DIGITAL SELF-PRESENTATION: PERSONAL BRANDING STRATEGIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG STUDENTS IN INDONESIA AND THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, grounded in Personal Branding Theory, examines how cultural contexts shape digital self-presentation and personal branding strategies among college students in Indonesia and the Philippines. The study focused exclusively on Instagram and Facebook as the primary social media platforms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants, consisting of 10 students from Camarines Sur Polytechnic Colleges (Philippines) and 10 students from Politeknik Negeri Padang (Indonesia), along with a review of their publicly accessible profiles. The findings reveal that Indonesian students are more focused on curating aesthetic aspects of their social media feeds, maintaining consistent visual styles to reflect professionalism and cultural expectations of modesty. In addition, they frequently use "dummy" or secondary Instagram accounts to communicate more freely with close friends, allowing them to segment their audiences and preserve a controlled public image. Conversely, Filipino students adopt a more open and expressive approach, using Facebook to highlight academic accomplishments, share personal narratives, and incorporate religious or motivational themes, consistent with cultural values of community belonging and faith. These contrasting strategies illustrate how personal branding practices are negotiated within culturally rooted understandings of self-presentation. The study underscores the significance of culturally sensitive digital literacy education to help students balance global personal branding practices with local values.

Keyword: Digital self-presentation, Facebook, Filipino students, Indonesian students, Instagram, personal branding, Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

Personal branding is the active, strategic shaping of one's digital persona has become a vital practice for students and young professionals in the social media age. As Harvard Business School lecturer Catherine Cote (2024) explains, personal branding is "the intentional, strategic practice of defining and expressing your value". In other words, individuals must now market their unique skills, values, and identities much like a company markets a product. This process is especially important on social platforms: Kanasan and Rahman (2024) found a robust, statistically significant correlation between graduates' personal branding efforts on social media and improved career opportunities.

This process is especially important on social platforms. Kanasan and Rahman (2024) found a robust, statistically significant correlation between graduates' personal branding efforts on social media and improved career opportunities. Social media thus serves as a "digital stage" where identity is performed and impressions are made (Avery & Greenwald, cited in Cote, 2024). For today's Indonesian and Filipino university students – who spend multiple hours online daily – managing this digital identity is both inevitable and consequential. In the Philippines, for example, the average person spends over 8½ hours

on the Internet each day, and social media use is ubiquitous (nearly 93% of those with internet access are active on social platforms).

Indonesia likewise has a massive online population (66.5% internet penetration) and reports that 85.3% of Indonesians use Instagram monthly, making these platforms deeply woven into daily life. This saturation of online life means that young people in both countries are not just passive consumers of content but active creators and curators of their own digital personas. Cultural context plays a crucial role in how students craft these online identities. Both Indonesia and the Philippines are highly collectivist societies, but with distinct emphases.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions reveal that Indonesia has one of the lowest individualism scores in the world (IDV = 14) while the Philippines also scores low on individualism (IDV = 32). These scores indicate that in both countries, tight family and community bonds are normative, and individual choices are made with group harmony in mind. In Indonesia, this collectivism is intertwined with religious conservatism (roughly 87% of the population is Muslim and high power distance). Indonesian culture therefore tends to emphasize modesty, social harmony, and respect for elders within its extended family networks. By contrast according to Scroope, C. (2017), Filipino society, while also deeply family-oriented, is heavily shaped by Catholic-Christian values (nearly 79% identify as Roman Catholic). and a mix of religious and indigenous customs. Family bonds in the Philippines are famously close: extended relatives and even close friends are often referred to by familial titles (tita, tito, lola, etc.), and multiple generations commonly live together or remain in daily contact.

This strong familism is supported by cultural concepts like hiya (duty/shame) and *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) that reinforce respect and interdependence among kin.

Kanasan (2024) also says that these cultural values influence how young people present themselves online. Social media platforms provide a rich field for symbolic interaction, individuals create meaning through how they choose to appear and communicate. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with symbolic interactionism: individuals actively construct their identities through interactions and impressions.

Meltwater (2025) explains that in the social media era, self-presentation is highly visual and social: users curate timelines, photos, and posts that signal who they are. Instagram and Facebook are especially salient: Instagram is a visual platform prized for its aesthetic appeal, while Facebook serves as a more text and community focused hub. For Gen Z users, these networks are intimately tied to identity work. In the Philippines, for example, industry reports note that a majority of Meta (Facebook/Instagram) users are under age 34, and that "Instagram, in particular, has become a playground for both expression and content consumption for Gen Z". Such findings underscore that young people view these apps as spaces for sharing personal narratives.

