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### **Personal Branding in the Structure of Professional Development of Students Studying in Pedagogical and Psychological Specialties**

#### *Abstract*

*Introduction.* The study considers personal branding as a manageable component of professional development in pedagogy and psychology students, where credibility depends on ethically grounded self-presentation, a clear professional identity, and trust-based communication in educational and community settings. The research explores how personal branding takes shape during university training and which components are more or less developed across years of study and practicum experience. *Methodology and Methods.* A quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive-comparative design was implemented at Sarsen Amanzhaolov East Kazakhstan University, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan. The sample comprised 79 undergraduate students. Personal branding was assessed with a structured 1–5 scale instrument covering five components: value proposition, communication, reflection, digital footprint, and reputation signals; an overall index was computed as the mean of component scores. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, course-level comparisons (ANOVA), and practicum-experience comparisons (t-tests), with effect sizes estimated where relevant; no intervention or pre-post design was used. *Results.* Overall, personal branding was predominantly moderate. Reflection and communication scored highest, indicating stronger reflective and communicative resources. Digital footprint and reputation signals were weaker, suggesting limited strategic visibility and insufficient evidence-based self-presentation. Differences across years of study were associated with clearer role articulation and reflective maturity, while practicum experience related more to reputation evidence and portfolio-oriented presentation of competencies. *Scientific novelty.* The study offers an integrative, domain-based interpretation of personal branding in pedagogy and psychology education, showing how value orientation, competence demonstration, and ethically regulated communication shape coherent professional self-presentation, and distinguishing components linked to academic progression versus practicum practical *significance.* The findings support curriculum improvements: modules on professional identity and ethics, structured digital portfolios aligned with confidentiality standards, and mentoring-based supervised visibility practices.

*Keywords:* personal branding; professional development; pedagogical psychology students; professional identity; digital footprint; employability.

**Introduction.** In modern higher education, the professional development of students in pedagogical and psychological programmes is determined not only by academic performance and practical training, but also by the ways in which future specialists position themselves within educational and social contexts. As universities prepare graduates for employment in schools, counselling services, inclusive

environments, and community institutions, the ability to clearly express a professional identity, convey expertise, and establish trust with diverse audiences becomes an essential applied skill. Within this framework, personal branding can be understood as a deliberate and consistent process of shaping and sustaining a professional image based on values, professional competencies, ethical standards,

and demonstrable conduct. For pedagogical psychologists, whose professional activity relies on interpersonal communication, confidentiality, and social responsibility, the development of a personal brand should not be interpreted as self-promotion, but rather as a means of professional self-definition, strengthening credibility and supporting long-term career development.

Although personal branding has attracted increasing attention in business and media studies, its place within the professional formation of students enrolled in pedagogical and psychological programmes remains weakly articulated in teacher education and psychology training. Many students encounter difficulties in consolidating separate competencies into a coherent professional stance: solid theoretical preparation is often accompanied by limited communicative confidence, insufficient reflective self-presentation, or an unclear perception of their professional purpose. Such imbalances may result in uncertainty during practicum placements, inconsistent communication with teachers, parents, and learners, and a low level of readiness for professional networking and lifelong professional growth. In this regard, the analysis of personal branding as a structural element of professional formation is of clear relevance for educational theory as well as for the renewal of university practices focused on the development of soft skills, professional identity, and graduate employability.

This article aims to examine the role and functions of personal branding within the structure of professional development of students enrolled in pedagogical psychology programmes and to substantiate its pedagogical significance for reinforcing professional identity, communication culture, and readiness for future careers. The study explores the links between core elements of personal branding values, professional competencies, self-presentation practices, digital presence, and professional reputation, and the main stages of professional formation throughout university education. The practical value of the article is associated with the application of the results to the development of curriculum-based recommendations, including workshops, reflective learning components,

mentoring formats, and digital portfolio tools, which can assist students in forming an ethical, coherent, and socially responsible professional image consistent with the norms and expectations of psychological and pedagogical practice.

**Materials and Methods.** The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive, and comparative design to investigate personal branding as an element of professional development among students enrolled in pedagogical and psychological programmes. The research framework integrated descriptive analysis of key personal branding components with comparative assessments across groups differentiated by stage of study and practicum experience.

