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STRATEGIC PERSONAL BRANDING AND VISIBILITY IN MODERN ACADEMIA

Mateusz Grzesiak
WSB University, Poland
E-mail: mgrzesiak@wsb.edu.pl
ORCID 0000-0003-4017-0912

Łukasz Sułkowski
Jagiellonian University,
Cracow, Poland
E-mail:
lukasz.sulkowski@uj.edu.pl
ORCID 0000-0002-1248-2743

Justyna Dziedzic
University of Lodz,
Lodz, Poland
E-mail:
justyna.dziedzic@uni.lodz.pl
ORCID 0000-0002-8292-0892

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ABSTRACT. This study investigates how academics in Poland construct personal brands and manage impressions across traditional, digital, and institutional arenas, and examines the relationships between branding practices, authenticity, and perceived visibility. Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, impression-management research, and personal branding literature, the study employs an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. Qualitative data were collected through 12 semi-structured interviews with highly visible scholars, followed by a cross-sectional CAWI survey of 279 researchers from leading Polish universities. The qualitative analysis identified three interconnected domains (self-presentation strategies, performance arenas, and identity tensions) and revealed that branding efforts are consistently balanced against scientific integrity and a cultural norm of modesty. The quantitative findings showed that branding activity and the diversity of communication platforms were positively associated with perceived visibility, whereas discomfort with self-promotion was negatively associated with it. Perceived authenticity, by contrast, was not significantly associated with self-assessed reputation or credibility; instead, it structured an internal tension between identity coherence and the felt need to compromise. Declared citation counts likewise did not differentiate self-presentation, indicating that academic perceived visibility rests on branding activity and strategy rather than on bibliometric output or authenticity per se. These findings highlight the growing importance of personal branding in academic careers.

JEL Classification: I23,
M31, Z13

Keywords: personal branding, impression management, authenticity, brand management, academic visibility

Introduction

Impression management framework originates with Erving Goffman's classic work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which likens social interaction to a theatrical performance. Goffman described individuals as "actors" who present an image to others on a social "stage," carefully managing their behaviours, appearance, and speech to shape audience perceptions. In this front-stage region, people display a controlled persona that aligns with

social norms and their goals. In contrast, a separate backstage area allows for rehearsal and preparation out of public view. This dramaturgical metaphor emphasises that social life involves both conscious presentation and implicit, automatic aspects: what Goffman called "expressions given" (deliberate signals) versus "expressions given off" (unintentional cues).

Subsequent scholars built on Goffman's insights by dissecting the tactics of self-presentation. For example, Leary and Kowalski (1990) expanded the theory into a taxonomy of impression management strategies, identifying behaviours such as self-promotion (advertising one's abilities), ingratiation (flattering others), exemplification (demonstrating integrity or dedication), intimidation, and supplication. These strategies offer a more nuanced understanding of how individuals actively influence observers' impressions. In psychology and management research, impression management is often equated with the broader concept of self-presentation – the control of information about oneself to influence others' opinions and perceptions. For example, Jones and Pittman (1982) first articulated these five self-presentation tactics in organisational contexts, and later works (Leary et al., 1986; Bolino et al., 2016) have reinforced their role in social and professional settings.

Despite growing interest in academic self-presentation, little is known about how scholars in non-Anglophone, modesty-oriented systems reconcile self-promotion with disciplinary norms. Polish academia, where overt self-advertisement is often regarded with suspicion, offers an instructive case. This study integrates impression-management and brand-management frameworks to examine how academics construct and present personal brands across traditional, digital, and institutional arenas. Using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, it combines interviews with highly visible scholars and a survey of researchers at leading Polish universities. The study contributes an integrative framework linking self-presentation strategies, authenticity, and academic perceived visibility, and draws practical implications for scholars and institutions.

1. Literature review

In academia, scholars strategically present their most notable work to establish credibility and authority, often through curated presentations, selective self-disclosure, and the highlighting of prestigious achievements (Dziedzic & Sułkowski, 2023). Publishing serves as a strategic form of self-presentation, where choices of outlets, dissemination practices, and reliance on metrics like the H-index collectively function to signal expertise, enhance prestige, and manage perceptions of scholarly competence (Sułkowski & Dziedzic, 2020). Empirical studies illustrate these dynamics. In a mixed sample of faculty and students, Dziedzic and Jastrzębowska (2022) found that lecturers themselves acknowledge using prestige (such as publications and expertise) to manage students' impressions, and students perceive that higher "research prestige" corresponds to a stronger academic image. From formal presentations to casual corridor conversations, scientists are curating their image.

