crystallized, and labeled (branded) rather than simply on a list of skills, interests, etc. (Lair et al., 2005). Personal branding is also a marketing strategy used to promote self through presentation, mannerisms, appearance, competence, character, actions, and nonverbal communications (Khedher, 2014). The tools

of personal branding might include a résumé and application cover letter, and any other forms of communication such as phone or in-person contact, and information communicated via social media sites. Differentiation of personal brands can be communicated strategically through construction of a mission and description of the product (person) (Montoya, 2002; Rascon, 2014; Ward & Yates, 2013) including values, personality, interests, and strengths (Kaputa, 2003; Lair et al., 2005; Peters, 1999; Poeppelman & Blacksmith, 2014; Rampersad, 2008).

Personal Branding Process

Personal branding begins with self-discovery and reflection to evaluate and develop one's personal brand (Poeppelman & Blacksmith, 2014). Students must reflect and consider how others view them, especially online (Rascon, 2014); then inventory personal attributes, beliefs, values, and experiences which people use to define their roles (Khedher, 2014). When creating a personal brand, it is important to highlight ways in which students can differentiate themselves (Lair et al., 2005; Montoya, 2002; Parmentier et al., 2013; Poeppelman & Blacksmith, 2014; Ward & Yates, 2013). The personal brand should be customized for the audience and the intended perception. The personal brand must also follow the professional industry and career rules; for example, conservative image, physical appearance, business attire, expectations (Rascon, 2014).

Once the personal brand is created, the student should conduct a current brand audit. To conduct a brand audit, students should look at their current materials and online presence to see the current "brand" that is being projected for others to view. This process should confirm a consistency among accounts and profiles on various Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter accounts; websites; professional bios; searches; and employer websites (Poeppelman & Blacksmith, 2014). Students should also review all social media accounts and ensure a professional online presence is being maintained. Students should also ensure that all personal appearances and styles are consistent and align with their personal brand (Rascon, 2014).

Ongoing activities should ensure that personal branding goals and market recognition are achieved (Khedher, 2014). An individual's personal branding message to the intended audience should evolve as needed for both initial employment and potential promotion, as well as for job transition later in one's career (Bullas, 2012; Peters, 1999; Poeppelman & Blacksmith, 2014; Rampersad, 2008).

Incorporating Personal Branding Assignments into the Classroom

Students do not necessarily grasp branding images and positioning when discussing companies and consumer perception (Stanton & Stanton, 2013). Applying marketing theories and concepts to the marketing of students can be used to encourage student motivation in learning integrated marketing

communication and career planning concepts. Students should be encouraged to compose a detailed plan to understand marketing planning and the strategy development process (Smith, 2004). Similarly, throughout students' college careers, and particularly as graduation approaches, business and communication students must engage in several activities to create personal brands (McCorkle et al., 1992; McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon, & Kling, 2003).

Social Media and Its Role in Recruitment and Hiring

The increase in the number of users, the amount of available information, and the ease of accessing social media have dramatically changed job application processes and recruitment processes in corporations. Businesses today use social media for recruiting (Peterson, 2014) as well as screening job candidate profiles online as part of the hiring process (Ollington et al., 2013; Paik et al., 2014; Peluchette & Karl, 2010; SHRM, 2012).

In 2013, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that 77% of human resource professionals accessed social media websites for recruitment purposes (SHRM, 2014). In 2015, 80% of organizations used social media to search for potential job candidates (Gillin & Schwartzman, 2015).

The use of social media sites has also continued to increase in screening job applicants during the hiring and selection process (Ollington et al., 2013; Paik et al., 2014; Roberts, 2009). In 2014, a Career Builder survey found that 43% of companies used social media to view applicant information (CareerBuilder. com 2014). Twenty-four percent (24%) of companies used social media to help confirm hiring decisions; 34% stated that information found on social media led to rejection of hires (Roberts, 2009). In 2011, over 90% of recruiters had visited candidates' profiles on a social media website during the screening process (Swallow, 2011).

Employers and recruiters are still struggling with how to use social media legally and ethically because of the lack of procedures and precedence established to date (Gershon, 2014; Ollington et al., 2013). Some information on social media sites can mislead the recruiter with irrelevant information, leading to inaccurate evaluation of the applicants' performance potential (Paik et al., 2014) that could lead to legal problems (Gershon, 2014).

Currently, the most noticeable use of social media for recruiting potential job candidates and searching for job applicant profiles during the selection process are activities that are conducted on Facebook and LinkedIn. Recruiters and hiring managers often use this information to evaluate the applicants during the hiring process. Waldman (2011) found that 80% of employers used LinkedIn, and 50% used Facebook for recruitment and hiring purposes. Further, one of five recruiters used some type of social media to learn more about applicants, and 14.4 million candidates used social media in job searches (Robles, 2015).

