

إنشاء المحتوى والعلامة التجارية الشخصية
في البيئة الرقمية
أدلة تجريبية من مؤسسات التعليم العالي
في إقليم كردستان العراق

Content Creation and Personal Branding in Digital Environment

Empirical Evidence from Higher Education in the Kurdistan

Region of Iraq

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الملخص

أصبح الإنشاء المهني للمصنوعات الرقمية ومشاركتها (المحتوى) جانباً أساسياً من جوانب محو الأمية الرقمية، وممارسة جوهرية يقوم الأفراد من خلالها ببناء علاماتهم التجارية الشخصية والتعبير عنها والتواصل بشأنها في البيئات المهنية المتوسطة رقمياً.

وعلى الرغم من تزايد الاهتمام الأكاديمي بكل من مفهومي إنشاء المحتوى والعلامة التجارية الشخصية، فإن العلاقة التجريبية بينهما لم تحظَ بالدراسة الكافية في السياقات التعليمية غير الغربية والنامية.

ولسد هذه الفجوة البحثية، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى اختبار الفرضية القائلة بوجود علاقة ارتباط إيجابية ذات دلالة إحصائية بين إنشاء المحتوى والعلامة التجارية الشخصية، وذلك بالاعتماد على بيانات كمية أولية جُمعت من 300 مستجيب من مؤسسات التعليم العالي في أربع محافظات من إقليم كردستان العراق، وهي: أربيل، والسليمانية، ودهوك، وحلبجة.

وتستند هذه الدراسة إلى نظرية التعلم الاجتماعي المعرفي لباندورا (Bandura, 1997) وإلى الإطار الأوروبي للكفاءة الرقمية (DigComp 2.2 (Vuorikari et al., 2022). وقد اتبعت الدراسة منهجاً تحليلياً صارماً يتكون من مرحلتين رئيسيتين، هما: التحليل العاملي التوكيدي (CFA) ونمذجة المعادلات الهيكلية (SEM) باستخدام برنامج IBM AMOS الإصدار 29.

أظهرت النتائج أن إنشاء المحتوى له تأثير مباشر إيجابي ذو دلالة إحصائية على العلامة التجارية الشخصية ($\beta = .284$, $t = 4.51$, $p < .001$). كما أظهرت النتائج وجود تأثير غير مباشر إيجابي ذي دلالة إحصائية يتم بوساطة الكفاءة الذاتية ($\beta = .133$, 95% BCI [.067, .214])، إضافة إلى وجود تأثير تعديلي إيجابي ذي دلالة إحصائية للعوامل الاجتماعية والثقافية ($\beta = .187$, $t = 3.34$, $p = .001$).

وتحمل هذه النتائج دلالات مهمة لنظرية بناء الهوية الرقمية في البيئات الجماعية والثقافية المعقدة، فضلاً عن دلالاتها التطبيقية في مجالات تصميم المناهج الدراسية، وسياسات محو الأمية الرقمية، وبرامج تعلم المعلمين والتطوير المهني في إقليم كردستان والمجتمعات الانتقالية المماثلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إنشاء المحتوى، العلامة التجارية الشخصية، محو الأمية الرقمية، الكفاءة الذاتية، العوامل الاجتماعية والثقافية، إقليم كردستان، التعليم العالي، نمذجة المعادلات الهيكلية.

Abstract:

Professional creation of and sharing of digital artifacts (content) has become a core aspect of digital literacy and a fundamental action through which people are building and communicating their personal brands in digitally mediated professional spaces. Although there has been an increase in scholarly interest in both constructs, the empirical link between personal branding and content creation has not been sufficiently explored in non - Western and developing educational contexts. To fill in this void, this study aims to give an empirical test to the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between content creation and personal branding based on primary quantitative data gathered from 300 respondents in higher education institutions at four provinces of Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Halabja). This study is based on Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory and European Digital Competence Framework DigComp 2.2 (Vuorikari et al., 2022), which the study follows with an analytical approach that is rigorous, consisting of two stages: Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using IBM AMOS Version 29. Content creation has a statistically significant positive direct effect on personal branding ($\beta = .284$, $t = 4.51$, $p < .001$); a statistically significant positive indirect effect mediated by self - efficacy (indirect $\beta = .133$, 95% BCI [.067, .214]); and a statistically significant positive moderation effect of socio - cultural factors (interaction $\beta = .187$, $t = 3.34$, $p = .001$). The results have implications for the theory of digital identity construction in collectivist and culturally complex settings as well as substantive implications for curriculum design, digital literacy policy, and teacher and professional learning programs in the Kurdistan Region and similar transition contexts.

