

Personal Branding: An Innovative Approach to Life Design Education

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ABSTRACT

This case study introduces personal branding as an innovation in Career and Life Design. While Life Design offers a roadmap for navigating complex career paths, it requires a deep understanding of one's identity, values, and aspirations. Personal branding can be a valuable complement to Life Design, providing individuals with a structured process for self-discovery and expression. By integrating principles of identity theory, self-concept theory, and brand management into a curriculum focused on personal brand development, students are empowered to construct meaningful and fulfilling life paths. The findings described in this case study suggest that personal branding can serve as a powerful tool for self-discovery, career exploration, and overall life design. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of personal branding education on career outcomes and overall life satisfaction.

Keywords: Personal branding; Life Design; Innovation; Self-discovery.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the potential of personal branding to enhance life design education. By fostering self-awareness, goal setting, and a purposeful life, personal branding empowers individuals to make informed career decisions and achieve their aspirations.

While existing research has examined personal branding and life design separately, there is a lack of studies investigating their combined impact within a formal educational setting. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the potential of personal branding as a pedagogical tool to empower students.

The research question is: **Can personal branding effectively integrate into life design education to enhance students' self-awareness, career exploration, and overall life design outcomes?**

HOW DOES PERSONAL BRANDING ENHANCE YOUR LIFE?

As noted by Avery and Greenwald (2023) in their Harvard Business Review article "A New Approach to Building Your Personal Brand" (May-June 2023), and expanded by Cote (2024), a personal brand can significantly enhance your life by:

- **Boosting self-esteem and confidence:** A clear understanding of your strengths and values can lead to increased self-belief.

- **Fostering a sense of purpose:** Aligning your career and personal life with your intrinsic motivations can create a more fulfilling existence.
- **Building stronger relationships:** A well-defined personal brand can attract like-minded individuals and facilitate meaningful connections.
- **Improving career prospects:** A strong personal brand can make you more attractive to employers and increase your perceived employability.

While these studies provide a strong foundation for understanding the positive impact of personal branding on life satisfaction, happiness, and well-being, more research is needed to establish a definitive causal link.

HOW DOES PERSONAL BRANDING COMPLEMENT LIFE DESIGN EDUCATION?

Personal branding is grounded in three theories which align with Life Design principles.

- **Identity theory** (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and how individuals perceive and present themselves to the world, aligning with the core concepts of life design education.
- **Self-concept theory** (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) aligns with life design education by emphasizing the importance of self-awareness and self-esteem. These internal factors are crucial for individuals to understand themselves, set meaningful goals, and create a fulfilling life.
- **Brand management theory** (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991) provides a strategic roadmap for



developing and maintaining a strong personal brand, aligning with the Life Design principle of creating a purposeful and intentional life.

By fostering self-awareness, goal setting, and a purposeful life, personal branding complements and enhances life design education by:

- Aligning with core Life Design principles, emphasizing self-awareness, goal setting, and a purposeful life.
- Providing a practical framework for achieving life design goals, offering students a clear roadmap for personal and professional development.
- Enhancing self-discovery and identity development, helping students understand their values, passions, and strengths.
- Facilitating career exploration by helping students identify their unique qualities and explore career options that align with their personal values and goals.
- Building confidence and resilience, enabling individuals to navigate challenges and setbacks effectively.

METHOD AND DATA

This case study explores the implementation of a personal branding course within an AACSB-accredited MBA program. A case study approach was chosen for this research as it allows for an in-depth examination of a specific practice within its real-world context.

Case Study: Personal Branding Immersion

The Personal Branding course was developed and implemented as a 2.5-day immersion at a private institution located near an urban area. It was attended by 22 MBA students on campus as one of several topical immersions that students are required to complete, graded on a pass/fail basis. Student representation varied across age, race/ethnicity, and gender as depicted below.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Students

Age	20-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	40+
#	1	4	6	5	6
%	5%	18%	27%	23%	27%

Race/ Ethnicity	White	Black/ African Am	Hispanic / Latino	Asian	Other
#	16	3	2	1	0
%	73%	14%	9%	5%	0%

Gender	Male	Female
#	11	11
%	50%	50%

The course aimed to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to build strong personal brands aligned with their life design goals and consisted of three elements:

Prework: students were assigned five items to complete prior to the immersion:

- Watch a TEDx video titled The Future of Branding is Personal (Waller, 2018).
- Read a HBS article describing Personal Branding (Cote, 2024).
- Take a personal brand assessment (SelfBrand, n.d.).
- Share a resource on Personal Branding in our *Personal Branding Collaboratory*.
- Write a reflective essay describing insights gained from completing these materials following suggested prompts.