Recent qualitative work by Sokowati, M. E., & Manda, S. (2022), among Indonesian teens observed that many maintain multiple Instagram accounts: a public "main" account and one or more private "finsta" (or "dummy") accounts for close friends. These private accounts allow users to "express oneself without worrying that the identity will be recognized by the public," relieving the pressure to appear perfect. In other words, many Indonesian youths seem to segment their social media audiences, presenting a highly curated, aesthetically ideal self in one arena and a more candid, informal self in another.

According to Meltwater (2025) Philippine youths, on the other hand, have shown a pattern of using Facebook broadly to broadcast life events and values. Philippine social media users are among the most active globally with over 90 million active Facebook users (about 78% of the population) in early 2023. They tend to leverage this platform for community connection. Content analyses of Filipino user behavior indicate that status updates often include academic achievements, motivational messages, or religious reflections. Such content aligns with Filipino values: sharing one's successes is a way of honoring family and encouraging others, and posting religious or inspirational quotes reflects the centrality of Catholic faith and *malasakit* (compassion) in daily life. Many Filipino students routinely post-graduation photos, exam scores, or quotes of gratitude, often framed with expressions of "blessings" and heartfelt thanks, which could be seen as social signifiers of their family-oriented identity.

The study is framed by Personal Branding Theory. According to Montoya and Vandehey (2009), personal branding is the deliberate process of shaping public perceptions by showcasing an individual's unique skills, achievements, personality and values. In practice, this involves carefully crafting one's online image – for example through profiles, posts, and interactions – much as corporations market products. Scholars note that social media have become the optimal venues for this work: one recent analysis confirms that social platforms offer "the most straightforward and efficient method for establishing a personal brand" and gaining visibility.

Hontiveros (2022) analyzed Filipino college students and showed that greater engagement on social media correlates with a more "authentic personal brand". In other words, Filipino students value genuineness and consistent identity presentation in their online branding. This aligns with broader observations about Philippine social media practice: Filipinos often emphasize relational authenticity, and "ordinary" or down-to-earth presentation, in order to build trust in their networks.

To date, however, most studies have looked at one culture in isolation. Only a few have directly compared Indonesian and Filipino students. Nurfalah et al. (2023) did conduct a cross-national qualitative study, but focused on usage patterns and general attitudes; they reported that both groups use social media to study and socialize, yet Filipino students mainly use Facebook while Indonesian students prefer Instagram and TikTok. Importantly, they did not analyze how these tools are used for branding. Likewise, Dumont and Ots (2020) and Kucharska (2017) call for more comparative work. In fact, Raftari et al. (2024) explicitly note that "comparative studies investigating the efficacy of different social media in personal branding still need to be included".

Building on this gap, the objectives of the present research are as follows. First, we seek to explore and compare the personal branding strategies employed by Indonesian and Filipino students on social media. This includes identifying the types of content they share, the ways they highlight their skills or values, and the narrative styles they use when positioning themselves as "brands." Second, we aim to uncover how cultural values and social norms in Indonesia and the Philippines shape these strategies. This study will examine whether collectivist orientation, gender expectations, or local aesthetic preferences affect how students present themselves on Instagram and Facebook. Third, we intend to analyze any platform-specific differences in self-presentation. Also this study will compare how an Indonesian student's Instagram branding may differ from a Filipino

student's Facebook branding, considering the affordances of each medium. Underlying these objectives is the use of Personal Branding Theory as our theoretical lens and we will apply its concepts to interpret the findings in each cultural context.