Keywords: content creation, personal branding, digital literacy, self - efficacy, socio - cultural factors, Kurdistan Region, higher education, structural equation modeling

1. Introduction

Digitalisation is affecting the way in which people build, express and maintain their professional identity in a significant way, and is speeding up. In the current knowledge economies, the formation, management and promotion of professional reputation and career visibility is increasingly an issue that involves digital technologies and mediums, not only for professional differentiation and advancement, but also for its utility (Castells, 2015; Jarrahi et al., 2024; OECD, 2023). In this context, personal branding is a marketing term that has become applicable to a wide spectrum of fields, acquired a digital nature, and is a continuous process in which an individual builds, communicates, and manages a distinctive professional brand in order to create perceived value and differentiation within competitive context (Khedher, 2019; Gorbato et al., 2018). Content creation is a behavior that bridges digital literacy with personal branding: creating, organising and sharing digital content (such as articles, posts, multimedia information, professional commentaries) that collectively constitute a person's visual digital footprint. Content creation is conceptualized as a part of digital literacy as well as a key behavioral mechanism for the construction of personal branding, whereby internal capabilities and professional identities are made visible to an audience through publicly promoted, and so, "brandable" touch points (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shepherd, 2020). However, empirical evidence supporting the link between content creation and personal branding outcomes is still limited, especially within a non - Western and developing country context where socio - cultural aspects related to personal branding, digital access disparities, and digital competency could yield very different relationships than in Western settings (Helsper & van Deursen, 2022; Zarkada & Polydorou, 2024). The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is an important and theoretically interesting setting in which to explore this relationship. The socio - cultural norms of modesty, roles of women and men in the public face and their relationship to personal branding are embedded in their socio - cultural values, which

are shaping and conditioning how they express the digital competencies in the context of education and higher education institutions in the region are experiencing a rapid digital transition in response to socio - economic conditions, competitive graduate markets and the trend of education and higher education institutions turning towards greater digitalization (Ahmed, 2025; Albadri et al., 2025; Qadir, 2025). There are relatively few empirical examples of this context, which make it difficult to make generalizations and to design interventions that are suitable for this context. This paper summarizes the results of the quantitative empirical study directly testing the hypothesis: There is a statistically significant positive correlation between content creation and personal branding. In addition to the direct relationship, the study also investigates the mediating influence of self - efficacy between content creation competency and personal branding behaviors, as well as the moderating effects of socio - cultural factors on the relationship between content creation competency and personal branding behaviors. The study therefore, adds to a plethora of literature on digital literacy, personal - branding, and its interplay within culturally complex landscapes in the developing country setting.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical framework

2.1 Content Creation as a Dimension of Digital Literacy

The concept of digital literacy has developed from mere computer competence to a multidimensional and comprehensive concept that incorporates information literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety and problem solving (Vuorikari et al., 2022; Ng, 2012). In the definition of digital competence, the creation and editing of new content, programming, application of intellectual property rights and the re - elaboration and integration of existing digital materials in new ways, are clearly included in the competency area of creating content under the European Commission's DigComp 2.2 framework, which is one of the most widely adopted con-

ceptual and policy frameworks for digital competence. (Vuorikari et al., 2022). For this research, content creation is the behavioural aspect of digital literacy that is most clearly linked to the creation, sharing and planning and strategically using digital artefacts for professional purposes. These include creating articles, creating professional posts using digital narrative and engaging with professional audiences in a regular manner through original digital content (Ng, 2012; Kaeophanuek et al., 2019). It is undeniable that creating content is a part of digital competence that is complex and integrative, which not only requires technical skills but also metacognitive, creative and critical skills, in this regard, these are noted by contemporary researchers (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Kurniawati et al., 2024).