LinkedIn Is the Online Personal Brand Platform Choice

LinkedIn is the most dominant social media platform for personal branding, and the world's largest professional network on the Internet (LinkedIn, 2015). LinkedIn had 100 million professional users globally in 2011; 70 million in 2010 (Dufour, 2011; cited in Ollington et al., 2013). In 2013, LinkedIn had over 225 million members globally (Arruda, 2013; Van Dijck, 2013) and continues to be the largest online network critical personal branding tool (LinkedIn, 2015). The most recent data on the LinkedIn website (June, 2015) indicated 364 million members in over 200 countries and territories.

Smith (2015) noted the current statistics about LinkedIn:

- • 94% of recruiters used LinkedIn to vet candidates
- • 48% of recruiters only used LinkedIn for social outreach
- • Recruiters had an average of 616 connections on LinkedIn

More than 39 million students and recent college graduates are on the LinkedIn site and are the fastest growing demographic (LinkedIn, 2015). LinkedIn is most prevalent with professional recruitment (Ollington et al., 2013). "Professionals are signing up to join LinkedIn at a rate of more than two new members per second" (LinkedIn, 2015, p. 1).

Research Methodology

To answer the research questions, first, an exploratory qualitative study (Study 1) was undertaken to better understand the experiences of human resources professionals. Study 1 was followed by an empirical survey (Study 2), which was developed based on the findings of the qualitative study.

Study 1 Participants and Data Collection

In Study 1, human resources professionals engaged in the recruiting and hiring of new college graduates for professional positions participated in qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Twelve participants were recruited from faculty professional networks and were interviewed over a 2-week period. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed, and transcripts were analyzed to reveal themes surrounding the experience of recruiting and engaging with candidates for positions in business careers.

Study 2 Methods and Procedures

The overriding purpose of Study 2 was to explore further the concepts and ideas gleaned from the Study 1 results, with the primary goal being to identify what mechanisms result in effective student branding during the job search process. Within this realm, criteria under consideration included the importance placed on specific classroom activities, the most important skills recruiters look for in the interview process, which social media platforms are most widely utilized,

which elements of the LinkedIn profile are most important and the most important elements to include on a résumé. Therefore, an empirical study was undertaken as follows.

Instrument. A survey instrument, consisting of a series of 7-point Likert items derived from existing studies, was created and distributed via Qualtrics (Hopkins, Raymond, & Carlson, 2011; Raymond, Carlson, & Hopkins, 2006), measuring each of the criteria under study. Additional measures were utilized to assess the demographic composition of the sample.

Sample. The sampling frame consisted of recruiters who were part of recruitment panel databases at two southeastern universities. From a total 298 potential individuals, 170 usable responses were obtained (57% response rate). Of this group, 60% were male; 66% held managerial positions, with 100% reporting they were heavily engaged in the recruitment process for their respective firms. The sample further consisted of individuals with a mean of nine years' experience within their industry. Positions for which these individuals recruited consisted of customer service, product development, advertising, marketing research, retail sales, public relations and business-to-business sales. All firms represented in the sample were considered large with at least 500 or more employees. The sample was approximately evenly distributed geographically throughout the United Sates with a similar number of participants from each of the four regions defined by the United States Census Bureau Geography Division (2015): Northeast, Midwest, South and West.

Data Findings and Analysis

The data findings and analysis are presented with the results from both Study 1 and Study 2.

Study 1 Qualitative Results

The qualitative interview results revealed that 9 of 12 participant hiring managers looked at social media profiles of potential job candidates at some point during the recruitment and hiring process. Most often, participating hiring managers examined LinkedIn profiles and Facebook profiles, but used information on these sites in different ways. Recognizing that LinkedIn is a professional site, recruiters noted these profiles are much like a digital résumé, containing information about career interests and experience. The hiring managers used LinkedIn most often to locate candidates at the beginning of a search for viable candidates. When asked what social media tool, if any, was used to locate viable candidates, most of the hiring managers pointed to the professional social media website, LinkedIn. Recognizing that Facebook is a more personal, sociable site, several recruiters admitted using information on this site later during the search process to exclude candidates if profiles contained content that detracted from the candidate's character or ability to discern what is appropriate for public consumption.

Of those participants who indicated using LinkedIn, profiles, professional photos, keywords, and specific skills or desired positions were noted as the most important features of the profile. Incomplete profiles, lack of focused search terms, and less professional photos were the features that most detracted or were most likely to exclude a candidate from a job search. Of those participants who indicated using Facebook, profiles, photos with alcoholic drinks and other behaviors that could be construed as irresponsible, and political or personal opinion posts were mentioned as detractions from the image of a candidate and reasons for not being pursued as a candidate. Participants cited personal responsibility, common sense, and self-awareness as desired candidate qualities; some Facebook posts may illustrate whether a candidate possesses or does not possess these qualities.

