Issues Raised by EFL Teachers about Personal Branding on Social Media: Exploring Self-Delusion as an Extra Factor in Digital Personal Branding

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Abstract

Introduction: This study concentrates on EFL teachers, whose unique viewpoint provides rich insights into personal branding. Given their profession's emphasis on cultural adaptability, interpersonal communication, and personality projection, the ramifications of personal branding are especially pertinent. Moreover, as facilitators of English— the widely recognized global lingua franca— their experiences encompass a broad spectrum of cultural and social nuances.

Objectives: The objective was to uncover the nuanced experiences and perceptions that these teachers have towards personal branding, particularly concerning the challenges and benefits associated with it.

Methods: This research employs a design within the qualitative research framework to delve into the perceptions and experiences of EFL teachers concerning personal branding on social media. The study examines the complex phenomenon of personal branding among twelve EFL teachers in Vietnam, encompassing diverse stages of their careers. To gather rich, in-depth data, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were employed, providing an opportunity for participants to reflect and share their experiences and perspectives.

Results: Results from the study indicate that EFL teachers encounter various challenges when engaging in personal branding. These include balancing personal and professional identities, managing diverse audiences, adhering to cultural norms, ensuring online privacy, and acknowledging the potential for self-delusion. Interestingly, the study also underscores the role of personal branding as a catalyst for professional development and lifelong learning. Despite these potential benefits, concerns surfaced regarding time management and the potential impact on teachers' psychological well-being.

Conclusion: The findings from this study provide a valuable contribution to the existing literature on personal branding in educational settings. They also highlight important considerations for teacher training programs, institutional support structures, and policy-making decisions. To further enrich the understanding of personal branding, it is recommended that future research explores this phenomenon in different cultural contexts and professional fields.

Type of paper

Research Article

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study. The research was conducted independently and with full transparency, without any financial, professional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes of the research.

1. Introduction

The digital revolution of the 21st century has rendered social media an omnipresent facet of daily life (Popkova & Gulzat, 2020). The rise of these digital platforms has not only revolutionized communication but also paved the way for a new phenomenon known as personal branding (Jacobson, 2020). While traditionally associated with

corporate entities, branding has transcended this realm, giving individuals an opportunity to craft a strategic and deliberate self-image to project onto their digital audiences (Wijaya & Nasution, 2022). Within this framework, the present study addresses the concept of personal branding on social media, particularly questioning whether it represents a form of self-recognition or self-delusion, as viewed through the lens of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. The concept of personal branding is interwoven with an array of perceptions and potential impacts on one's professional and personal life (Rangarajan et al., 2017). While personal branding may serve as a platform for self-recognition and self-actualization, helping individuals to define their identity and professional value, it also harbors the risk of fostering self-delusion (Booker, 2020). The latter pertains to a potential dissonance between one's crafted digital identity and the lived reality, which may, in turn, result in unfulfilled expectations and misconceptions about one's self (Bozkurt & Tu, 2016).

EFL teachers, as the focus of this study, offer a unique perspective to investigate this phenomenon. They operate in a field where cultural adaptability, interpersonal communication, and personality projection are central, making the implications of personal branding particularly relevant. Furthermore, with English being the de facto global lingua franca, their perspectives encapsulate a diverse range of cultural and social experiences. The aim of this study is to explore the nuanced relationship between personal branding on social media and self-perception, focusing specifically on EFL teachers' experiences and perspectives. By doing so, this study is expected to shed light on the role and impacts of personal branding within the field of education and contribute to the wider discourse on identity construction in the digital era.

2. Literature review

2.1. Personal Branding and Social Media

The genesis of personal branding lies in the late 20th century (Peters, 1997), although it has become exponentially prominent with the rise of social media platforms. These platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Zalo, and the like, provide individuals the tools to craft and project a particular image of themselves to their digital audience (Evans et al., 2021). As noted by Labrecque et al. (2011), personal branding involves creating a distinctive identity, leveraging it to achieve personal or professional goals, and establishing relationships with the target audience.

However, the literature also suggests that personal branding on social media can have potential drawbacks. Van Dijck (2013) argues that the necessity to perform on social media can lead to a disconnect between the projected and real self, resulting in a form of self-delusion. Additionally, Khamis et al. (2017) identified the risk of commodification of personal life, where the boundary between personal and professional becomes blurred.