2.2 Personal Branding in Digital Environments

Personal Branding is the deliberate and consistent process by which people strive to build, convey, and cultivate a unique “professional reputation” and purpose to a targeted audience across competitive markets (Montoya & Vandehey, 2009; Khedher, 2019). Personal branding in digital environment is represented by means of the individual’s own representation in the network, professional networking, sharing information, possibilities of its visibility, shaping of personal reputation on such platforms as LinkedIn, academic network, and social media (Gorbatov & Khapova, 2020; Szántó et al., 2025). Modern studies of personal branding have specified that it is not simply a case of self - advertising, but more of a consistent and well - designed identity - enabling signal, building credibility, being authentic and managing personal reputation over a period of time (Shepherd, 2020; Schlosser et al., 2023). Evidence from empirical research regularly correlates personal branding with their perceived employability, career satisfaction, and professional recognition, as well as digital competence being identified as one of the key prerequisites for successful personal branding in digitally mediated environments (Gor-

batov et al., 2019; Rammile, 2025).

2.3 The Content Creation–Personal Branding Nexus

Content seems to be the main behavioural platform which helps to build and maintain a personal brand in digital settings. When people create and publish digital artifacts, they create brand signals that are visible to others and exhibit their personal competencies or professional identities, which are a manifestation of a personal brand (Labrecque et al., 2011). Content creation is a form of self - presentation and can be understood as an affective immaterial labor defined by what Arriagada et al. (2020) call “a conscious interaction with digital platforms that seeks to achieve attention, gain reputation and recognition of professionals.”

The initial support to this relationship comes from empirical research. According to Wroblewski et al. (2020) user - generated content on social media had a significant positive influence on personal brand awareness and the perceived brand quality. Rosalina (2023) found a high correlation coefficient of .765 between personal branding activities and effects on brand image. Massoudi et al. (2023) found that out of all six factors that directly influence the success of a personal marketing campaign, content creation was a key element. However, the relationship has not previously been tested thoroughly in non - Western developing country settings with the use of a sound structural modeling technique, thus making this study (empirically) relevant to address the empirical gap.

1.3 Self - Efficacy as a Mediating Mechanism

Self - efficacy is defined as a person’s confidence in their ability to plan and perform activities necessary to reach a desired level of performance and is based on Bandura’s (1997) Social Cognitive Theory. In online contexts, self - efficacy influences the confidence that individuals have in their ability to interact online, create digital products, use

technology, and take care of feedback from the public (Eastin & LaRose, 2000; Tams et al., 2018). Self - efficacy relates positively to persistence, proactive involvement and willingness to take the visible risks of public professional self - presentation (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). The self - efficacy perspective that content creation influences personal branding is related to the SCT process of mastery experiences in creating and sharing professional digital artifacts leading to increased perceived competence and confidence and maintaining and encouraging continued personal branding practices (Bandura, 1997). Empirical research in the higher education field has also recently substantiated a positive relationship between digital competence and self - efficacy (González - Prida et al., 2024; Javier - Aliaga et al., 2024), giving theoretical support to the role of self - efficacy as a mediator between content creation and personal branding.

2.5 Socio - Cultural Factors as Boundary Conditions.

Bandura (1997) and Hofstede (2001) have proposed the triadic model of social cognition theory (SCT) where socio - cultural factors are environmental variables such as cultural norms, gender roles, power distance, collectivism—individualism orientations, and institutional orientations towards self - presentation. Self - promotion is an activity that can be limited in high - context and collectivist cultures even if a person has high levels of digital skills and self - efficacy (Gorbatov & Khapova, 2020; Zarkada & Polydorou, 2024). On the other hand, socio - culturally supportive environments can boost the brand - building value of investments in digital competency by minimizing social friction and institutional obstacles to digital expression.

1.6 Research Hypothesis

H1: There is a statistically significant positive correlation between content creation and personal branding.

The hypotheses being tested in this article are: H4: self - efficacy mediates the relationship between content creation and personal branding; and H8: the socio - cultural relationship between content creation and personal branding is a positive moderation relationship, that is, the stronger the alignment, the greater the effect.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

The research design for this study is quantitative, cross - sectional survey with postpositivist philosophical approach and deductive research approach (Saunders et al., 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study aims to examine theoretically derived hypotheses in relation to empirical data and to compare theoretical predictions with empirical evidence. In this study, quantitative statistical methods were used, and the relationships between the dimensions of digital literacy, self - efficacy, socio - cultural factors and personal branding were empirically measurable and generalizable regularities; thus, the postpositivist paradigm was considered suitable (Bryman, 2016). The main analytical technique used is the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using IBM AMOS Version 29 with the Maximum Likelihood estimation and the Bollen - Stine bootstrap correction (2,000 resamples). One of the reasons for using SEM is its ability to estimate both direct effects and indirect effects (mediated effects) among latent constructs while explicitly accounting for measurement error, which was crucial for testing the moderated mediation model proposed in this study (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2023). Methodological triangulation was achieved through the use of moderation analyses performed with Andrew F. Hayes' PROCESS Macro Version 4.2 (Hayes, 2022) with IBM SPSS Version 29.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

