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Examining the Use of Social Media in Building a Student Personal Brand and the Impact of Demographics

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ABSTRACT

The concept of personal branding has recently gained the interest of researchers as the expectations, requirements, and recruitment processes of potential employers have been transformed with the advancements in technology, especially with search engines and social media accounts (LeBlanc, 2018; McCabe 2017). Hood *et al.* (2014) pointed out that college students and graduates entering the job market need to understand the importance of current technology tools and utilize them in building their personal brand and searching for jobs. As the recently published studies illustrate, the research examining the extent of student efforts using the current technology tools in building their personal brand is limited (Ollington *et al.*, 2013; Gershon 2014), especially in the area of utilizing of social media tools (Girard *et al.*, 2020; Vitelar, 2019). In response to the need for empirical research to understand students' perceptions and efforts to build their personal brand using social media, this study aims to offer further insights to narrow the gap.

Researchers have recognized that the key factor of personal success is understanding the importance of and building a personal brand (Rampersad, 2008; Hood et al., 2014; Girard et al., 2020). Published studies have focused on building a student personal brand during the college years (Ilies, 2018; Vitelar, 2019; Parrott, 2019; LeBlanc, 2018; Girard et al., 2020), and using social media to promote personal brands (Parrott, 2019; McCorkle and Payan, 2017; Sihi and Lawson, 2018; Vitelar, 2019). A study by Hood et al. (2014) identify not only a list of personal branding attributes from the literature, but also the traditional tools of personal branding as well as the online tools such as social media. Vitelar (2019) points out that social presence sites like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, [Twitter, and Pinterest] characterize high levels of self-presentation and self-disclosure due to the ability to post photos, video and audio files, and micro-blog content. Because social media has become very important for creating personal brands in the digital era, it has become essential that students have a strong social media presence to create and maintain a strong personal brand. In this regard, Kleppinger and Cain (2015) point out that students must be familiar with various social media platforms and actively manage their profiles.

Drawing from the identified gaps in the literature, this study develops measurements and examines the perceptions of college students' efforts in general and using their social media presence in building their personal brands. The specific objectives are to determine: 1.) The most used social media platforms by students for personal branding; 2.) Students' perceptions of their social media efforts for building their personal brands and the perceptions of their personal

branding efforts in general; 3.) The differences in students' perceptions of their personal branding efforts based on the social media platforms they use; 4.) If various personal branding efforts are impacted by student demographics; and 5.) If the social media platform use differs by student demographics.

Drawing from the literature, a survey instrument was developed to include five statements to measure students' perceptions of personal branding efforts using social media and three statements to measure students' perceptions of personal branding in general. The survey also included students' use of various social media platforms in building their personal brand. Lastly, demographic questions captured gender, class standing, age, major, whether the respondents were International students, and class standing. The pretests with students as the target population improved survey questions and their face validity. The data were collected from students at a private university in mid-western United States and at a large public university using a link to the online survey built in Qualtrics. Because the students' perceptions are the focus of this study, they comprise the target population in this study. This method produced a total of 161 usable responses for analysis, 94 responses from the public university and 67 responses from the private university.

The results indicate that Instagram is the most used social media platform by students for building their personal brand, followed by LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest. The study found significant differences between the users and non-users of Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter platforms for most of the personal branding efforts. These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of students' efforts in building their social media presence and actively managing their profiles (Kleppinger and Cain, 2015). The results regarding general personal branding efforts confirm that students understand and are conscious of the importance of having a strong personal brand, and they seem to be working hard to build their personal brand. They also feel that their university is helping them to develop a strong personal brand. Finally, the study found significant differences between male and female students' perceptions for only one of the personal branding efforts. Students of two universities did not differ in the perceptions of their social media and general personal branding efforts.

This study provides new insights about students' use of social media and their efforts for developing a strong personal brand; however, it has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tulay Girard (Ph.D., Florida Atlantic University) is a Professor of Marketing at Penn State Altoona. Her research focuses on product classes, retailer attributes, perceived risk, brand equity in banking, higher education, and private-label branding. Her publications can be found at www.tulaygirard.com. She received several best paper awards.

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