*Participants.* The participants were undergraduate students enrolled in pedagogical and psychological programmes at Sarsen Amanzhaolov East Kazakhstan University, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan. The final sample included 79 students in their second to fourth year of study. The sample size reflected actual cohort availability during the data-collection period, which is common in single-institution research in pedagogical psychology education. The participants' mean age was  $20.9 \pm 1.3$  years. To explore differences associated with field experience, the students were grouped according to whether they had practical experience in education or psychology (e.g., school-based practicum, volunteering, tutoring, or counselling-related activities).

Inclusion criteria consisted of current enrolment in the relevant programme, completion of at least one semester of professional coursework, and provision of informed consent to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria included questionnaires containing substantial missing data or incomplete responses that did not allow for the calculation of composite scores.

*Data Collection Tools.* Personal branding was measured with a structured questionnaire covering five components relevant to professional formation in the helping professions: value proposition (clarity of professional mission, understanding of one's role, articulation of strengths and values); communication (ability to present oneself professionally, maintain

constructive interaction and adapt messages to different audiences); reflection (analysis of one's experience, awareness of development needs and capacity to learn from feedback); digital footprint (purposeful online presence, portfolio practices and understanding of digital professionalism); and reputation signals (indicators of competence such as supervisor feedback, participation in projects and documented achievements). All components were rated on a unified 1–5 Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting stronger development. An Overall Personal Branding Index was calculated as the mean of the five component scores.

For interpretative purposes, the overall index was divided into three levels (low, medium, and high) using distribution-based thresholds (for example, tertiles corresponding to the 33rd and 66th percentiles) to facilitate visualization and group comparisons. In addition, a brief self-assessment of baseline professional readiness was collected on a 1–5 scale and used as an initial indicator to ensure comparability between subgroups.

*Procedure.* Data collection took place during the academic term using classroom-based and, where appropriate, online survey formats. Participation was voluntary, and students completed the questionnaire individually and anonymously. All responses were checked for completeness; the proportion of missing data was below 5% and was addressed through listwise deletion when calculating composite indices.

*Data Analysis Technique.* Data were analyzed using standard statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) were computed first. Baseline differences between subgroups were checked using independent-samples t-tests for continuous variables (age and baseline readiness) and chi-square tests where appropriate. Differences by year of study were examined with one-way ANOVA, while practicum-experience effects were tested with independent-samples t-tests for both component scores and the overall index. Internal consistency for the total scale and each subscale

was assessed with Cronbach's alpha. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ , and effect sizes (Cohen's  $d$ ,  $\eta^2$  and Cramer's  $V$ ) were reported where applicable to support interpretation of practical relevance.

*Ethics.* The study adhered to established ethical standards, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymization. All data were processed in aggregated form and used solely for research purposes. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. The research was confined to an ascertaining (baseline) stage based on a cross-sectional survey design. No formative intervention, training programme, or pre–post assessment was conducted within the scope of this study; accordingly, the findings reflect cohort-specific characteristics rather than the effects of any intervention.

**Results.** Personal branding is often defined as a deliberate approach to shaping how others perceive an individual's professional value, expertise, and credibility. Early managerial discussions presented it as the necessity of treating oneself as “a brand” within an increasingly individualized labor market (Peters, 1997). Subsequent practitioner-focused publications translated this idea into practical terms through positioning, differentiation, and the consistent communication of professional signals (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002). For students in pedagogy and psychology, however, personal branding should not be equated with self-promotion; rather, it can be understood as an ethically and professionally grounded way of communicating competence, values, and role boundaries within helping relationships.

Academic research has further refined the concept by distinguishing between the personal brand as an outcome, reflected in relatively stable perceptions, and personal branding as the ongoing process through which these perceptions are formed and managed. A systematic review highlights personal branding as a career-related activity shaped by changes in the labor market and mediated by identity work, reputation cues and social validation (Gorbatov et al., 2018). From this perspective, a personal

“brand” develops through repeated interactions and sustained narratives of competence and trustworthiness, rather than through a single communicative act.

One prominent stream of research links personal branding to employability. Empirical evidence suggests that personal branding is related to perceived employability and career outcomes, although these relationships are often indirect and contingent on context, available resources, and the credibility of communicated signals (Khedher, 2019). From an educational standpoint, this supports viewing personal branding as a set of teachable competencies such as self-presentation, reflective articulation of strengths, portfolio development, and communication strategy rather than as a purely market-oriented ideology. In a similar context, models of “self-marketing brand skills” argue that universities can foster students’ capacity to translate their competencies into clear value propositions for employers and professional communities (Manai & Holmlund, 2015). Issues of employment are also examined through the lens of student competitiveness and academic mobility as integral elements of educational trajectories, which further underscores the importance of coherent professional self-presentation already during the period of study (Dusekeyeva & Kadirisizova, 2020).