2.2. Personal Branding and EFL Teachers

When it comes to personal branding within the field of education, particularly among EFL teachers, the research is sparse. However, the extant studies suggest that personal branding plays a role in teachers' professional lives, affecting their teaching practice, career progression, and job satisfaction (MacLure, 1993; Nord et al., 2014).

EFL teachers often use social media for professional development and community building (Lomicka & Lord, 2016). They share teaching resources, exchange ideas, and seek advice from peers globally (Richardson & Mancabelli, 2011). As such, these platforms become a space where they establish and nurture their personal brand. Yet, the potential dissonance between the online persona and the real self is a concern (Jordan, 2020).

2.3. Self-Recognition vs. Self-Delusion

The intersection between personal branding and self-perception brings worldwide scholars to the dichotomy of self-recognition and self-delusion. Self-recognition refers to the process of identifying, understanding, and accepting oneself (Swann et al., 2007). In the context of personal branding, it means consciously leveraging one's unique qualities to create a distinctive brand.

On the other hand, self-delusion, as conceptualized by Oliver (2020), involves holding beliefs about oneself that are contrary to reality. In the realm of personal branding, this may manifest as a significant disconnection between the projected self and the actual self. While the potential for self-delusion exists, it remains under-researched in the context of personal branding.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design within the broad realm of qualitative research. IPA, which is informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, is concerned with the detailed examination of individual lived experiences and the meanings that individuals assign to those experiences (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). In the context of this study, IPA is particularly fitting given the research's aim to explore the complex experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of EFL teachers regarding their personal branding on social media. The IPA approach recognizes the subjective nature of these experiences and provides a framework for exploring the rich, detailed, and nuanced accounts provided by the teachers.

This study was grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Symbolic Interactionism (SI). SIT, proposed by Hogg (2016), posits that individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-image by classifying themselves as members of specific social groups. In the context of this study, SIT was used to understand how EFL teachers categorize themselves in the social structure of social media and how this classification influences their personal branding strategies. SI, on the other hand, is a sociological perspective that places emphasis on subjective meanings and the interpretive aspects of social life (Rock, 2016). Under this theoretical lens, personal branding can be viewed as a dynamic process of symbolic interaction, where EFL teachers interpret and assign meanings to their social media activities, which in turn shape their personal brand.

These theoretical frameworks guided the development of the interview guide and the analysis and interpretation of the data. They provided a nuanced lens through which the dynamics of personal branding, self-recognition, and potential self-delusion among EFL teachers on social media could be explored and understood.

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study consist of twelve EFL teachers, selected based on the different stages of their career: four novice teachers (less than five years of experience), four mid-career teachers (between five and fifteen years of experience), and four near end-of-career teachers (more than fifteen years of experience). This strategic sampling approach allowed for the investigation of personal branding from diverse career perspectives and experience levels. All participants were active users of at least one social media platform, utilizing these digital spaces for both personal and professional purposes. They came from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, teaching English in various educational settings such as schools, private language centers, and universities. Table 1 displays the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Participants

Participants	Gender	Workplace	Stage of Career
Lan	Female	University	Novice
Binh	Male	High School	Novice
Minh	Male	Language Center	Novice
Thao	Male	University	Novice
Anh	Male	High School	Mid
Tuan	Male	University	Mid
Hien	Female	University	Mid
Trang	Female	Language Center	Mid
Hoa	Female	High School	Near-end
Phuong	Female	University	Near-end
Dung	Male	High School	Near-end
Thuy	Female	Language Center	Near-end

Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical approval was sought and granted from the institutional review board. In line with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, all participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw

at any time without any negative repercussions. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained at all times. To this end, pseudonyms are used in lieu of participants' real names in the report of this study. All identifiable information was removed, and data was securely stored in accordance with data protection policies.

Before the interviews, participants were provided with an informed consent form detailing the nature of the study, the procedures involved, the expected duration of their participation, the measures for ensuring confidentiality, and their rights as participants. Participants were given sufficient time to read the form, ask questions, and were only included in the study once they had signed the consent form. Through ensuring ethical rigor, this study seeks not only to contribute to the academic understanding of personal branding among EFL teachers on social media, but also to respect and protect the rights and well-being of the participants involved.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

Semi-Structured Interviews

The first phase of data collection involved conducting individual semi-structured interviews with each participant. An interview guide was developed prior to the interviews, but the semi-structured nature allowed for flexibility, enabling the researchers to delve deeper into emergent themes and participants' unique perspectives (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interviews, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes, were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. During the interviews, Vietnamese, being the native language for both the interviewer and interviewee, was employed to facilitate a comprehensive expression of their ideas.