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, academic networking relies on impression management as scholars perform professionalism and success while strategically curating their image through backstage preparation (see also Woyo et al., 2014). Social media and professional platforms offer new "stages" for the dramaturgical performance of science. Scholars might maintain Twitter profiles, LinkedIn pages, or ResearchGate accounts as part of their front-stage persona. In digital environments, visibility increasingly depends on continuous interactions with multiple stakeholders, making personal branding an ongoing process of value co-creation and strategic self-presentation (Pasquinelli & Eshuis, 2025). This becomes complicated in a rapidly changing media environment (Alsyoo et al., 2025; Mishchuk et al., 2026) and its credibility (Coutinho et al., 2023; Schinello, 2025) even considering efforts of

universities to develop their brands, including positioning in socially responsible ranks (Lacmanović & Škare, 2024) and development of responsible practices (Rydzak et al., 2025). Zhang and Lu (2023) experimentally examined how audiences judge scientists on Twitter. They found that profiles of scientists were rated as more authentic and qualified than those of typical social-media "influencers," and that posts emphasising professional content led to a higher perceived expertise than personal posts. The same study (Zhang and Lu, 2023) found that audiences responded positively to professional self-disclosure, but scientific stereotypes (anti-intellectualism) also influenced trust. Complementary evidence on parasocial dynamics shows that direct audience engagement – for instance, explicitly addressing followers rather than posting generic content – increases persuasive influence independently of the depth of the parasocial bond, indicating that active, dialogic self-presentation may matter more for perceived authority than passive visibility or follower count alone (Tuominen et al., 2025). This underscores the importance for academics navigating social media to present their research confidently (through self-promotion) while maintaining trustworthiness through authenticity (Grimm et al., 2026). Jin et al. (2022) utilise Goffman's framework to demonstrate that online users frequently maintain multiple online personas. When applied to academia, this suggests that a researcher might have a public professional account (front stage) and a more private or subgroup account (backstage) where they are more candid.

Recent evidence reinforces the link between academic personal branding and strategic self-presentation. Analysing the #AcademicTwitter community, Gomez-Vasquez et al. (2024) found that scholars deliberately use hashtags and curated content to increase visibility, signal expertise, and cultivate professional relationships, while navigating the communicative constraints of social media platforms. A parallel logic operates beyond academia: a recent measurement protocol for organic social media distribution in professional services shows that consistent cross-platform posting, standardized identity cues, and technical production quality function simultaneously as a visibility mechanism and a trust-building intervention, without relying on paid promotion – a framework directly transferable to how scholars without institutional marketing budgets can strategically build perceived visibility (Velychko, 2026). In a survey of 307 higher-education scholars, Romero-Hall et al. (2024) similarly reported that academics' motivations for engaging with digital social networks (visibility, feedback, networking, and recognition) align closely with self-presentation and impression-management processes, requiring continuous negotiation between the benefits and risks of online exposure. Beyond academia, Debus et al. (2024) showed, through latent profile analysis, that the highest levels of objective career success were associated not with intensive self-promotion but with a restrained, low-frequency use of impression-management tactics. Kusci and Bakır (2026) further operationalise this tension by developing the Social Media Self-Presentation Discrepancy Scale, which captures the gap between users' real and presented selves across three dimensions (reality distortion, idealized self-presentation, and strategic impression management), underscoring that online impression management is judged not only by its intensity but by its perceived divergence from the authentic self.

Engagement on digital platforms significantly shapes academic visibility. Studies indicate that while scholars predominantly post field-related content, interactive and dialogic tweets, incorporating hashtags, questions, or multimedia, generate higher engagement and broader reach (Chan et al., 2022). While empirical literature on social media branding is sparser, practical guides note their importance for academic networking. As the editors of a recent academic branding volume note, social media tools enable researchers to “manage their personal brands” by showcasing their work and finding collaborators (Cabrera and Lloret, 2016).

While impression management framework (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and the concept of personal branding (Peters, 1997; Montoya and Vandehey, 2002) offer insight into the strategic construction of the academic self, this research focuses on how these strategies function in real-world academic contexts, particularly within the Polish research environment.

Drawing on Ibarra's (1999) theory of provisional selves and identity adaptation, this examination explores how scientists experiment with various forms of self-presentation in digital spaces and how these efforts impact their sense of professional identity. As Harrison et al. (2019) and others have noted, academics who clearly package and share their accomplishments often enjoy greater professional opportunities.

Over-emphasising self-promotion can raise scepticism. This asymmetry between visibility and credibility echoes findings from corporate-reputation research, where market reactions to reputational changes depend on sector and market maturity rather than on the magnitude of publicised achievements alone, suggesting that audiences evaluate self-presentation against a contextual credibility baseline rather than rewarding exposure in a linear fashion (Blajer-Gołębiowska & Nowak, 2024). Zhang and Lu's (2023) experiment shows that overtly personal posts (or dramatised self-promotion) can actually reduce perceived expertise. Academics who adopt the role of "academic influencers" may enhance their visibility but risk undermining credibility if perceived as inauthentic. Impression management framework suggests that exaggerated or inconsistent self-presentation erodes trust. At the same time, even a single misstep, such as retracting a paper or posting an ill-judged comment, can damage a carefully built reputation. Effective reputation management, therefore, demands vigilance, transparency, and genuine engagement to preserve authenticity and trust.

2. Theoretical model and hypotheses

Despite growing interest in academic self-presentation, empirical evidence on how scholars in non-Anglophone, modesty-oriented systems such as Poland reconcile self-promotion with disciplinary norms remains scarce. Building on the identified research gap, the following research questions and hypotheses were formulated: RQ1: What impression management strategies do academics employ in constructing their personal brands? RQ2: How do different arenas of academic self-presentation, traditional, digital, and institutional, shape scholars' branding practices? RQ3: How do academics negotiate identity tensions between authenticity and image, personal and institutional brands, as well as cultural attitudes toward self-promotion? H1: The self-presentation style of academics in the context of personal branding (e.g., degree of self-promotion vs. modesty, formal vs. informal communication style) is associated with the declared visibility within the academic community, with the assumption that a more assertive and proactive style is linked to higher self-assessed recognition than a restrained style. H1a: The use of intensive self-promotion techniques (e.g., highlighting achievements, deliberate impression management) is positively associated with the declared number of citations. H1b: A defensive or modest self-presentation style (limited self-promotion) is associated with lower self-assessed public visibility. H2: Perceived authenticity of a scholar's personal brand is positively associated with declared trust and credibility, either in terms of self-assessment or in how the researcher believes they are perceived by their community, with the assumption that individuals who consistently and sincerely present themselves report higher levels of reputation and attractiveness for their personal brand.