The digital environment has become a key arena for personal branding, as it accumulates, amplifies, and recombines reputational signals. Studies of online personal branding in the context of Web 2.0 point to challenges such as fragmented audiences, blurred boundaries between private and professional spheres, and the difficulty of maintaining coherence across multiple platforms (Labrecque et al., 2011). These challenges are particularly relevant for pedagogical psychologists, whose professional legitimacy depends on confidentiality, ethical behavior, and trust-based relationships; as a result, digital traces and communication style form an integral part of professional credibility and responsible self-presentation.

At the psychological level, personal branding intersects with established theories of self-presentation and impression management.

Goffman’s dramaturgical approach describes how individuals enact roles and regulate impressions in social encounters, offering a foundational perspective for viewing a “brand” as an identity negotiated through interaction (Goffman, 2023). The two-component model of impression management differentiates between impression motivation and impression construction, which helps explain why people may deliberately foreground particular competencies and values in professional settings (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). For students, these processes are shaped by academic assessment, practicum requirements, and peer comparison, influencing both what they communicate and the degree of consistency with which they present themselves.

To link personal branding with professional development in pedagogical and psychological education, research on professional identity is especially relevant. Reviews of teacher professional identity describe it as dynamic, context-sensitive, and constructed through experience, reflection, and participation in professional communities (Beijaard et al., 2004). A dialogical perspective further suggests that professional identity is both unified and multiple, encompassing different “I-positions” (such as counsellor, educator, or mediator) that need to be coordinated rather than suppressed (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). This perspective offers a solid theoretical foundation for examining personal branding as a structured expression of professional roles and values, representing the outward articulation of an internally integrated professional identity.

Research that foregrounds the “person of the professional” highlights that teachers’ and other helping professionals’ actions cannot be separated from who they are, how they interpret their responsibilities, and how they attribute meaning to their practice (Kelchtermans, 2009). In the case of pedagogical psychologists, personal branding is therefore closely linked to professional self-understanding, including the ability to articulate one’s mission, ethical boundaries, modes of intervention, and communication norms. In addition, narrative and career-construction approaches propose

that professional trajectories are shaped through life themes and processes of meaning-making, with narratives enabling individuals to integrate competencies and experiences into coherent vocational stories (Del Corso & Rehfuß, 2011). Recent syntheses of career-construction theory further confirm the importance of identity- and narrative-based tools for career decision-making and professional adaptation (Wang & Li, 2024). Taken together, these perspectives justify examining personal branding in higher education as an identity-oriented, ethically constrained, and competency-based element of professional formation among students in pedagogical and psychological fields.

The study included undergraduate students enrolled in pedagogical psychology programmes at a higher education institution. Participants were at different stages of professional training, which allowed personal branding indicators to be examined in relation to year of study and practical experience. The inclusion criteria were:

- current enrolment in a pedagogical or pedagogical-psychological programme;
- completion of at least one semester of professional coursework;
- provision of informed consent to participate.

Students who submitted incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the final analysis.

The final sample reflected the typical cohort profile of pedagogical psychology programmes. The distribution across years of study was sufficient for descriptive and comparative analyses, while the gender composition was predominantly female, with male students representing a small minority. The sample also showed meaningful variation in pedagogical and psychological practicum experience. Data completeness was high: missing responses accounted for less than 5% and were managed through listwise deletion, as they did not affect the overall structure of the dataset. For analytical purposes, students were additionally classified according to whether they had practical experience (e.g., school-based placement, volunteering, tutoring, or counselling-related activities) or not.

Baseline comparability analyses indicated no statistically significant differences between the practicum-experience subgroups in terms of age or initial self-assessed professional readiness ( $p > 0.05$ ), which permitted subsequent comparisons without further statistical adjustment. Owing to the small proportion of male students in the cohort, gender was not treated as a primary stratification variable, and any observed gender-related patterns were interpreted with caution (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Sample characteristics and baseline indicators*

Indicator	Category / Value	n (%) / Mean (SD)
Total sample size	—	79 (100%)
Course level	2nd year	26 (32.9%)
	3rd year	28 (35.4%)
	4th year	25 (31.6%)
Gender	Female	69 (87.3%)
	Male	10 (12.7%)
Practical experience in education/ psychology	Yes	44 (55.7%)
	No	35 (44.3%)
Age (years)	Mean (SD)	20.9 (1.3)
Baseline professional readiness score	Mean (SD)	3.21 (0.54)
Missing data	—	< 5%

This sample profile suggests that the participants constitute a typical single-institution cohort of pedagogical psychology students,

offering a sufficient basis for examining personal branding components within the context of their professional development. At the same time,

the pronounced gender imbalance should be taken into account when interpreting subgroup comparisons.