The use of semi-structured interviews in the initial stage of data collection served several purposes. Firstly, they allowed for an in-depth exploration of each participant's unique experiences and perspectives on personal branding, providing rich and detailed data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Secondly, they enabled the researchers to establish rapport with participants, creating a conducive atmosphere for open and candid discussions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Focus Group Interviews

Following the individual interviews, two focus groups were conducted involving six participants per each. The focus groups served as a platform for participants to discuss and debate their views on personal branding in a group setting, enabling the generation of collective insights. The dynamics of group interaction often elicit additional information that may not emerge during individual interviews, such as shared experiences, consensus or disagreements, and different perspectives on the same issue (Krueger, 2014). The focus groups were facilitated by the researcher using a set of pre-determined but flexible questions related to the themes that emerged during the individual interviews. As an example, the interviewees were prompted to deliberate upon the merits and demerits of utilizing social media for personal branding purposes, or to elucidate their experiences in regard to sharing content pertaining to their individual accomplishments on social platforms. The session, lasting approximately 90 minutes, was also audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The sequential use of twelve semi-structured interviews and two focus groups in this study serves to triangulate the data, strengthening the validity and reliability of the findings (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Furthermore, it allows for a comprehensive understanding of EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions of personal branding on social media, capturing both the individual and collective perspectives.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews in this study is executed through the technique of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a robust qualitative method that allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns, or "themes," within the data. This method is renowned for its flexibility and capacity for providing a rich, detailed, and complex account of data (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

The process of data analysis in this study unfolds in six stages as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2012). The first stage, familiarization with the data, consists of repeated reading and reviewing of the transcriptions from the

interviews and focus group discussions, as well as listening to the audio recordings, to immerse the researchers fully in the data. The second stage involves generating initial codes from the data. Each transcription is examined line-by-line, with relevant sections being highlighted and assigned initial descriptive codes. These codes directly pertain to the participants' experiences and perceptions related to personal branding. In the third stage, we search for themes by clustering the identified codes based on shared or related concepts. These clusters form the foundation for potential themes and sub-themes that begin to create a structured understanding of the larger patterns present in the data. The fourth stage includes reviewing these themes. The themes that emerged in the previous stage are critically examined in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset. During this stage, themes may be merged, refined, split, or even discarded depending on their relevance and significance to the research question and objectives. The fifth stage focuses on defining and naming themes. Each finalized theme is named and clearly defined to encapsulate its central concept or role in understanding the data. The final stage, writing the analysis, entails the weaving of these themes into a coherent and analytical narrative. This narrative is contextualized within the broader research objectives, relevant literature, and theoretical frameworks of the study. To support and illustrate the themes, direct quotes from the participants are incorporated.

Throughout the analysis, reflexivity is maintained, acknowledging the integral role of the researchers in shaping the interpretation and presentation of the findings (Finlay, 2002). This approach ensures that the analysis provides a credible and valid interpretation of EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions of personal branding on social media.

4. Findings and Discussion

After a rigorous process of data analysis, several themes emerged from the data that help to understand EFL teachers' experiences and perceptions of personal branding on social media.

4.1. Awareness and Engagement in Personal Branding

All participants (n=12) demonstrated a clear awareness of personal branding and its significance. Many actively engaged in the process, using social media to showcase their teaching skills, knowledge, and professional values. Novice teachers, in particular, were keen on building a robust personal brand. As one participant, Lan, stated: "*I view social media as a powerful tool to showcase my teaching philosophy and techniques. It helps me connect with other educators and potential employers.*" Sharing the same point of view, Tuan, a mid-career teacher, expressed her perspective on the matter, stating, "*I perceive social media as a potent instrument to exhibit my teaching philosophy and methodologies. It enables me to forge connections with fellow educators and prospective employers, thereby amplifying my professional network.*" Comparing this with studies in other contexts, it resonates with findings by Labrecque et al. (2011), who found a high level of engagement in personal branding among new entrants in a profession. The importance given to personal branding could be influenced by the Vietnamese context, where social connections and reputation often play a significant role in career advancement (Nguyen & Nordman, 2018). Thus, the way people presents themselves publicly and the connections they make can have a substantial impact on career advancement. Therefore, in this specific context, personal branding is not only about projecting an image of professionalism and competency, but also a means of building a network and fostering relationships that can potentially lead to job opportunities and career growth.