Classwork: students participated in the immersion across three days:

- Friday: class dinner with personal branding overview and superpower exercise.
- Saturday: 8 hours of programming focused on brand building.
- Sunday: 4 hours of programming focused on brand communication.

Postwork: students were asked to write a reflective essay in 2-3 pages describing:

- Key elements of their personal brand.
- What resonated most in exploring the elements of their personal brand.
- How they intend to enhance their personal brand going forward, and,
- How they will integrate personal branding into their remaining MBA coursework and future career plans.

The classroom set up was intentional to create a family-type small group setting. It consisted of 6 double tables, each with 4 chairs (2 students on opposing sides). Students worked in these table groups for the duration of the immersion.

Each student was given a printed Personal Branding Journal (created specifically for this class) which consisted of 15 exercises used during the immersion. Students also used an interactive digital workbook from PWC titled PWC Personal Brand Workbook (PWC, 2010). This free online resource was chosen for its comprehensive coverage of essential topics in personal branding, its numerous practical exercises, and its accessibility and ease of use. Class slides were created for each module to guide the course flow. A timed agenda ensured pacing was balanced. Purposeful, hands-on warm up activities were conducted as segues to each module.

The course curriculum was divided into five modules:

Module 1: Defining your X-Factor

- **Theoretical Alignment:** Defining Your X-Factor aligns primarily with identity theory and self-concept theory by focusing on self-discovery and personal values. This module lays the groundwork for understanding the self as a unique entity.
- **Focus:** This module laid the foundation for the course by introducing students to the core concepts of personal branding, including its importance in career development and Life Design.
- **Activities:** Students participated in a Today and Tomorrow visioning exercise and completed the first of three sections in the *PWC Personal Brand Workbook* (PWC, 2010) titled “Define Your X Factor” which prompted students to define, refine, validate, and activate their core strengths and weaknesses.
- **Reflection:** Students reflected together in their table groups on what resonated most about their X-Factor, and what they were most curious to learn about.

Module 2: Understanding Your Why

- **Theoretical Alignment:** Understanding Your Why delves deeper into self-concept theory by exploring personal values, passions, and purpose. This module connects the individual's internal motivations to their external identity.
- **Focus:** This module delved deeper into self-discovery, helping students connect their values, passions, and purpose.
- **Activities:** Students explored epic fails in personal branding and completed the second section of the *PWC Personal Brand Workbook* (PWC, 2010) titled “Understand your whY-Factor” which prompted students to identify their “north star” or personal compass by identifying, defining, and aligning their personal values. They also completed an exercise to think about their passions and how to connect them to career goals. Students participated in a guided visualization exercise and explored their purpose to create a personal road map for their journey ahead.
- **Reflection:** Students reflected together in their table groups on what resonated most about their Y-Factor, and what they were most curious to learn about.

Module 3: Eliminating Your Zzz

- **Theoretical Alignment:** Eliminating Your Zzz builds upon identity theory by focusing on

executive presence and how individuals present themselves to the world. This module emphasizes the social construction of self.

- **Focus:** This module continued the work of self-discovery, helping students to build their executive presence.
- **Activities:** Students participated in a hands-on executive presence practice session then completed the third section of the *PWC Personal Brand Workbook* (PWC, 2010) titled “Eliminate your Zzz Factor”. Students completed a self-reflection profile, and highlighted areas of improvement validated with an accountability partner.
- **Reflection:** Students reflected together in their table groups on what resonated most about their Z-Factor, and what they were most curious to learn about.

Module 4: Building Your Brand Story

- **Theoretical Alignment:** Building Your Brand Story draws heavily from brand management theory by focusing on crafting a compelling narrative. This module translates self-awareness and identity into a strategic communication plan.
- **Focus:** This module equipped students with the skills to craft a compelling personal narrative that resonates with their target audience.
- **Activities:** Students explored storytelling techniques to develop clear and concise messaging. They drew from their personal branding self-discovery to craft an authentic 0:15 response to answer a common question in job interviews: “Tell Me About Yourself”. They also crafted a longer 2:00-minute response to answer another common question in job interviews: “Walk me through your resume” using the FIT Model (Favorite Part, Insights Gained, Transitioned To) codified by Steve Dalton at Duke University (Dalton, 2020).
- **Reflection:** Students practiced their brand storytelling in their table groups showcasing their strategies and envisioned impact on their life design journey. They reflected individually and together the self-discovery experience conducted via the *PWC Personal Brand Workbook* (PWC, 2010).