The reputational effects of personal branding are complex: a coherent and visible academic brand can enhance funding opportunities, collaborations, and student recruitment, while also fostering public engagement through greater accessibility. However, credibility ultimately depends on authenticity and scholarly merit. As shown in Figure 1, the theoretical

model of academic personal branding examines the relationships between self-presentation strategies, authenticity, and academic outcomes. H1 assumes that a proactive self-presentation style, reflected in frequent branding activities, the use of multiple communication platforms, and active impression management, is positively associated with declared academic visibility. H1b proposes that a modest or defensive self-presentation style is associated with lower perceived visibility. H1a extends the model by linking intensive self-promotion to objective academic outcomes, operationalised as the number of declared citations. Additionally, H2 posits that perceived authenticity is positively associated with trust, credibility, reputation, and brand attractiveness.

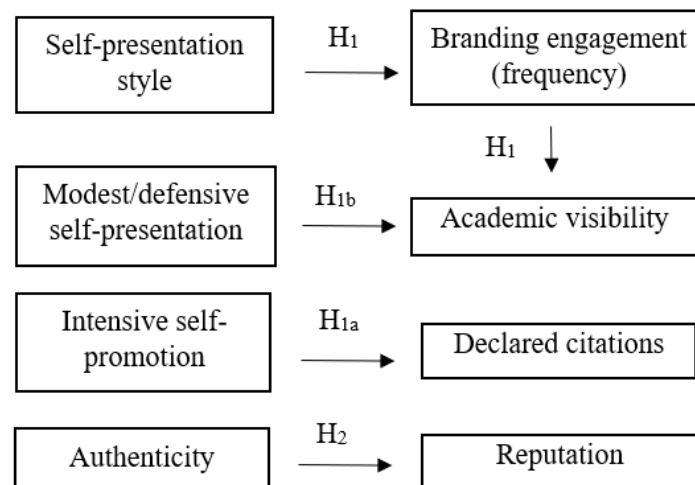


Figure 1. Theoretical model and hypotheses of academic personal branding
Source: Own study

Building on these qualitative findings, the three coding domains were used to operationalise the survey constructs and to specify the hypotheses, in line with the logic of the exploratory sequential design. The domain of self-presentation strategies (self-promotion, exemplification, ingratiation) informed the items measuring the frequency of branding activities, the intensity of self-promotion, and communication style, which underpin H1, H1a, and H1b. The domain of performance arenas informed the items on the number and diversity of communication platforms and on institutional presence, capturing the proactive, multi-arena style central to H1. The domain of identity tensions and reflexivity informed the authenticity items (e.g., consistency between brand and professional goals, role–identity fit, the need to compromise) and the items on discomfort with, and perceived community pressure against, self-promotion, which underpin H2 and the analysis of internal identity tensions. In this way, each quantitative construct is grounded in a theme that emerged in the qualitative phase.

3. Methodological approach

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design comprising two complementary research stages: a qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase. The goal was to explore and better understand how academic scientists in Poland manage personal branding and impression formation in both traditional and digital scholarly environments. All

research procedures followed standard ethical guidelines, and participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous.

The first stage involved a qualitative inquiry based on semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 12 purposefully selected academics. The selection criteria prioritised scholars recognised for their high academic perceived visibility and active public engagement, including their presence in media discourse, professional networks, and scholarly communication platforms. These participants were selected to represent a diverse range of disciplines, institutional backgrounds, and levels of public engagement.

The interviews were guided by open-ended questions exploring the participants' strategies, perceptions, and experiences related to academic perceived visibility, personal branding, and impression management. Topics included self-presentation at conferences, social media activity, and alignment of personal and institutional identity. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and edited to retain the original meaning and contextual nuance.

Interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), combining deductive coding informed by impression-management and dramaturgical theory with inductive coding open to themes emerging from the data. Coding proceeded iteratively: the transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarisation, initial codes were generated, and these were collated into candidate themes that were reviewed and refined against the full data set. Consistent with the reflexive approach, the researcher is treated as the analytic instrument, and analytic rigour was supported through an audit trail of coding decisions, the use of illustrative verbatim quotations, and discussion of the emerging theme structure among the authors, rather than through inter-coder reliability coefficients. The analysis produced three principal domains and their associated subcodes (Table 1), which informed the design of the subsequent survey instrument.

Table 1 outlines three principal codes and their associated subcodes for analysing interviews with academic scientists, based on the theory of impression management. The framework draws on Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Leary and Kowalski's taxonomy of self-presentation strategies, and empirical findings from the study.