The benefits of this research are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study will extend Personal Branding Theory by integrating cultural considerations: the results will indicate how well existing models (originally developed in Western contexts) account for self-presentation in Asian societies. This contributes to cross-cultural communication scholarship, answering calls from scholars like Jacobson (2019) and Nolan (2015) for more culturally nuanced branding research. Finally, by focusing on two polytechnic campuses (Politeknik Negeri Padang in Indonesia and Camarines Sur Polytechnic Colleges in the Philippines), the research will produce context-sensitive insights, a depth of understanding often lacking in big-data studies. In summary, this qualitative inquiry aims not only to document what branding strategies exist, but to explain why they take the forms they do in Indonesian and Filipino youth culture, yielding guidance that is meaningful to these communities.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the personal branding strategies and digital self-presentation of university students in Indonesia and the Philippines, aiming to capture culturally nuanced communication patterns in a naturalistic manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted in two locations, namely Politeknik Negeri Padang in Indonesia and Camarines Sur Polytechnic Colleges in the Philippines, from 2024 to 2025. The nature of the study was exploratory and descriptive, designed to gain a deep understanding of subjective perspectives in their cultural context.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling with criteria emphasizing students active on social media, resulting in a total of 20 informants: 10 from Indonesia and 10 from the Philippines, predominantly women aged 17–20, enrolled in English and Development Communication study programs. Indonesian participants were interviewed in person, while Filipino participants were interviewed online to accommodate geographical distance. Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews supported by light observation of each participant's publicly accessible Instagram and Facebook profiles to triangulate their stated experiences with their actual digital self-presentations. These interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data were then analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure, allowing the researcher to identify recurring themes and cultural patterns related to personal branding practices and digital identity. This combined method ensured rich, credible, and context-sensitive findings that reflect how Southeast Asian students navigate social media branding in a culturally rooted way.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In Indonesia, aesthetic self-curation emerged as a key dimension of students' online branding. Indonesian participants described painstakingly crafting their Instagram feeds to look visually cohesive and attractive, often noting consistent filters, color palettes, and staged poses. As Putra and Afrilian (2025) observe, Instagram's visuals "often create idealized representations of the self" that strongly shape youth identity. For example, one Indonesian student explained, "I use Instagram to show my creative side" (Indonesian

participant, age 19), emphasizing artfully composed posts. Others spoke of maintaining a uniform theme: "I keep the same filter on all my photos so it looks neat" (Indonesian participant, 18). These accounts illustrate how young Indonesians act as "virtual curators" of their personae, editing and staging content to present an appealing self (Bailey et al., 2020). Many mentioned that posting attractive photos and maintaining a polished feed boosts their social identity, echoing findings that younger users are heavily influenced by beauty standards on Instagram. Indonesian students thus treat Instagram as a showcase of style and status, carefully removing or avoiding any posts that clash with their planned aesthetic. In some cases, respondents maintained multiple accounts or selectively highlighted content. For instance, one student admitted having a personal "finsta" (private backup account) for casual photos, keeping only the most curated images on her main profile. This segmentation of content separating playful or private posts from the public feed reflects a strategic branding approach. In effect, Indonesian respondents managed audiences by distributing different facets of their lives across platforms and account settings. Such compartmentalization aligns with research on selective self-presentation: in collectivist settings like Indonesia, online behavior is shaped by cultural norms and audience feedback, prompting users to curate only socially acceptable, well-styled content for their broad networks.

By contrast, Filipino students foregrounded authenticity and personal expression, often intertwined with faith. Many Filipino respondents emphasized being "real" and conveying their true selves rather than an idealized image. One Filipina noted, "I want people to see who I really am, not just a perfect filtered version" (Filipino participant, age 20). This mirrors observations by Shtern, Hill, and Chan (2019) that Philippine content creators practice performed authenticity deliberately presenting a relatable persona to their local audience. In the interviews, expressions of genuine emotion, humor, or opinion were common. For instance, one student remarked, "I post the silly things I do; I don't want to pretend to be someone I'm not" (Filipino participant, 19). Creative self-expression was valued, but often in service of honesty. Crucially, faith surfaced repeatedly as part of this authenticity. Many Filipino students described weaving religious references into their branding: for example, "I share a Bible verse whenever something good happens" (Filipino participant, 18). Others posted prayer emojis or photos of church events, reflecting the centrality of Catholic identity. This blending of faith and identity suggests that for Filipino youth, being authentic online includes being true to religious values. It was noted that while Indonesian students discussed modesty or social norms, they rarely explicitly invoked religion in their branding. The Philippine participants' faith-based posts – such as captions thanking God or images of church gatherings – underscore how personal values influence self-presentation. Indeed, this reflects the broader Filipino context where social media can serve as a platform for spiritual and moral expression. The emphasis on genuineness resonates with the wider literature showing that social media users seek a balance between idealized and authentic self-presentation (Bailey et al., 2020)