A descriptive analysis was carried out to assess the level of development of key personal branding components among students in pedagogical and psychological programmes. The assessment encompassed five core dimensions: value proposition, communication, reflection, digital footprint, and reputation signals measured on a unified five-point scale, with higher scores indicating a more advanced level of development.

As presented in Table 2, the highest mean scores were recorded for reflection and communication, indicating that most students demonstrate comparatively strong capacities for analyzing professional experience, articulating

personal strengths, and interacting effectively in educational settings. These dimensions align with reflective practices and interpersonal communication skills, which are typically emphasized in pedagogical and psychological training.

Moderate scores were observed for the value proposition component, suggesting that although students have a general understanding of their professional mission and competencies, they often struggle to articulate a clear and differentiated professional positioning. The lowest mean values were found for digital footprint and reputation signals, indicating limited awareness of purposeful online self-presentation, professional visibility and reputation management in both digital and offline professional communities.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive statistics for personal branding components*

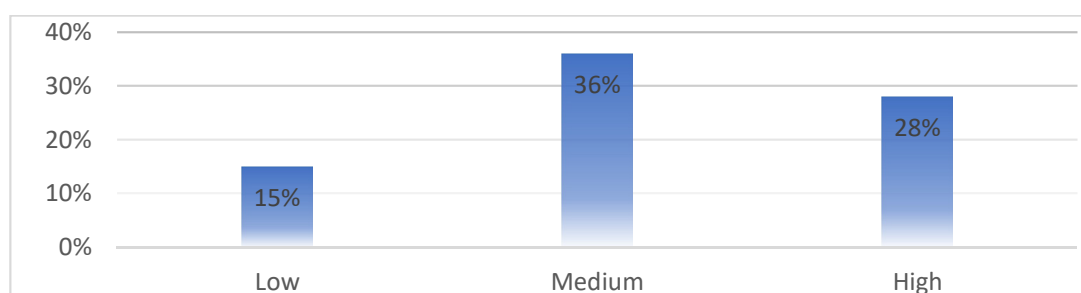
Personal branding component	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)
Value proposition	3.34	0.61
Communication	3.78	0.57
Reflection	3.85	0.54
Digital footprint	2.96	0.68
Reputation signals	3.02	0.64
Overall personal branding index	3.39	0.49

To provide a more integrated perspective, students were also classified into three levels of overall personal branding development (low, medium and high) based on their composite index scores. The distribution across these levels is shown in Figure 1. The findings indicate that the medium level predominates, suggesting that

basic elements of personal branding are present but are not yet supported by sufficient consistency or strategic coherence. A smaller share of students demonstrated a high level, whereas a limited group fell into the low level, characterized by weak professional self-presentation and low awareness of reputation-building practices.

**Figure 1**

*Distribution of personal branding levels among pedagogical psychology students*



Overall, the descriptive findings point to an uneven development of personal branding components: reflective and communicative competencies appear relatively well developed, whereas strategic positioning and digital professional visibility remain comparatively weaker. This pattern corresponds with the predominance of the medium level of overall personal branding observed within the cohort (Figure 1).

This subsection provides an analytical examination of how the core components of personal branding are embedded within the main domains of professional development among pedagogical psychology students. Consistent with the professional formation framework applied in the study, three integrative domains were considered: motivational–value, activity/practice-based, and reflective–communicative. As illustrated in Table 3, personal branding should not be treated as an isolated “self-presentation skill”; instead, it brings together

value orientation (why the profession is chosen), professional action (what can be done in practice), and reflective communication (how experience is analyzed, messages are conveyed, and trust is established).

The value proposition component is primarily associated with the motivational value domain, as it reflects clarity of professional mission, ethical positioning, and the ability to articulate one’s professional role. Communication and reflection constitute the core of the reflective communicative domain and are central to the work of future pedagogical psychologists, whose professional activity is grounded in dialogue, empathy, and self-regulation. Digital footprint and reputation signals are conceptually connected to the practice-based domain, as they represent professional visibility through portfolios, participation in projects, supervisory feedback, and other evidence of competence in real educational contexts.