Table 1. Coding framework: Impression management in academics' personal branding

Main Code	Subcodes	Description
Self-presentation strategies	a) Self-promotion b) Exemplification c) Ingratiation	Communicative tactics used to shape professional image: highlighting achievements, demonstrating dedication, or building rapport.
Performance spaces	a) Conferences and publications b) Digital platforms (e.g., Twitter, LinkedIn, ResearchGate) c) Institutional presence and affiliation	Contextual arenas where impression management occurs: academic events, online profiles, and connections to institutional prestige.
Identity tensions and reflexivity	a) Authenticity vs. image b) Personal brand vs. institutional brand c) Cultural sensitivity and resistance to self-promotion	Internal and cultural conflicts arise when academics navigate personal branding while maintaining professional and cultural alignment.

Source: Own study; coding framework developed using NVivo software based on thematic analysis of interview data.

The second phase employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey conducted through the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method. The target population consisted of

academic researchers affiliated with the top 40 Polish universities, as ranked by Perspektywy 2024. To ensure broader coverage, two additional universities (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and the University of Rzeszów) were also included.

A stratified sampling strategy was applied using publicly available citation data. Academics were grouped into three strata based on citation impact: those with over 2000 citations, those with 1000–1999 citations, and those with 500–999 citations. A small number of early-career scholars with fewer than 500 citations were also invited to capture emerging trends. Contact information and indicators of media activity were collected through publicly available online sources.

A total of 2,564 scholars were invited via email, of which 279 completed the survey in full, forming the final sample (a response rate of 10.9%). While the initial sample consists of 279 respondents, the sample size varies across specific analyses due to the survey's skip logic. Specifically, 46 respondents (16.49%) reported never engaging in personal branding activities and were excluded from subsequent detailed branding questions, reducing the sample to 233 active participants. Furthermore, when evaluating the specific career impacts of branding, only those who perceived clear benefits or were uncertain proceeded ($N = 190$), while 43 respondents (18.45% of the active group) who stated that branding yielded no professional benefits were filtered out. The final sample for the analysis of professional outcomes ($N=190$) excluded 43 respondents who indicated that their branding activities resulted in no tangible career benefits. While this exclusion was intended to sharpen the focus on the effectiveness of branding strategies, we acknowledge it as a potential source of selection bias. Future research should include these non-beneficiary cases to better understand the barriers to effective personal branding in academia. The structured questionnaire (administered in Polish) included items on personal branding behaviours, social media engagement, impression management strategies, and perceived outcomes related to academic perceived visibility and reputation. Of the 279 completed responses, all were retained for analysis; pairwise deletion was applied to individual items with missing values. The academic-visibility scale (three items) showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) and the personal-branding-strategy scale (six items) was reliable ($\alpha = .74$). Authenticity was assessed with five single 5-point items; perceived reputation/credibility was indexed by the item on branding impact on perceived visibility and professional success and by a categorical professional-benefit item. These were single, theoretically derived indicators rather than established multi-item scales: each authenticity item was designed to capture a distinct facet identified in the preceding qualitative phase, while reputation/credibility was approached through proxy indicators of perceived professional benefit. Although single items preclude internal-consistency estimation, the five authenticity indicators displayed a theoretically coherent pattern of inter-correlations (see Table 4), consistent with their intended meaning. The reputation/credibility proxies are more limited, and the associated findings are accordingly treated as exploratory.

Of the 279 respondents, valid N varies across analyses because several outcome items used skip logic and some respondents did not disclose all information: $N = 279$ (full sample), $N = 274$ (declared citations; 5 missing), $N = 233$ (recognition and prestige), $N = 190$ (perceived visibility and professional success). Pairwise deletion was applied; no values were imputed. Associations were examined using non-parametric tests (Spearman's ρ and the Kruskal–Wallis test), appropriate for ordinal items and non-normally distributed data. As the quantitative phase is exploratory and involves multiple bivariate tests, the results are interpreted in terms of the magnitude and consistency of associations rather than isolated significance thresholds; associations significant at $p < .01$ are treated as the most robust, while those significant only at $p < .05$ are regarded as tentative.

The two methodological stages were mutually reinforcing. The qualitative findings provided conceptual grounding and contextual richness, while the quantitative data enabled broader generalisation and verification of patterns. This integrative approach offered a nuanced understanding of how Polish academic scientists engage in personal branding and impression management across face-to-face and digital environments.

4. Results

4.1. *Qualitative findings*

The qualitative analysis revealed overarching thematic domains that shape the understanding of academic personal branding. The results for each research question (RQ) are presented below, illustrated with representative quotations and thematic evidence.

RQ1: The analysis of the collected data reveals that the respondents employ a diverse range of impression management approaches. However, one of the key areas emerging from their statements is self-promotion, often linked to the creation of a coherent and long-term professional image. As one interviewee explained: "It is about designing a long-term marketing and PR strategy that allows for the consistent publication of coherent content. What matters is that these materials are not only carefully planned but also unique and distinctive—for example, through the use of customised templates that can be easily associated with my personal brand." (IDI 01). This statement highlights the deliberate nature of self-presentation, where communication is perceived as an integral part of one's professional strategy. In this context, self-promotion is not incidental but embedded in the long-term process of reputation building.

At the same time, self-promotion carries risks related to authenticity and the sustainability of the constructed image. As one respondent cautioned: "You can present yourself as an expert in a given field, but within two or three weeks—once fact-checking is done—such an artificially built reputation can be lost very quickly." (IDI 06). This quotation highlights the limitations and fragility of strategies that rely solely on the superficial display of expertise.