The data was collected from August 2024 to October 2025, using a bilingual (Kurd-

ish / English) structured self - administered questionnaire using both hard copy delivery to universities and academic institutions in the Kurdistan Region and delivered online via Google forms. The target groups were digitally engaged university students (master's and doctorates), academics, administrative staff, and early career professionals at recognized academic and professional institutions in the four provinces of the Kurdistan Region: Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Halabja. There were 347 questionnaires sent and 318 were returned (91.6% response rate). A systematic exclusion process was applied that excluded 12 questionnaires with excessively missing data (more than 10% in a construct), and six multivariate outliers identified by applying a Mahalanobis distance analysis were excluded yielding a final sample of $N = 300$ complete questionnaires with usable data. This is an example that surpasses the methodological requisites suggested for SEM when multiple latent constructs are measured (Kline, 2023; Hair et al., 2019).

3.3 Measures

Content Creation (CC): Five items adapted from Ng's (2012) digital literacy scale that measures the extent to which people are frequent and strategic producers of digital content for work - related purposes (e.g., "I frequently produce digital content to demonstrate my expertise"). Five point likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

Personal Branding (PB): Five items adapted from Labrecque et al., (2011) and Khedher, (2015) to assess online visibility management, professional identity communication and strategic self - promotion (e.g., "My digital presence always conveys a clear professional presence").

Self - Efficacy (SE): Five items adapted from Bandura's (1997) general self - efficacy scale for digital contexts that measure confidence in digital tool use and professional content management.

Socio - Cultural Factors (SCF): five items based on the work of Hofstede (2001) and Straub et al. (1997) that assess the cultural norms that encourage digital self - promotion, gender role limitations, and institutional support of digital visibility.

The pilot study (N = 50) was followed that yielded acceptable Cronbach's alpha for Content Creation ($\alpha = .832$) and Personal Branding ($\alpha = .759$) for the purposes of preliminary psychometric validity before the main study was deployed.

3.4 Analytical Strategy

To fully validate the measurement model, a two - step approach was followed as suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988): a first step involved conducting Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), which was followed by an estimation of the structural relationships. The mediation model was evaluated using bootstrapped indirect effects (2,000 bootstraps) and significance was determined with the presence of a 95% bias - corrected confidence interval that does not contain zero (Hayes, 2022; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The PROCESS Model 1 for mean - centered interaction terms (Hayes, 2022) was used for moderation, and simple slope tests were conducted for interpretation. The Index of Moderated Mediation (Hayes, 2015) was used to assess moderated mediation.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics for Content Creation Items

Descriptive statistics of the five Content Creation items and the composite are presented in Table 1. The content creation engagement items ranged from 3.55 (CC3) to 3.74 (CC5) with a standard deviation between 0.79 (CC3) and 0.91 (CC5), showing moderate to high engagement across the sample in the creation of content. The range of skewness values (-0.82 to -0.48) and of kurtosis values (-0.12 to 0.63) were within acceptable range of ± 2.0 and ± 7.0 respectively (George & Mallery, 2019) and thus the

values confirmed univariate normality.

Table 1:

Descriptive Statistics for Content Creation Items and Composite (N = 300)

Item	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Range
CC1: I regularly create digital content to showcase my expertise	3.72	0.84	- 0.64	0.31	1–5
CC2: I produce articles / posts to build my professional identity	3.61	0.91	- 0.48	- 0.12	1–5
CC3: I craft digital narratives reflecting my skills and values	3.55	0.88	- 0.52	0.18	1–5
CC4: I use multimedia tools to create professional digital content	3.68	0.86	- 0.71	0.44	1–5
CC5: I consistently share original content to engage my professional audience	3.74	0.79	- 0.82	0.63	1–5
Content Creation Composite	3.66	0.86	- 0.63	0.29	1–5

Note. All items measured on a five - point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; Kurt. = Kurtosis.