4.2. Balance between Personal and Professional Identity

The findings show that most of the participants (n=10 out of 12) experienced a tension in maintaining a balance between their personal and professional identities on social media. One mid-career teacher, Anh, noted: "*Sometimes it is challenging to separate personal from professional. I want to share my life but also maintain a professional image.*" Similarly, Minh, a novice teacher, expressed the dilemma by stating, "*At times, it becomes arduous to distinguish between my personal life and my professional obligations. While I desire to share glimpses of my personal experiences, I also aim to uphold a polished and respectable professional image.*" This finding mirrors previous studies (e.g., Van Dijck, 2013) highlighting the complexities of managing personal and professional identities online. The tension might be more pronounced in the Vietnamese context, where cultural norms place a strong emphasis on the preservation of face and reputation (Lim & Basnyat, 2016). The concept of "face" in many Asian cultures, including Vietnam, is related to dignity, respect, and social standing (Oetzel et al.,

2001). It implies that individuals must be cautious of their public image, as losing face could result in social disgrace or diminished respect among peers. Therefore, for Vietnamese professionals like teachers, the struggle between showing a personal side and maintaining a professional image on social media is not just about managing their personal brand, but also about adhering to societal expectations around preserving face and reputation.

4.3. Influence of Cultural Context

A majority of the teachers (n=10 out of 12) believed that the Vietnamese cultural context played a pivotal role in shaping participants' personal branding strategies. Teachers mentioned the importance of saving face and conforming to societal norms. For instance, a near end-of-career teacher, Hoa, mentioned: "*In Vietnam, we have to be careful about what we post online. Anything controversial can damage our reputation, which affects not only us but also our family.*" Another teacher, Phuong, shared her perspective by stating, "*It is imperative to exercise prudence when it comes to online postings. You know? Anything controversial has the potential to tarnish our reputation, impacting not only ourselves but also our family members.*" This finding underscores the influence of cultural context on personal branding, which aligns with Marwick and Boyd (2011) who found that cultural norms and societal expectations significantly impact individuals' online behavior. In the Vietnamese context, the cultural emphasis on saving face and conforming to societal norms informs the personal branding strategies of professionals, making them more cautious about their online persona and the content they share (Nguyen, 2017). This shows how cultural factors intertwine with the practice of personal branding, affecting not just how individuals present themselves online but also their broader social behavior.

4.4. Role of Peer Influence and Collaboration

Some of the teachers (n=8 out of 12) also expressed that their personal branding efforts were often influenced by their peers and colleagues. Observing others' practices, success stories, and collaborations via social media influenced their approach towards personal branding. Binh, a novice teacher, explained: "*Seeing other teachers sharing their resources and engaging in collaborations inspired me to be more active and innovative in my online presence.*" Thao, a novice teacher, conveyed his perspective by stating, "*By witnessing fellow teachers actively sharing their educational materials and collaborating on various initiatives, it has sparked a motivation within me to enrich my online presence, thereby cultivating a heightened sense of innovation and active involvement.*" This finding resonates with Chung's (2019) study, which found that peer influence significantly impacts individuals' online behavior. Particularly in the Vietnamese context, where collectivism is a dominant cultural trait (Truong et al., 2017), the influence of peers on personal branding strategies is quite significant. Vietnamese teachers are not only forming their online identities based on their individual perspectives and experiences but are also significantly influenced by the practices and success of their peers.

4.5. Perception of Audience

The perception of who the "audience" is on their social media platforms affected the teachers' personal branding (n=7 out of 12). Teachers felt the need to cater to different groups – students, parents, colleagues, and potential employers – simultaneously. Phuong, a near end-of-career teacher, stated: "*I always have to keep in mind who might be seeing my posts. It is a mix of students, their parents, my colleagues, and sometimes even potential employers.*" Similarly, Lan, a novice teacher, expressed, "*My post viewers comprise not only students and their parents but also my colleagues and occasionally prospective employers. Therefore, I constantly remind myself of that.*" This finding aligns with Costa's (2018) concept of "context collapse", where various social groups become part of a single audience due to social media's public nature. In the Vietnamese setting, where the social hierarchy and respect for elders are deeply ingrained (Nguyen, 2016), managing posts for a diverse audience can be particularly challenging. In practice, this means that teachers on social media must carefully navigate these complexities, as they may need to communicate in ways that respect and acknowledge these hierarchical relationships. For instance, the language and tone used for students might be different from those for colleagues, parents, or potential employers.