Beyond self-promotion, an important dimension of impression management involves articulating values that foster trust and legitimising academic activities. As one interviewee stressed: "For me, the absolute and fundamental value is scientific integrity. [...] I always try to remain fully reliable in what I do—not bending facts or adding unnecessary information—while maintaining complete integrity, both scientific and human." (IDI 09). This perspective connects brand-building strategies with the ethos of academic work, emphasising that visibility cannot be pursued at the expense of research quality and ethical standards.

In parallel, the data reveal the significance of relationship-building, grounded in openness and the cultivation of positive bonds within and beyond the academic community. As one academic remarked: "What matters is openness to others—that people feel they can talk to me, rather than seeing me as a distant professor who communicates in a rigid way." (IDI 07). This strategy extends beyond traditional self-presentation, emphasising the interpersonal dimension of personal branding. Scholars who prioritise accessibility and approachability project an image of authenticity, which may foster collaboration as well as the dissemination of scientific knowledge.

RQ2: The findings indicate that academic branding practices are simultaneously shaped by three areas of self-presentation, traditional, digital, and institutional, each offering distinct opportunities and constraints. Traditional forms of appearances, such as lectures or conferences, allow scholars to retain greater control over their image and adjust the tone of their communication to the audience. As one respondent emphasised: "During a lecture, I am somewhat more relaxed, I have more time, and I smile more at the students, whereas in the

media I do not have that opportunity." (IDI 03). The contrast between classroom presence and media appearances illustrates the tension between freedom and authenticity on the one hand, and the pressure of brevity and professional image on the other. Another interviewee noted: "I never approach this from a branding perspective. It is simply about adapting to the audience so that I can convey as much information as possible in a form they can understand." (IDI 05). This suggests that traditional arenas of self-presentation reinforce the role of scholars as communicators of knowledge rather than as individuals consciously constructing a personal brand. In this context, branding becomes secondary to the primary educational mission.

In contrast, the digital area, which includes social media and other online tools, generates ambivalent experiences. On the one hand, it offers the potential to reach broader audiences and enhance visibility. As one respondent put it: "In my view, the importance of online promotion is highly underestimated. No one pays sufficient attention to it or shows much interest in this marketing aspect. We continue to focus on formal publications, grants, teaching, committees, and meetings—activities that have little to no impact on the average person. If we want our work to make a tangible difference, media visibility is essential." (IDI 01). This statement highlights the growing recognition that digital platforms are becoming increasingly crucial for building scholars' visibility capital. On the other hand, the same arena raises concerns about authenticity and the value of communication. A critical perspective was voiced as follows: "The issue of sincerity in social media is a general problem of operating in that environment. I believe social media does not foster openness or authenticity. Rather, it encourages narcissistic tendencies and various forms of self-display." (IDI 12). In this view, digital presence may reinforce superficial modes of self-presentation, where generating attention takes precedence over communicating scientific content.

The third dimension concerns institutional frameworks of self-presentation, which increasingly shape branding practices. Requirements such as promoting publications on official university profiles or organising outreach events serve as tools for both institutional promotion and the individual visibility of scholars. As one interviewee highlighted: "The emphasis is on advertising every publication on Facebook through short notes and graphics. It also involves giving lectures for schools and outreach sessions for young people." (IDI 04). This example demonstrates that institutional expectations of academics are driven by the broader strategic objectives of universities, linking individual branding with organisational promotion.

RQ3: Negotiating identity tensions between authenticity and image becomes evident in the way researchers emphasise the importance of coherence between personal beliefs and public presentation. As one interviewee observed: "It should be noted that my vision differs depending on the context: one is at the university, where I fulfill the role of an administrative and teaching employee, and another is in the international academic environment." (IDI 02). This statement suggests that authenticity is not an absolute category, but somewhat contingent upon institutional frameworks and specific audiences. Consequently, scholars may deliberately adjust their message to maintain a balance between self-expression and external expectations.

At the same time, authenticity is often regarded as a paramount value, the violation of which entails ethical risks. "If I try to build my image in a way that differs from who I really am, then I face an ethical conflict." (IDI 05). This perspective highlights the emotional and moral costs of creating an image that is inconsistent with one's true identity. While a public image may enhance a scholar's position, excessive divergence from the authentic self produces inner dissonance and a sense of inauthenticity.

The relationship between personal and institutional branding constitutes another source of tension. Several respondents stressed limited organisational support: "Faculty or university leadership is mainly interested in reports and does not understand that in order to showcase someone, investment in that person is necessary." (IDI 02). On the one hand, institutions expect

individual visibility; on the other, they fail to provide adequate resources or supportive structures. As a result, the responsibility for brand-building rests on the scholars themselves, generating both pressure and a considerable time burden.

Other respondents pointed to strategies that combine both levels of branding: "I operate in two ways: either I create posts myself, or I share content prepared by my department or university, depending on its importance." (IDI 09). Such practices reflect attempts to reconcile individual expression with institutional loyalty. In this arrangement, a scholar's image becomes part of a broader organisational narrative, and simultaneous presence in both dimensions can strengthen the message – though it requires careful balancing of personal and institutional interests.