**Table 3**

*Personal branding components and domains of professional development*

<b>Personal branding component</b>	<b>Motivational–value domain</b>	<b>Activity/practice-based domain</b>	<b>Reflective–communicative domain</b>
Value proposition	High	Medium	Medium
Communication	Medium	Medium	High
Reflection	Medium	Medium	High
Digital footprint	Low–Medium	High	Medium
Reputation signals	Medium	High	Medium

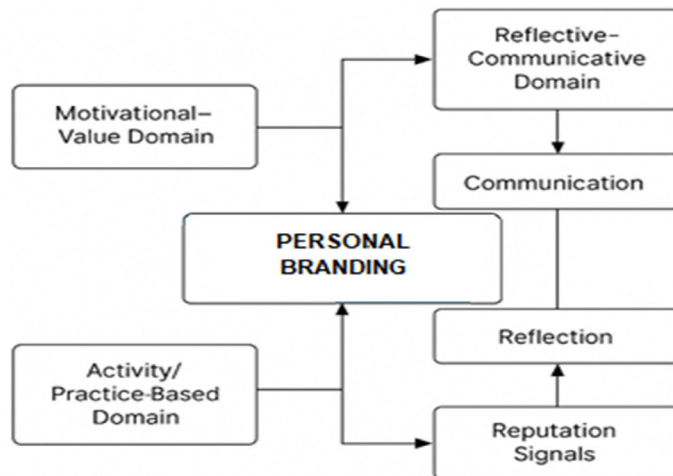
To explore possible differences across stages of training, descriptive comparisons were made by year of study and by the presence or absence of practicum experience. The observed pattern aligns with the assumption that progression through the Programme is associated with clearer articulation of professional roles and more developed reflective–communicative skills, whereas practicum experience is more closely related to practice-based indicators, particularly reputation signals (such as supervisor feedback and project participation) and purposeful digital representation (including portfolio materials and documented achievements).

Given the descriptive design of the study and its single-institution sample, these differences are interpreted as cohort-specific tendencies rather than as causal effects. The conceptual integration of these patterns is summarized in Figure 2.

This conceptually presents personal branding as emerging from the interaction between internal work on professional identity (values and meaning), the demonstration of competence through experience, and reflective communication, together with ethical self-presentation in both offline and online environments.

**Figure 2**

*Conceptual model of personal branding in the professional development of pedagogical psychology students*



**Discussion.** The findings reinforce the view that personal branding in pedagogical psychology education should be understood as identity-based professional communication rather than as market-oriented self-promotion. The predominance of a medium overall level (Figure 1) indicates that most students have basic resources for professional self-presentation, but their branding lacks sufficient consistency and strategic orientation, particularly with regard to visibility and reputation management. This pattern is consistent with the argument that personal branding represents a long-term, socially validated process grounded in identity work and recurring reputation signals (Gorbatov et al., 2018), rather than a one-off exercise in “image creation” (Peters, 1997).

One notable finding is that reflection and communication scored higher than digital footprint and reputation signals (Table 2). From a psychological standpoint, this difference is understandable: reflective and interpersonal skills are strongly emphasized in the preparation of helping professionals and are closely related to impression management in everyday interaction (Goffman, 2023; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). By contrast, weaker results in the digital-professional dimension suggest that students may not consistently translate their competencies into evidence-based professional narratives, such as portfolio artefacts, documented achievements or purposeful

professional networking. This observation is consistent with research indicating that online personal branding is complicated by fragmented audiences and blurred boundaries between private and professional life (Labrecque et al., 2011), which may be particularly sensitive for pedagogical psychologists given ethical requirements and the trust-based nature of their work.

The alignment of personal branding components with professional development domains (Table 3; Figure 2) further supports the interpretation of personal branding as an externalized expression of professional identity. Professional identity is commonly described as dynamic and shaped through practice, reflection and participation in professional communities (Beijaard et al., 2004), while dialogical approaches highlight the need to coordinate multiple role positions (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). From this perspective, students’ difficulties in articulating a clear value proposition may indicate an incomplete integration of professional roles and self-understanding – students may “know what to do” in practical terms, yet still struggle to articulate “who they are as professionals” in a coherent manner (Kelchtermans, 2009). Moreover, the descriptive comparisons by practicum experience align with employability-oriented research showing that personal branding outcomes depend on the credibility

of signals and the accumulation of evidence of competence (Khedher, 2019).