4.2 Measurement Model: Reliability and Validity

The six - factor CFA model demonstrated excellent overall fit: $\chi^2(390) = 487.23$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2 / df = 1.25$; CFI = .964; TLI = .961; RMSEA = .029 [90% CI: .017, .040]; SRMR = .044. All fit indices were within recommended limits (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Byrne, 2016) indicating an excellent fit of the proposed factor structure of the data observed. The psychometric properties of the Content Creation construct are presented in Table 2. All five items had good to high standardized factor loadings ($\lambda = .724$ to .771) with all significant at $p < .001$. Both the construct and the items within them showed satisfactory internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .832$; CR = .855) and adequate convergent validity (AVE = .542) scores, as recommended by Nunnally

and Bernstein (1994) and Fornell and Larcker (1981). To achieve discriminant validity, the Fornell - Larcker criterion (square root of AVE = .736 > all inter - construct correlations) and HTMT ratios (maximum = .783 < .85 threshold) were used and found to be satisfied (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 2:

CFA Results for Content Creation: Standardized Loadings, Reliability, and Convergent Validity (N = 300)

Item	(Std. Loading λ)	t - value	α / CR	AVE
CC1	.748	Fixed	α = .832	.542
CC2	.763	12.84**	CR = .855	
CC3	.724	12.11**		
CC4	.771	13.02**		
CC5	.758	12.69**		

Note. λ = standardized factor loading; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. ** $p < .001$. 'Fixed' = reference indicator set to 1.0 for scale identification. Thresholds: loadings $\geq .60$ (Hair et al., 2019); $\alpha \geq .70$ (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994); CR $\geq .70$; AVE $\geq .50$ (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

4.3 Structural Model: Direct, Mediated, and Moderated Effects

The structural model fit was excellent ($\chi^2 / df = 1.30$, CFI = .958, RMSEA = .032) and the R^2 value was .541, well beyond Cohen's (1988) criterion of a large effect. Table 3 shows the main results of the hypothesis tests.

Table 3 Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results for Content Creation—Personal Branding Relationships (N = 300)

H	Path	β	t	p	Decision
H1	Content Creation → Personal Branding (direct)	.284	4.51	< .001	Supported
H4	CC → Self - Efficacy → Personal Branding (mediated)	.133 (indirect)	—	< .001	Supported
H8	SCF moderates CC → Personal Branding	.187 (interaction)	3.34	.001	Supported

Note. β = standardized path or indirect effect; BCI = bias - corrected bootstrap confidence interval (2,000 resamples); SCF = Socio - Cultural Factors; CC = Content Creation; PB = Personal Branding. All effects significant at $p < .05$.

4.3.1 Direct Effect: Content Creation → Personal Branding (H1)

H1, predicting a significant positive direct effect of content creation on personal branding, was strongly supported ($\beta = .284$, $SE = .063$, $t = 4.51$, $p < .001$, 95% BCI [.162, .410]). The results of the present study are consistent with the theoretical arguments positing that content production is the most important behavioral manifestation of personal branding in digital context (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shepherd, 2020), with the results further indicating that active and strategic content production and sharing practices are significantly associated with increased personal branding effectiveness. The effect size ($\beta = .284$) suggests that there is a moderate - strong substantive relationship, and this shows that content creation is the second highest direct predictor of personal branding in the full structural model after the technical literacy ($\beta = .312$).

4.3.2 Mediation Effect via Self - Efficacy (H4)

H4, predicting self - efficacy as a mediator of the content creation—personal branding relationship, was supported by the bootstrapped indirect effect analysis. The content cre-

ation to self - efficacy path was significant ($\beta = .319, p < .001$) and the self - efficacy to personal branding path in this model was the strongest single predictor ($\beta = .418, p < .001$). However, the indirect effect of content creation on personal branding via self - efficacy was significant: (indirect $\beta = .133, SE = .038, 95\% BCI [.067, .214], p < .001$). This pattern was also consistent with partial mediation since the direct path was still significant ($\beta = .284, p < .001$). This partial mediation is theoretically consistent, as the process of content creation offers mastery experiences, concrete examples of being successful in creating and deploying professional digital artifacts, which in turn leads to self - efficacy by Bandura's (1997) most important mechanism for building self - efficacy. This increased confidence in turn drives and maintains the continued brand actions. Nevertheless, content production also functions directly in personal branding in that it produces the brand touchpoints that are visible to the viewer, as articles, posts or multimedia content, which are independent of psychological mediation (Labrecque et al., 2011).