Study 2 Results

Given the exploratory nature of the study, frequency distributions were utilized to analyze the data. In terms of classroom activities, the most important elements recruiters noted should be included consisted of current events knowledge, live case analysis (presented to company), required internships, and computer applications, as noted in Table 1.

Table 1
Classroom activities (n = 170)

Activity	Mean	Standard Deviation
Current events knowledge	5.76	1.254
Live case analysis (presented to company)	5.73	1.274
Required internships	5.72	1.304
Computer applications	5.71	1.222
Individual projects	5.63	1.188
Internet usage	5.62	1.410
Financial analysis	5.59	1.243
Group projects	5.57	1.467
Discussion of current events/article reviews	5.57	1.321
Short problem solving activities	5.54	1.243
Role play activities	5.45	1.462
Use of PowerPoint presentations	5.31	1.503
Tests	5.20	1.525
Quizzes	5.11	1.507
Classroom lectures	5.06	1.568
Textbook case analysis	5.03	1.383

Respondents further noted the most important skills for assessing potential applicants include problem solving, time management, and teamwork skills, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Recruiting process (n = 170)

Skill/Attribute	Mean	Standard Deviation
Problem solving skills	6.25	.999
Time management skills	6.21	.919
Teamwork skills	6.20	.967
Computer skills	6.15	1.033
Interpersonal skills	6.15	1.050
Initiative	6.14	.963
Decision-making skills	6.12	1.053
Creativity	6.09	1.011
Oral communications skills	6.09	1.149
Motivation	6.08	1.014
Critical thinking	6.04	1.049
Organization skills	5.98	1.066
Leadership experience	5.98	1.270
Written communication skills	5.98	1.107
Career-related work experience	5.97	1.192
Presentation skills	5.97	.978
Interview skills	5.95	1.106
Internship experience	5.76	1.312
Personal selling skills	5.76	1.208
Quantitative skills	5.73	1.088
Current events knowledge	5.69	1.305
Other work experience	5.59	1.279
Typing (word/minute) skills	5.45	1.336
Involvement in student activities	5.42	1.370
High GPA	5.36	1.377
Fluency in foreign language	5.28	1.680

Two major conclusions drawn from Study 1 included (1) LinkedIn was the most widely utilized social media platform for recruitment purposes, and (2) Facebook

was most often used to "exclude" candidates from consideration. Table 3 supports this finding as LinkedIn was rated most important during the recruitment process. Further, 81% of the sample reported that Facebook is in fact most often utilized for exclusion purposes with recruiters primarily looking for inappropriate pictures or posts on an individual's page.

Table 3
Social media utilization (n = 170)

Media Platform	Mean	Standard Deviation
LinkedIn	5.24	1.814
Facebook	4.96	1.933
Twitter	4.85	2.003
Instagram	4.44	1.996
Other social media	3.81	2.321

The specific platform elements that respondents believed brand candidates in a most positive manner included complete job history, list of relevant skills, and complete education information, as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4
LinkedIn criteria importance (n = 170)

Criteria	Mean	Standard Deviation
Complete job history	6.08	.968
List of relevant skills	5.99	.924
Complete education information	5.93	1.076
Applicant provides a summary bio	5.83	1.080
Number of skill endorsements	5.78	1.152
Applicant provides a career objective	5.78	1.213
Profile is 100% complete	5.77	1.529
Relevant coursework listed	5.73	1.121
Professional picture	5.65	1.302
College GPA	5.62	1.310
Volunteer experience	5.58	1.263
Number of INDUSTRY SPECIFIC contacts in the applicant's network	5.56	1.363
Applicant uses keywords and phrases	5.54	1.328
Civic activities	5.44	1.345
Number of contacts in the applicant's network	5.35	1.465
Applicant provides a personal URL link	5.33	1.656

Additional means by which individuals can effectively brand themselves include items present on résumés and specific skills that can be demonstrated during the interview process. The most important items for candidates to include on résumés include career-related work experience, job responsibilities, college degree and information, and computer/technical skills, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5
Resume' criteria (n = 170)

Criteria	Mean	Standard Deviation
Career-related work experience	6.01	1.256
Job responsibilities	5.98	1.038
College degree and information	5.89	1.207
Computer/technical skills	5.88	1.143
Job accomplishments	5.84	1.151
Graduate or other degrees (e.g., Associate, MBA)	5.83	1.213
Contact information	5.83	1.263
Internship experience	5.76	1.242
Detailed job tasks	5.68	1.157
Other work experience	5.65	1.287
Career objective	5.63	1.294
Classes taken	5.52	1.393
References	5.50	1.355
GPA	5.49	1.444
Class projects worked on	5.25	1.693
Offices held in organizations	5.23	1.528
Clubs and organizations	5.17	1.639
High school involvement	5.15	1.731
Jobs from high school	4.93	1.797

Relative to the interview process, respondents reported the best personal branding strategies consisted of demonstrating one's effective communication skills, strong interpersonal skills, and enthusiasm, as seen in Table 6.