A cultural dimension further reveals particular sensitivities regarding self-promotion, which is often perceived ambivalently in academic settings. "Talking about one's work outside of conferences or seminars is seen as boasting, implying that the result is so weak that it requires personal promotion for anyone to read it." (IDI 02). This attitude points to disciplinary norms in which excessive exposure of one's achievements may be reputationally risky. Rather than reinforcing credibility, self-promotion may undermine it, reflecting the firm entrenchment of modesty and restraint as academic values.

The empirical analysis demonstrates that scholars negotiate identity tensions by selectively tailoring their messages to context, seeking equilibrium between authenticity and institutional demands, and critically assessing cultural barriers to self-promotion. Rather than eliminating these tensions, academics learn to manage them, striking a balance between their own needs, organisational expectations, and the cultural norms of the academic community.

4.2. Quantitative findings

The results of the empirical study confirm the existence of a relationship between academics' self-presentation styles and their declared visibility in the academic environment. Spearman's correlation analysis revealed that the frequency of engaging in personal branding activities, as well as the flexible adjustment of self-presentation style to the expectations of the academic community, are significantly and positively related to subjectively assessed recognition.

Academics who more frequently emphasised their competencies and actively used multiple communication platforms assessed their perceived visibility in academic media as higher ($\rho = 0.309\text{--}0.410$, $p < 0.01$). At the same time, negative correlations were found between feelings of discomfort related to self-promotion and the perceived impact of branding activities on visibility ($\rho = -0.208$ to -0.261 , $p < 0.01$). This indicates that the greater the resistance to self-presentation, the lower the declared recognition.

Importantly, academic community pressure to avoid self-promotion did not show statistically significant correlations with visibility assessment, suggesting that this factor does not play a decisive role in shaping scholars' image.

The Kruskal-Wallis test also indicated that the number of citations does not significantly differentiate either the frequency of self-presentation activities or the level of discomfort experienced during self-promotion ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that perceived visibility is based more on subjective self-presentation strategies than on objective bibliometric indicators. The citation strata used for sampling were designed to ensure coverage across perceived visibility levels; because they were unequal in size and the lowest band was small, respondents were regrouped for the Kruskal-Wallis analysis into three bands of comparable size (≤ 1250 , $n = 92$; $1251\text{--}2500$, $n = 96$; > 2500 , $n = 86$), so as to provide adequate and balanced group sizes for the non-parametric comparison.

Table 2. Correlations between self-presentation style and declared academic visibility

Variable	Visibility and professional success	Recognition in the academic community	Prestige (invitations, collaboration)
Frequency of branding activities	$\rho = 0.338^{**}$	$\rho = 0.410^{**}$	$\rho = 0.203^{**}$
Adjustment of self-presentation to community expectations	$\rho = 0.094$ (ns)	$\rho = 0.309^{**}$	$\rho = 0.172^{**}$
Number of communication platforms used	$\rho = 0.292^{**}$	$\rho = 0.358^{**}$	$\rho = 0.166^*$
Discomfort related to self-promotion	$\rho = -0.208^{**}$	$\rho = -0.261^{**}$	$\rho = -0.101$ (ns)
Academic community pressure to avoid self-promotion	$\rho = 0.137$ (ns)	$\rho = 0.090$ (ns)	$\rho = 0.023$ (ns)

Note. Spearman's ρ ; pairwise deletion. N = 190 for "visibility and professional success"; N = 233 for "recognition" and "prestige". * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; ns = not significant.

Contrary to H2, perceived authenticity was not significantly associated with self-assessed reputation or credibility. None of the five authenticity dimensions correlated with the perceived impact of branding on perceived visibility and professional success (ρ between $-.04$ and $.13$, all $p > .08$; N = 190). A Kruskal–Wallis test showed that only branding–goal consistency differed by whether respondents reported concrete professional benefits ($H(2) = 22.19$, $p < .001$); the other dimensions did not (all $p > .17$). H2 was therefore not supported in the present data; given the single-item, proxy operationalisation of reputation/credibility, however, this should be read as the absence of a detectable association rather than as evidence that authenticity is unrelated to reputation. The authenticity items did, however, form a coherent identity-tension structure: a sense that one's role reflects one's true identity was positively related to goal-consistency ($\rho = .32$, $p < .01$) and institutional alignment ($\rho = .31$, $p < .01$) and negatively related to the need to compromise ($\rho = -.29$) and internal conflict ($\rho = -.39$), while compromise and internal conflict were strongly linked ($\rho = .47$).

Statistical analysis reveals that discomfort with self-promotion is significantly and negatively correlated with the frequency of branding engagement ($\rho = -0.197$, $p = 0.003$, N = 233), perceived impact on recognition ($\rho = -0.261$, $p < 0.001$, N = 233), and overall perceived visibility ($\rho = -0.208$, $p = 0.004$, N = 190). Conversely, institutional pressure to avoid self-promotion does not demonstrate a statistically significant relationship with branding frequency ($\rho = 0.071$, $p = 0.283$, N = 233), suggesting that environmental discouragement does not effectively deter scholars from undertaking branding efforts.

Table 3. Authenticity dimensions and perceived reputation/credibility (Spearman's ρ , N = 190)

Variable	Impact on visibility and professional success
Branding consistent with professional goals	$\rho = 0.13$ (ns)
Identity–institution alignment	$\rho = -0.02$ (ns)
Need to compromise authenticity	$\rho = 0.06$ (ns)
Professional role reflects true identity	$\rho = -0.04$ (ns)
Internal conflicts from branding	$\rho = 0.03$ (ns)

*Note. Spearman's ρ ; pairwise deletion; N = 190; none significant at $p < .05$.