The findings support the integration of personal branding into professional formation through ethically grounded, competency-based approaches, including:

- professional identity and ethics modules that address role clarity, professional boundaries, core values and responsible self-presentation;

- structured digital portfolio practices (case reflections, practicum outputs, supervision records and project results) designed to enhance digital footprint and reputation signals while adhering to confidentiality requirements;

- mentoring and supervised forms of professional visibility involving faculty members and field supervisors, aimed at helping students translate practicum experience into credible professional narratives;

- communication skills training with structured feedback loops, including simulated interviews and parent–teacher interaction scenarios followed by reflective debriefing.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation and does not allow analysis of how personal branding develops across stages of training. The absence of a formative intervention or pre–post assessment further limits conclusions regarding change over time and the effectiveness of specific educational practices. Second, the study relied primarily on self-report measures, which may be affected by social desirability bias and individual differences in self-awareness. Third, the sample was limited to a single institution and region; moreover, the gender distribution was predominantly female, reflecting the cohort structure but constraining the generalization of findings across genders.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs that track the development of personal branding across multiple semesters and practicum cycles; intervention studies that test the effectiveness of identity-focused modules, portfolio-based training and mentoring programmes; and multi-source assessment approaches that combine self-reports with supervisor evaluations, portfolio analytics and structured observations of professional

communication. Further attention should be given to ethical issues related to digital visibility in helping professions, as well as to potential moderating factors such as the intensity of mentoring, the quality of practicum experiences and students' prior levels of digital literacy.

**Conclusion.** This study analyzed personal branding as a structural component of professional development among students enrolled in pedagogical and psychological programmes. The findings suggest that, in this field, personal branding is most appropriately understood as identity-based professional communication grounded in ethical standards, responsibility and trust, rather than as market-driven self-promotion. Overall, the descriptive results indicate that students have a basic foundation for developing a coherent professional image; however, the development of specific personal branding components remains uneven and may require targeted pedagogical support.

The descriptive results indicate that reflection and communication are the most developed components of personal branding among the participants, which corresponds to the strong emphasis on interpersonal competence and reflective practice in pedagogical psychology education. At the same time, digital footprint and reputation signals were comparatively less developed, pointing to limited strategic awareness of professional visibility, evidence-based self-presentation, and systematic reputation building in both online and offline professional settings. The predominance of a medium overall level of personal branding further suggests that students generally display professional intentions and core competencies, but often lack consistency and clarity in positioning and in translating their achievements into credible professional signals.

The conceptual mapping of personal branding components to the domains of professional development (motivational value, activity/practice-based, and reflective communicative) supports the view that personal branding serves as an integrative mechanism linking professional identity, the demonstration of competence, and ethically regulated self-presentation. Year

of study and practicum experience showed descriptive associations with different aspects of branding: more advanced stages of training tended to align with clearer role articulation and greater reflective communicative maturity, whereas practicum experience was more closely connected to practice-based components, particularly reputation signals and purposeful digital representation. Taken together, these findings underline the importance of linking identity work with authentic professional evidence and reflective communication.

The practical significance of the study lies in identifying directions for enhancing university training. The results support the integration of personal branding into professional formation through modules focused on professional identity and ethical self-presentation, structured digital portfolio practices that document competencies and achievements while respecting confidentiality requirements, and mentoring, together with supervised opportunities for developing professional visibility and communication skills. Such approaches may assist students in translating their academic learning and practicum experience into a coherent, credible, and socially meaningful professional image that

aligns with the standards of pedagogical and psychological practice.

At the same time, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design, its reliance on self-report measures, the single-institution nature of the sample, and the predominantly female gender distribution typical of the Programme. Future research should broaden the empirical base, employ longitudinal and intervention-based designs, and incorporate multi-source assessment (supervisor evaluations, portfolio analysis, and structured observation). Additional attention is also required to address the ethical challenges of digital self-presentation in the helping professions and to identify the educational conditions that most effectively support sustainable personal branding as part of professional development.

In summary, personal branding appears as a relevant and pedagogically manageable component of professional formation for students in pedagogical psychology. When embedded in processes of identity development, supported by practicum-based evidence and guided by ethical communication, it can enhance employability, professional confidence, and readiness for responsible practice in educational and community contexts.

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