Table 6
Interview process (n = 170)

Skill/Attribute	Mean	Standard Deviation
Effective communication skills	6.17	.992
Strong interpersonal skills	6.15	1.035
Shows enthusiasm	6.04	1.057
Has examples of accomplishments	5.95	1.103
Shows competitiveness	5.88	1.209
Knowledge about the company	5.86	1.224
Has prepared questions to ask interviewer	5.83	1.134
Current events Knowledge	5.73	1.290
Does not use canned answers	5.62	1.476
Asks for job	5.49	1.332

From dual qualitative/quantitative inquiry, this study determined specific aspects of the personal brand building process that are salient for instructors to share with students. Areas under consideration include classroom instructional activities upon which faculty should focus, essential skills, résumé/interview elements, and effective utilization of social media.

Summary

Given that an individual's personal brand can be crucial during the job-search process, the purpose of this study was to determine what mechanisms are most valuable in enhancing one's personal brand. Specifically, this study sought to determine what attributes recruiters consider in assessing potential applicants and what communication tools are best for students to integrate into developing personal brands. The study further sought to discern specific aspects of the brand-building process that educators can facilitate in instructing and preparing their students to enter the work force.

Conclusions

Relative to social media, the qualitative assessment in Study 1 discerned that recruiters focus primarily on LinkedIn as the focal platform for assessing applicants and that Facebook is used primarily as a means of excluding applicants from the evoked set. These findings were further supported by the quantitative assessment in Study 2. The Study 1 findings were extended in Study 2 with the determination of specific aspects of the LinkedIn platform that are most important during assessment. Study 2 also uncovered non-online brand-building elements that are keys to the brand-building process. Given the findings of both studies, the

following on/offline recommendations for business educators are provided with the purpose of aiding students in developing personal brands.

Recommendations

The following offline personal brand-building recommendations are based on the above conclusions:

1. Educators are encouraged to focus heavily on incorporating assignments that require students to be familiar with current events.
2. Coursework should encompass live cases in conjunction with firms whenever possible. Faculty are encouraged to inquire with their institution's Career Services Centers in order to make contacts. Faculty are also encouraged to contact local area Chambers of Commerce for making said partnerships.
3. College administrators would add value to the curriculum by requiring field-oriented internships as part of degree granting requirements.
4. Because recruiters most value problem solving, time management and teamwork building skills, instructors are encouraged to incorporate assignments that facilitate these skills.
5. The most important aspects to be focused on relative to students' résumés include full descriptions of career-related work experiences, job responsibilities, degree information, and computer/technical skills. Development of these aspects of the résumé should be covered in detail during the students' education, perhaps as part of a field capstone course.
6. Effective communication and interpersonal skills are critical during the interview process, as is an applicant's level of enthusiasm. Educators are advised to incorporate role-play exercises that aid in developing these skills into their curriculum.

The following online (social media) personal brand-building recommendations are also based on the above conclusions of the study:

1. Because LinkedIn is the most focused upon social media platform by recruiters, educators should require students, as part of a classroom assignment, to create a LinkedIn profile page. The page should focus on providing a complete job history, specific list of relevant skills, complete education information, and a concise and professional summary biography. Instructors are strongly urged to review and approve students' entire LinkedIn page to ensure accuracy and professionalism.
2. Because Facebook is used primarily as a means of culling individuals from a list of potential applicants, instructors should inform students that all content provided via Facebook be of a respectable and professional nature. Because individuals with an extremely large number of friends

on the platform may suffer from a loss of control as to what other individuals post to their personal pages, it may be advantageous that educators recommend to students to render their Facebook pages inactive throughout the job search process.

Implications

Personal branding stresses communication, critical thinking, problem solving, positivism, self-reliance, innovation, and self-confidence. Because a personal brand can have a tremendous impact on one's success or failure during the job-search process, this study has attempted to offer insights into how faculty can educate students about the importance and development of personal branding strategies. While branding in general is an ongoing, ever-changing phenomenon that requires a great deal of effort and care; with an effective strategy, students can succeed in positioning themselves in the most favorable light. The insights gleaned from this study should assist instructors in helping students become as marketable as possible in a competitive job market. By focusing on aspects of both online and offline environments, it is expected that attentiveness to the elements of each of these environments should prove fruitful as a means of increasing the likelihood of success for students as they emerge from academia and embark upon the respective careers.

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