Table 4. Internal structure of authenticity/identity (Spearman's ρ)

Variable	Goal-consistency	Institutional alignment	Need to compromise	Internal conflict
Role reflects true identity	$\rho = 0.32^{**}$	$\rho = 0.31^{**}$	$\rho = -0.29^{**}$	$\rho = -0.39^{**}$
Need to compromise	$\rho = -0.12$ (ns)	$\rho = -0.44^{**}$	—	$\rho = 0.47^{**}$
Internal conflict	$\rho = -0.18^{**}$	$\rho = -0.24^{**}$	$\rho = 0.47^{**}$	—

*Spearman's ρ ; N = 233–279; ** $p < .01$; ns = not significant.

Source: own study.

H1a was not supported: declared citations were unrelated to branding frequency ($\rho = -.07$), platform use ($\rho = -.03$), and prestige ($\rho = -.03$), all ns, and a Kruskal–Wallis test across citation bands (≤ 1250 , $n = 92$; $1251-2500$, $n = 96$; > 2500 , $n = 86$) showed no differences ($H(2) = 0.19-2.23$, all $p > .32$). H1 and H1b were supported. The rejection of H2, positing a link between authenticity and reputation, should be interpreted with caution. The study utilized single-item measures for complex constructs (reputation and credibility). As noted in psychometric literature, such measures may suffer from lower reliability and limited ability to capture the full variance of the constructs, which may have attenuated the observed correlations. Consequently, the lack of support for H2 may be a measurement artifact rather than a definitive indication of a null relationship in the population.

A Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted to examine whether perceiving professional benefits from branding (Yes / No / Hard to say) differentiates scholars' alignment and identity tensions. The test revealed a highly significant difference only regarding the alignment of branding activities with career goals ($H(2) = 22.186$, $p < 0.001$), with those reporting concrete benefits showing the highest consistency (mean rank = 139.16) compared to those seeing no benefits (mean rank = 82.87). Crucially, the perception of professional benefits does not significantly differentiate institutional culture fit ($p = 0.175$), the need for authenticity compromise ($p = 0.173$), role identity reflection ($p = 0.218$), or internal conflict levels ($p = 0.813$). This indicates that regardless of whether branding efforts yield tangible career benefits, academics experience internal identity tensions and authenticity conflicts to a similar extent.

Perceived visibility was associated with the intensity and strategic breadth of branding activity rather than with citation counts or perceived authenticity. Authenticity instead operated as an internal identity dynamic, balancing coherence against compromise.

5. Discussion

Based on the results, it can be argued that academic perceived visibility is not merely a consequence of bibliometric indicators but the findings demonstrate that proactive and flexible engagement in personal branding activities, including the use of multiple communication platforms and the emphasis on competencies, is significantly associated with perceived

recognition and prestige. Integrating the two strands yields a meta-inference that neither phase provides alone. The qualitative accounts showed that scholars treat authenticity and scientific integrity as non-negotiable anchors and experience self-promotion as culturally ambivalent, whereas the quantitative results showed that self-assessed perceived visibility is associated with the intensity and breadth of branding activity rather than with citation counts or perceived authenticity. The data indicate a strong negative correlation between organizational alignment and the perceived need to compromise personal authenticity ($\rho = -0.444$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 279$). This need for compromise is, in turn, strongly associated with experiencing internal conflicts regarding personal branding ($\rho = 0.474$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 279$). However, the degree to which a scholar's primary role reflects their true professional identity serves as a significant protective factor against such internal conflicts ($\rho = -0.386$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 279$). Read together, these findings indicate that authenticity operates less as a driver of external recognition than as an internal regulative principle that keeps branding within the bounds of disciplinary norms, while perceived visibility itself is produced through sustained, multi-arena self-presentation.

Excessive modesty or discomfort with self-promotion appears to limit declared perceived visibility, highlighting the importance not only of objective achievements but also of their social presentation. Notably, the absence of significant effects of community pressure to avoid self-promotion suggests that academic norms may be undergoing a transformation toward greater acceptance of branding strategies in scholarly work. Although perceived authenticity was not significantly associated with self-assessed reputation or credibility, scholars' accounts suggest that consistency and sincerity are treated as preconditions for sustainable branding rather than as drivers of immediate recognition; the absence of a quantitative association may also partly reflect the limited, single-item measurement of these constructs.

The findings of this study contribute to the emerging field of academic personal branding by illustrating how impression management strategies intersect with the concept of personal branding in the context of higher education. Three central insights stand out: the centrality of self-promotion balanced by authenticity, the differentiated role of arenas of self-presentation, and the persistent tensions between personal and institutional brands embedded in cultural norms.

First, the data demonstrate that self-promotion is a core strategy in academic impression management. Respondents emphasised the importance of long-term planning, coherence, and distinctiveness in their communication, aligning with the concept of personal branding, which recognises consistency and differentiation as critical attributes of strong brands (Aaker, 1996; 2025; Keller, 2013). Nevertheless, unlike commercial branding, academic self-promotion must align with the ethos of scientific integrity. The fragility of reputation, based on superficial signals, echoes Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, where dissonance between performance and authenticity risks reputational collapse. Thus, authenticity appears in scholars' accounts as a guiding principle rather than a measurable predictor, echoing arguments that credibility and trustworthiness matter for reputation (Felt, 2017; van Dijck, 2013).