Module 5: Building Your Digital Brand Presence

- **Theoretical Alignment:** Building Your Digital Brand Presence aligns with both identity theory and brand management theory as it addresses how individuals manage their online identity and reputation. This module emphasizes the importance of digital platforms in shaping and communicating one’s brand.

- **Focus:** This module introduced students to the role of digital platforms in building and managing their personal brand.
- **Activities:** Students participated in a facilitated in-depth audit of their digital brand presence on LinkedIn, noting the relevancy of each element on their profile while creating an action list for improvement. They then worked on managing their personal brand going forward, culminating in a Personal Branding Action Plan.
- **Reflection:** Students shared strategies in their table groups for managing personal brands in various contexts and reflected on their progress of defining their personal brand through self-discovery during this immersion.

Assessment of Learning

The course aimed to empower students to take ownership of their personal brand narrative and use it as a tool to navigate their life design journeys. Student learning was assessed through a mix of methods:

- **Individual Self-Discovery:** Students completed 15 exercises such as a "Personal Brand Mission Statement" and "Building Your Online Brand Presence Action Plan."
- **Group Presentations:** Students collaborated on short-form and long-form presentations to showcase their personal branding strategies.
- **Final Reflection:** The culminating project required students to reflect on their personal brand and implications in their life design going forward.

RESULTS

Preliminary findings indicate that a personal branding curriculum can effectively enhance students' self-awareness, career exploration, and overall life design. Students reported increased clarity about personal values, career goals, and a stronger sense of purpose.

Pre- and Post-Surveys

An informal classroom survey was conducted to gather preliminary insights into students' perceptions of their personal brand development before and after immersion. While not derived from formal theoretical work, the survey results provide directional evidence of the program's impact. Further research is needed to establish a definitive causal link between personal branding education and life design outcomes.

The survey consisted of 10 questions on a 5-point Likert scale aimed at assessing students' self-awareness, career exploration, and overall life design.

Identity Theory

- Question 1: My personal brand is well defined.
- Question 6: I feel comfortable telling others about myself.
- Question 9: Setbacks don't discourage me.

These questions assess how individuals perceive and present themselves to the world, which aligns with the core concepts of identity theory.

Self-Concept Theory

- Question 3: I have assessed my strengths and weaknesses.
- Question 4: I can articulate my purpose, values and passions.
- Question 8: I am well-positioned to reach my goals.

These questions focus on self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, core constructs of self-concept theory.

Brand Management Theory

- Question 2: I know the steps I need to take to develop my personal brand.
- Question 5: I convey my personal brand consistently across platforms.
- Question 7: I have a plan to develop my thought leadership.
- Question 10: I have relationships that support me in flourishing.

Twenty-two students completed the pre-survey, and fifteen students completed the post-survey. Results indicated an average of 52 percent improvement across all 10 survey questions, suggesting that the personal branding curriculum may have enhanced students' self-awareness, career exploration, and overall life design. Pre- and post-survey results are depicted in Figure 1 below.

Course Evaluation

Course Evaluation results have not yet been released by the Institution. However, anecdotal statements of impact have been posted on LinkedIn by various students in the Immersion. A sample of student posts on LinkedIn appear below:

- **Student 1:** I had the privilege to attend this Personal Branding Immersion with [instructor name] and my fellow classmates through [institution name] and it was truly inspiring! It allowed me time to slow down and think about my values, purpose and passions in both my person and professional life. The latter two (my purpose and passion) have felt like abstract ideas that I would eventually get to thinking about and identifying, but I am grateful for this Immersion emphasizing the importance of these ideas to

guide me through this next chapter after the MBA program.

- **Student 2:** I had such a wonderful experience last weekend finishing up my MBA with learning more about how to align my personal values, goals, and outlook with my career.
- **Student 3:** A great experience with great people! As my time at [institution name] comes to an end,

I reflect on my MBA journey with immense gratitude. This weekend's focus on personal reflection was a much-needed opportunity for growth. And of course, any time spent with this instructor is the best.