4.6. Challenges of Online Privacy

Teachers' concerns about online privacy surfaced as a prominent theme (n=6 out of 12). The fear of personal information misuse and the risk of blurring the line between professional and personal life were recurring

concerns. Tuan, a mid-career teacher, shared: "*While I see the benefits of personal branding, the risk of privacy invasion is always in the back of my mind.*" Trang, another mid-career teacher, shared her thoughts, saying, "*Although I recognize the merits of personal branding, I always have a lingering apprehension about the potential invasion of privacy.*" This observation aligns with prior studies that suggest online privacy concerns as a significant barrier to personal branding (Labrecque et al., 2011). In the context of Vietnam, where the digital landscape is still developing (Hang, 2021; Tran et al., 2020), such concerns may be particularly heightened. Thus, users may not fully trust digital platforms or may not be fully aware of how to protect their online privacy, resulting in increased apprehension about sharing personal and professional information online. In essence, while Vietnamese professionals, like teachers, see the value in using social media for personal branding, they also remain cognizant of the privacy risks.

4.7. Professional Development and Lifelong Learning

Half of the participants (n=6 out of 12) perceived personal branding on social media as an opportunity for professional development and lifelong learning. They used social media to share and learn about innovative teaching methods, educational theories, and classroom management strategies. Minh, a novice teacher, explained: "*Social media is a great place to learn from other teachers around the world. Sharing and discussing teaching methods have helped me grow professionally.*" As another novice teacher, Binh elaborated on his experience, stating, "*Social media provides an excellent platform for me to glean insights from teachers across the globe. Sharing and engaging in discussions about teaching methods have played a pivotal role in my professional growth.*" This finding is consistent with Carpenter and Krutka's (2014) study, which found that teachers often use social media for professional development purposes. In the context of Vietnam, with its strong cultural emphasis on education and lifelong learning (Khuc, 2019), this theme is particularly salient. Thus, for Vietnamese teachers, personal branding on social media is not just about creating a professional image, but also a form of ongoing professional development. By sharing, discussing, and learning from others, they continuously improve their skills and knowledge, reinforcing the cultural norm of lifelong learning.

4.8. Time Management

Teachers (n=6 out of 12) expressed concerns about the amount of time required to maintain an active and engaging personal brand on social media. Dung, an end-of-career teacher, noted: "*It is not just about posting; it is about creating meaningful content, engaging with your audience, and staying updated. It is time-consuming.*" Hien, a mid-career teacher, commented, "*It is quite time-consuming to do things like personal branding online.*" This concern aligns with prior research (Carpenter et al., 2022) that suggests that maintaining an active social media presence for personal branding can be time-consuming. Given the workload of teachers in Vietnam, it often extends beyond classroom teaching to include administrative tasks and extra-curricular activities (Hoang & Le, 2021). In such a context, finding the time and energy to maintain an active and engaging personal brand on social media becomes an additional challenge. Hence, while they see the benefits of personal branding on social media, Vietnamese teachers also have to balance this with their existing professional commitments, making the issue of time management particularly relevant in their context.

4.9. Impact on Psychological Well-being

Some teachers (n=5 out of 12) indicated that their engagement in personal branding on social media had implications for their psychological well-being. Hien, a mid-career teacher, mentioned: "*There is a constant pressure to project a successful image. It can be stressful and sometimes makes me question my self-worth.*" Thao, a novice teacher, stated: "*You need a lot of investments, such as time and efforts, to better your personal branding online... It is sometimes stressful.*" This finding echoes studies by Karpinski et al. (2013), who reported that excessive use of social media and the pressure to maintain a certain online image could lead to stress and negatively impact mental health. This theme is crucial in the Vietnamese context, where discussions about mental health are slowly gaining momentum (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Despite this, mental health is still a somewhat stigmatized topic, and resources for mental health support can be limited. Therefore, the impact of personal branding activities on mental health is an essential consideration for Vietnamese teachers. The pressure to present a successful image on social media, while navigating cultural expectations and the evolving digital landscape, can add to their stress levels.