Second, the analysis underscores that scholars operate simultaneously across traditional, digital, and institutional arenas, each of which frames personal branding differently. Traditional contexts such as lectures and conferences reinforce the role of academics as knowledge communicators rather than as deliberate self-branders, consistent with the idea that professional identity is tied to disciplinary credibility (Becher and Trowler, 2001). In contrast, the digital arena provides unprecedented opportunities for visibility, aligning with literature on the rise of "visibility capital" in academia (Felt & Fochler, 2012; Lovink, 2019). However, respondents' ambivalence, ranging from recognising the necessity of online presence to concerns about superficiality and narcissism—confirms prior critiques that digital platforms can both democratise and trivialise scholarly communication (Marwick, 2013; Jordan, 2020). The

institutional arena further complicates this landscape, as universities increasingly mobilise scholars' visibility for organisational branding. This dynamic positions academics as both brand agents and branded subjects, underscoring the duality between autonomy and institutional co-optation.

Third, the study highlights how academics negotiate identity tensions, particularly between authenticity and image, personal and institutional brands, and cultural ambivalence toward self-promotion. These tensions mirror Ibarra's (1999) model of identity adaptation, where professionals experiment with different role identities until they stabilise into a coherent self-concept. For academics, maintaining authenticity while responding to institutional pressures involves constant adjustment rather than a fixed identity. Cultural reluctance toward self-promotion, perceived as boasting or reputationally risky, resonates with Bourdieu's (1988) notion of the academic field as governed by symbolic capital, where overt marketing practices can disrupt established hierarchies of recognition. At the same time, respondents pointed to the stigmatisation of more visible colleagues, reflecting resistance to the intrusion of market logics into academic ethos (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Theoretically, this study integrates impression-management and brand-management frameworks into one model in which academic perceived visibility is associated primarily with self-presentation strategy rather than with citation counts or perceived authenticity, while authenticity operates as an internal identity tension.

6. Conclusion

This study presents a conceptual and empirical account of academic personal branding by integrating the concept of personal branding with impression management, with a particular focus on the Polish academic context. Drawing on a mixed-methods design, the evidence indicates that scholars strategically construct professional images through repertoires of offline and online self-presentation tactics. Academic branding emerges not only as communicative practice but as identity work embedded in wider symbolic and institutional structures. The findings suggest a continual negotiation among authenticity, visibility, and institutional expectations: Polish scholars, in particular, balance cultural reticence toward self-promotion with curated branding behaviours, credibility, and institutional fit. The findings carry practical implications for both individual scholars and academic institutions. For academics, especially at early career stages, authentic and strategically managed personal branding can enhance visibility, reputation, and career advancement when aligned with scholarly values and transparency. Institutions are encouraged to support researchers through training in science communication and digital self-presentation, while fostering cultures that recognise responsible personal branding as a legitimate dimension of academic work and align individual efforts with institutional narratives without compromising authenticity.

Evidence from stakeholder-communication research indicates that strategic communication shapes support primarily through psychological mediators such as a sense of importance and a sense of ownership rather than through message volume, reinforcing the conclusion that academics' branding efforts are likely to gain traction when audiences feel personally engaged with the researcher's work rather than merely exposed to it (Perdana & Wisesa, 2025).

Nonetheless, several limitations should be noted. Reputation and credibility were captured only indirectly, through perceived professional benefit and impact items rather than dedicated multi-item scales; future work should employ validated trust and credibility measures, as these proxy indicators may not fully capture the complexity of the constructs. While the mixed-methods design strengthens validity, the focus on Polish academics may limit

generalisability, and reliance on self-reported data raises the potential for social desirability bias. The cross-sectional design provides only a temporal snapshot and precludes causal inference, which is why the quantitative findings are framed throughout in associational rather than causal terms. Further, the bivariate analyses were not formally corrected for multiple comparisons; although the principal associations were significant at $p < .01$ and formed a consistent pattern, the weaker associations should be treated as tentative. Finally, the response rate (10.9%), while not unusual for email surveys of busy academics, raises the possibility of non-response bias; because the sampling frame was based on citation impact and public visibility, scholars who are themselves more active in self-presentation may have been more inclined to participate, which could inflate the observed associations between branding activity and visibility. The response rate of 10.9% is relatively low; however, it is consistent with trends in survey research targeting busy academic professionals (Cook et al., 2000). We recognize that the resulting sample may be skewed toward highly engaged researchers, which potentially limits the generalizability of our findings to the broader, less active academic population. The findings should therefore be read as indicative of patterns within an engaged segment of the academic community rather than as fully representative estimates. Finally, given the exploratory nature of this study and the high number of bivariate tests performed without rigorous multiple-comparison corrections, the isolated significant findings presented in Tables 2–4 should be interpreted as hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory. Future large-scale studies are required to validate these relationships using more robust statistical controls.

Future research could extend this framework to international comparative contexts, explore the longitudinal evolution of academic brands, or examine the emotional and ethical dimensions of visibility work in more depth. As academic careers become increasingly intertwined with media presence and symbolic capital, understanding and managing personal branding will remain a critical challenge for scholars and institutions alike.

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