**Personal Branding Immersion Survey Results
Pre- vs Post-Survey Average**

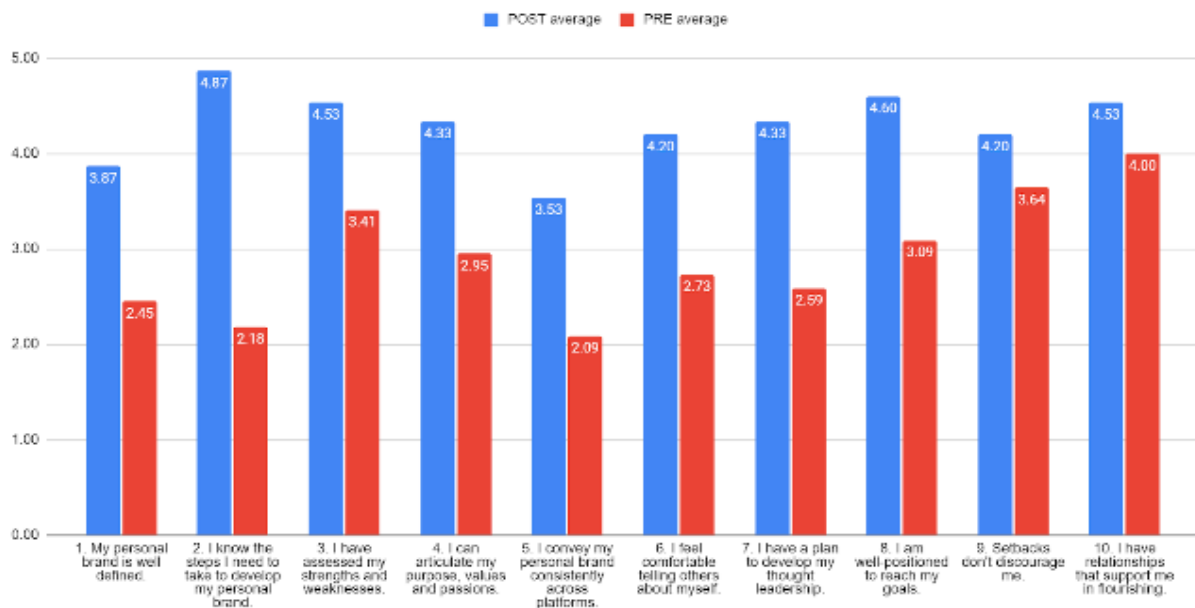


Fig. 1. Personal Branding Immersion Survey Results

Student Reflection Essays

To explore further the depth and impact of the personal branding experience, students submitted reflective essays at the conclusion of the course. These essays addressed key elements of their personal brands, explored resonant aspects of the branding process, and outlined strategies for future brand development. The essays revealed a profound level of self-discovery and personal growth.

Several key themes emerged from the reflective essays:

- **Skepticism to Conviction:** Many students described an initial skepticism towards personal branding, which evolved into a strong belief in its power to shape authentic and meaningful personal and professional trajectories.
- **Interconnectedness and Support:** Students emphasized the importance of relationships and support networks in building and maintaining a personal brand.

- **Continuous Evolution:** The essays highlighted the dynamic nature of personal branding, emphasizing the need for ongoing self-reflection and adaptation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this case study provide an early indication of the efficacy of personal branding as a pedagogical tool for life design education. The integration of personal branding principles within an MBA curriculum enhanced students' self-awareness, career exploration, and overall life design.

Pre- and post-course surveys revealed a marked improvement in students' confidence and clarity regarding their personal brands. Survey data indicated a significant increase in students' self-awareness, as measured by their ability to articulate personal values, strengths, and aspirations. Students reported increased clarity about their career goals and a broader range of career options after completing the course.

The reflective essays provided deeper insights into the transformative nature of the personal branding experience. Students journeyed from initial skepticism to a profound belief in the power of authentic self-representation. The emphasis on interconnectedness and the recognition of personal branding as a continuous process highlights the dynamic nature of self-discovery and goal attainment.

By shifting the focus from traditional career preparation to personal brand development, this study introduces a novel approach to life design education. Personal branding offers a structured framework for self-discovery, and emphasizes self-awareness, goal setting, and creating a purposeful life.

Contribution to Life Design Education

This study contributes to the evolving landscape of life design education by showcasing the potential of personal branding as a pedagogical tool. By integrating personal branding principles into the curriculum, educators can equip students with essential skills for self-discovery, career exploration, and life planning. This aligns with the core goal of life design: empowering students to take ownership of their educational journey and become intentional architects of their futures.

Personal branding advances life design by fostering self-awareness, building online presence, and cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset, further equipping students to achieve their goals and aspirations.

Future Research Directions

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of personal branding education on students' career outcomes and overall life satisfaction. Additionally, investigating the effectiveness of personal branding interventions in various academic disciplines and cultural contexts can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

By building upon the foundation established in this study, future research can continue to refine and expand the application of personal branding within life design education, ultimately leading to more empowered and fulfilled graduates.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Personal Branding Immersion 2024 Journal

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