4.10. *Potential for Self-Delusion*

Interestingly, a recurring theme was the potential for self-delusion in personal branding among some teachers (n=4 out of 12). Participants expressed concerns about the authenticity of the personal brands constructed on social media. As Trang, a mid-career teacher, noted: "*There is always the danger of deluding ourselves. We may start to believe in the image we project online, forgetting that it is not the complete picture.*" Thao, a novice teacher, further explained: "*Through my observations, I have encountered numerous teachers who fall into a self-delusion. By this, I mean that these teachers perceive themselves as highly skilled in certain areas. However, the reality is quite different as their actual abilities are inferior to the idealized images they project online.*" This theme resonates with the work of Hogan (2010), who suggested that the curated nature of online identities could lead to self-delusion. In the Vietnamese context, where face-saving is important (Nguyen, 2015), the potential for self-delusion could be particularly high as individuals might feel compelled to present an idealized self-image.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of EFL teachers concerning personal branding on social media. Using a qualitative approach grounded in SIT and SI, the study revealed a complex, nuanced, and multifaceted view of personal branding in the context of EFL teaching in Vietnam. The findings of the study indicate that the teachers recognized the potential benefits of personal branding and engaged actively in constructing and managing their personal brands on social media. While doing so, they navigated numerous challenges including maintaining a balance between their personal and professional identities, dealing with cultural norms, managing diverse audiences, ensuring online privacy, and confronting the potential for self-delusion. They also perceived personal branding as a tool for professional development and lifelong learning, despite concerns about time management and the potential impact on psychological well-being.

The findings underscore the need for ongoing support and training for EFL teachers as they navigate the complexities of personal branding in the digital era. The study also highlights the importance of considering cultural context when understanding and advising on personal branding strategies. In the Vietnamese context, personal branding practices are influenced by cultural norms around face-saving, collectivism, social hierarchy, and respect for elders. Understanding these nuances can inform the development of more effective and culturally sensitive personal branding strategies. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on personal branding and the use of social media in education by offering valuable insights from the perspective of EFL teachers.

6. Implications

This study has several implications for various stakeholders involved in EFL teaching and more broadly, education and professional development.

6.1. For EFL Teachers

The study underscores the importance of personal branding on social media for EFL teachers. It highlights the need for teachers to balance their personal and professional identities, conform to cultural norms, manage a diverse audience, and be aware of the potential for self-delusion. The findings encourage teachers to be mindful of these complexities as they navigate their personal branding journeys. They also emphasize the opportunities offered by personal branding for professional development, collaboration, and lifelong learning.

6.2. For Teacher Trainers and Professional Development Providers

This research suggests that personal branding on social media should be included in teacher training and professional development programs. By providing teachers with the knowledge and skills to manage their personal brands effectively and ethically, they can better navigate the challenges identified in this study. Additionally, providers should consider the role of cultural norms and societal expectations when designing these programs, particularly in cultures like Vietnam.

6.3. For Educational Institutions and Policymakers

This study illustrates the critical role of educational institutions and policymakers in providing the necessary support and guidelines for teachers as they engage in personal branding on social media. Institutions may need to develop policies around online conduct and personal branding, ensuring these guidelines are culturally sensitive and respect teachers' rights to privacy and personal expression.

7. Limitations and recommendations for further studies

This study, while revealing valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of EFL teachers regarding personal branding on social media, does have its limitations that necessitate careful interpretation of the findings and provide a fruitful ground for further research.

One key limitation is related to the study's sample size and scope. Given the investigation was conducted with a small group of twelve EFL teachers within Vietnam, the findings might not be fully representative of the wider population of EFL teachers in different cultural or geographical contexts. Therefore, future research could considerably benefit from expanding the sample size and diversifying the demographic characteristics of participants. Such efforts would enrich the understanding and generalizability of the findings.

In terms of methodology, this study employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, both of which rely heavily on participants' self-reporting. This introduces the potential for self-report bias where participants might unintentionally or intentionally misrepresent their experiences due to factors such as social desirability, recall error, or misinterpretation of questions. As a recommendation, future research could consider employing a mixed-methods approach or additional qualitative methods, such as direct observation or analysis of participants' actual social media posts, to provide a more comprehensive and unbiased view of their personal branding practices.

Moreover, this study's focus was limited to the EFL teaching profession. While this offered in-depth insights into this specific context, it restricts the applicability of the findings to other professional groups. Therefore, future studies could seek to explore personal branding practices among professionals from other fields. This extension would help ascertain the extent to which the themes identified in this study are universal or unique to certain professions.

Finally, the cultural context within which this study was conducted could be both a strength and a limitation. While it offered a culturally nuanced understanding of personal branding in the Vietnamese setting, it might limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Thus, future research should seek to replicate the study in diverse cultural settings to further explore how cultural norms and values may influence personal branding practices.

Acknowledgements

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