4.3.3 Moderation Effect by Socio - Cultural Factors (H8)

The interaction analysis was also conducted to test the moderation hypothesis of H8, which states that the relationship between socio - cultural factors and the content creation—personal branding relationship is stronger in high socio - cultural alignment than in low alignment. The interaction coefficient was significant ($\beta = .187, SE = .056, t = 3.34, p = .001, \Delta R^2 = .038, 95\% BCI [.078, .297]$), indicating that socio - cultural factors account for an additional 3.8% of variance in personal branding beyond the main effects—a meaningful practical increment. Interpretive detail is provided in tables 4 and simple slope analyses. The conditional $\beta = .219, (p < .001)$, for low socio - cultural alignment was statistically significantly lower than the conditional $\beta = .421, (p < .001)$, for high socio - cultural alignment, with the difference between the slopes statistically significant ($t = 3.34, p = .001$).

Table 4:

Simple slope analysis: Effect of content Creation on Personal Branding at High vs. Low Socio - Cultural Alignment (N=300)

Condition	(Conditional Slope (β))	p - value	Interpretation
High Socio - Cultural Alignment (+1 SD)	.421	< .001	Strong CC $\rightarrow$ PB
Low Socio - Cultural Alignment (-1 SD)	.219	< .001	Weaker CC $\rightarrow$ PB
Difference between slopes	t = 3.34, p = .001	.001	Significant $\Delta R^2 = .038$

Note. Slopes estimated at ± 1 SD of Socio - Cultural Factors (SCF) composite. ΔR^2 = incremental explained variance attributable to the interaction term. All effects estimated via PROCESS Macro Model 1 (Hayes, 2022) with 2,000 bootstrap resamples.

4.3.4 Integrated Moderated Mediation

Moderated mediation was also supported by the Index of Moderated Mediation (IMM = .074, SE = .032, 95% BCI [.018, .142], p = .008) that the indirect effect of content creation on personal branding via self - efficacy was found to be significantly moderated by socultural factors. High socio - cultural alignment was found to have a more direct predictive effect on personal branding, and personal self - efficacy had a greater effect on personal branding in the environments with high socio - cultural alignment, with content creation having a higher predictive effect on personal self - efficacy. Within this integrated finding, socio - cultural factors can be seen to work in several ways in the causal chain: both as a direct brand - building effect of content creation, but also as a path to increasing confidence that extends to the psychological pathway of converting content creation skills into continued brand behaviors.

5. Discussion

5.1 Content Creation as a Significant Positive Predictor of Personal Branding

The results of this study confirm the direct positive relationship between content creation and personal branding ($\beta = .284, p < .001$), offering a strong empirical basis for the theoretical suggestion that personal branding is one of the important behavioral processes influenced by content creation. The finding corroborates previous studies by Wroblewski et al., 2020; Rosalina, 2023, as it showed a relationship in a scientifically rigorous way through the use of SEM with latent variables measurement, which is a methodological improvement from the previous studies that only showed the relationship in the form of correlation or regression. The finding is significantly important in the context of higher education in the Kurdistan Region. In the new landscape in which academic professionals are more and more turning to digital tools like LinkedIn, Research Gate, and Google Scholar to market themselves, create impassioned content, and establish connections, the job of strategically generating and publishing professional content has become a significant edge in building one's reputation for career. The strong positive correlation between content creation and personal branding indicates that it is important for institutions looking to improve the professional outcomes of their students and faculty to make concerted efforts to build out content creation skills—both as a technical ability, but as a strategy and an act directed toward identity.

5.2 The Psychological Mechanism: Self - Efficacy as Partial Mediator

This indirect $\beta = .133$ (95% BCI [.067, .214]) between self - efficacy and personal branding highlights the psychological pathway in which digital competencies turn into personal branding behavior. The “self - efficacy” is the mechanism linking learning and engagement into personal branding that is obtained from successfully producing and publishing professional digital content. It is in line with Bandura's (1997) theory that

the most powerful contributor to self - efficacy is mastery experiences, as well as more recent research showing that digital competence is a strong predictor of academic self - efficacy in higher education settings (González - Prida et al., 2024; Javier - Aliaga et al., 2024). The partial mediation is theoretically important because it suggests that the content creation process helps to establish a personal brand through a functional route (brand artifacts created through content creation), as well as a psychological route (acquisition of confidence and motivation to continued brand behaviors). The idea of the dual pathway phenomenon suggests that a program of digital literacy development that only addresses skill development and not confidence building will not get the maximum return on the investments in competency development for personal branding.