Across both groups, audience awareness and platform strategy strongly informed students' branding choices. Indonesian and Filipino respondents alike noted that Instagram and Facebook serve different purposes. Indonesian students overwhelmingly favored Instagram for their curated persona – consistent with research showing 93.3% of Indonesian teens use Instagram versus only 23.3% on Facebook. They described Instagram

as the channel for highlighting interests and creativity: "Instagram is where I post my art and fashion – it has the right vibe" (Indonesian participant, 19). In contrast, Facebook was often reserved for family and acquaintances. As one Indonesian student explained, "I only post on Facebook if it's something safe, because my mom and relatives follow me there" (Indonesian participant, 20). Filipino students described a similar dichotomy: Instagram for eye-catching photos and personal fun, and Facebook for older family members or news. One Filipino respondent observed, "Facebook is the family group, i share school updates or funny memes with them there, but Instagram is for my friends and for showing off my drawings" (Filipino participant, 19). This distinction aligns with known usage patterns: in the Philippines Facebook remains the nation's digital hub. while Instagram appeals more to youth culture. In line with Back and colleagues (2010), platforms heavily tied to one's offline network (like Facebook) tend to elicit more "actual" self-presentation.

Both Indonesian and Filipino students managed these audience differences by tailoring content. For example, several mentioned turning off location tags or avoiding humor that parents might misinterpret. These strategies suggest a sophisticated understanding of each platform's audience demographics and norms: Instagram (visual, peer-oriented, mostly younger), versus Facebook (textual, broad age range, family-oriented). Participants also noted subtle tactics such as timing of posts or who is tagged – for instance, avoiding posting party photos on Facebook because it might upset elders. Overall, respondents in both countries demonstrated an acute sensitivity to audience composition when deciding what and where to post, supporting the idea that social media behavior is context-sensitive and audience-driven.

A final theme was the tension between personal and professional identities. In both Indonesia and the Philippines, many students expressed concern about how their social media presence might affect future opportunities. Several noted that even at 17–20 they were mindful of potential "employers" or authority figures viewing their posts. One Filipino said bluntly, "I don't like posting crazy stuff, maybe one day a boss will see it" (Filipino participant, 19). Similarly, an Indonesian remarked, "I deleted old photos that looked childish because I want to look mature to people who check my profile" (Indonesian participant, 20). To manage this, many had adjusted privacy settings or maintained separate accounts. For example, some students set Instagram to private, approved only real friends, or kept embarrassing posts in private story archives. Others treated Facebook as their "professional" or at least more formal feed by posting academic achievements and volunteering activities there, while sharing memes and casual selfies only on hidden Instagram pages. This double-life strategy reflects an understanding of context collapse the blurring of personal and public audiences online that has been well documented in the literature.

By segmenting content and audiences, students navigated the competing demands of authenticity and respectability. Both Indonesian and Filipino participants actively negotiated their digital identities, balancing the desire to express themselves with cultural expectations and future ambitions. These patterns aesthetic branding in Indonesia, authenticity and faith in the Philippines, and shared tactics of audience management highlight how cultural context shapes personal branding among young social media users.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study reveals contrasting but culturally grounded personal-branding strategies among Indonesian and Filipino students. Indonesian participants primarily used Instagram as a curated "personal showroom," carefully presenting a selected, aesthetically coherent self on their feeds. They often maintained multiple (secondary) accounts to segment audiences and experiment with different facets of identity. By contrast, Filipino students gravitated toward Facebook, where they shared more integrated and expressive content blending personal updates with academic achievements, religious reflections, and everyday life consistent with Facebook's role as a community-oriented network. By contrast, Filipino students gravitated toward Facebook, where they shared more integrated and expressive content – blending personal updates with academic achievements, religious reflections, and everyday life consistent with Facebook's role as a community-oriented network.

By contrast, Filipino students gravitated toward Facebook, where they shared more integrated and expressive content blending personal updates with academic achievements, religious reflections, and everyday life consistent with Facebook's role as a community-oriented network. Despite these differences, both groups demonstrated strategic audience awareness and platform sensitivity: for example, they used privacy settings and close-friend lists to tailor who sees which content, effectively managing an imagined audience for each platform.

These findings reaffirm core principles of personal branding theory that individuals consciously craft a distinctive identity online while highlighting the way cultural context shapes the process. In particular, our results suggest that Indonesian and Filipino youth adapt universal branding practices to fit local values. Thus, the study makes both theoretical and practical contributions: it validates personal-branding concepts in Southeast Asian settings and underscores the importance of culture when advising students or brands on social-media identity management. Ultimately, we show that personal branding frameworks hold across cultures, but their manifestations and priorities differ according to local social norms.

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