5.3 Socio - Cultural Moderation: Context as a Boundary Condition

The strong positive moderation of the socio - cultural factors ($\beta = .187$, $p = .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .038$) is also found, which illustrates that the relationship between content creation and personal branding is not culturally invariant, but rather is meaningfully conditioned by the socio - cultural context in which individuals are active. The personal branding returns on content creation were substantially higher when the cultural norms promoted digital visibility of the content creator and institutional policies facilitated online professional engagement, as well as when gender roles did not limit the digital self - expression of the content creator (conditional $\beta = .421$ vs. $.219$). A number of potentially relevant aspects of the culture and social expectations in the Kurdistan Region may pose challenges in increasing the effectiveness of personal branding through content production, such as collectivist cultural values, conservative attitudes towards self - promotion in the public sphere, and gender role expectations people have for each other in their everyday contexts, for people who work in less tolerant cultural environments. The message is that digitally competent people in culturally conservative (DCC) environments can create

a lot of content for very little return on investment in terms of personal branding, so a digital capability needs to be accompanied by strategies to overcome the socio - cultural obstacles to digital self - expression.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The first two are also considered as main theoretical contributions to this study. The first two are also regarded as the major theoretical contributions in this study. First, it offers strong empirical support for the relationship between content creation and personal branding from a non - Western context of developing countries with SEM and measurement of the latent variables. First, it presents empirical support for the relationship between content creation and personal branding with SEM and measurement of latent variables in a non - Western context of developing countries, thus extending the premise of the generalizability of the findings so far reported in the field. Second, it offers a partial explanation of the relationship between digital competence and personal branding as a psychological mediator, supported by Social Cognitive Theory and highlighting that the digital competence—personal branding relationship exists not only in the functional sense, but also in a psychological sense. Thirdly, socio - cultural factors are revealed as a key boundary condition, and it offers theoretical evidence of the contextually embedded and culturally - conditioned digital literacy—personal branding relationships.

6.2 Practical and Policy Implications

The results highlight the need for digital literacy programmes in higher education institutions (HEIs) and similar settings to be comprehensive, engaging in content creation skill development, and strategically fostering self - efficacy in digital literacy, for instance, by implementing scaffolds for portfolio projects, peer feedback mechanisms, or

mentorship from academics oriented toward digital activity and participation. Platforms like LinkedIn, ResearchGate, and academic blogs should be used as tools within the university to create the development of experiential branding. The moderation results suggest that from the policy perspective, socially and culturally responsive digital literacy programs need to be created with a particular focus on gender - sensitive programs as well as policies to recognize and support online digital visibility of academic staff and students.

7. Limitations and future research directions

There are some limitations in this study which need to be recognized. No causal inferences can be drawn as a cross sectional design was used, and all measures were self report items from a single source with potential for common method variance (implemented through procedural and statistical controls). The sample was representative of digitally engaged higher education participants in the Kurdistan Region, but may not be generalizable to other regional and occupational contexts. Longitudinal studies need to be conducted and should focus on the co - development of content creation competency and self - efficacy across time and should incorporate experimental / quasi - experimental measures to support causal inferences. The qualitative studies of the subjective experiences of content makers and personal branding for Kurdish academics would complement the quantitative findings. Comparative studies of the pattern of moderation across different cultural contexts, specifically across developing country contexts with high collectivism norms, such as between the Kurdistan context and other developing country contexts would enhance the theoretical generalizability of the findings.

8. Conclusion

This study gives substantial empirical proof of a positive correlation between content

creation and personal branding of stakeholders in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq with a positive statistical significance. This study validates the direct and positive relationship between content creation and personal branding effectiveness ($\beta = .284, p < .001$), identifies self - efficacy as the partial mediator between the two variables (indirect $\beta = .133, 95\% \text{ BCI } [.067, .214]$), and finds that this relationship is significantly moderated by socio - cultural factors, emphasizing higher effects when there is socio - cultural alignment (high alignment $\beta = .374, p < .001$, low alignment $\beta = .268, p = .007$). The results support the theoretical integration of digital literacy frameworks, Social Cognitive Theory and personal branding theory in culturally complex contexts of developing countries and offer concrete data for educational institutions and policy makers who want to improve professional identity outcomes in the digital age.

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