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Modeling the Effect of Self-Brand Distinctiveness and Self-Brand Expression on Personal Brand Performance

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to model and examine the effect of self-brand distinctiveness and self-brand expression on personal brand performance, emphasizing the mediating role of personal branding among creative professionals in Tehran. This research employed an applied, descriptive-correlational design using a field survey approach. The statistical population comprised contemporary artists, designers, architects, and art students in Tehran. A sample of 234 respondents was selected through simple random sampling, based on Cochran's formula. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire adapted from validated scales of prior studies. The questionnaire measured four constructs—self-brand distinctiveness, self-brand expression, personal branding, and personal brand performance—using a five-point Likert scale. Reliability and validity were confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) in SmartPLS. Data analysis was performed using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method to test the hypothesized relationships among variables. Results revealed significant positive relationships among all studied variables. Self-brand distinctiveness exerted a strong direct effect on personal branding ($\beta = 0.651$, $t = 9.28$, $p < 0.01$) and also positively influenced self-brand expression ($\beta = 0.532$, $t = 6.98$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, self-brand expression significantly affected personal branding ($\beta = 0.204$, $t = 2.56$, $p < 0.01$). The relationship between personal branding and personal brand performance was the strongest ($\beta = 0.813$, $t = 26.65$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that personal branding serves as a crucial mediator in translating distinctiveness and expression into enhanced performance outcomes. The overall model demonstrated high explanatory power and satisfactory goodness-of-fit indices. The findings highlight that self-brand distinctiveness and expression jointly strengthen personal brand performance through their influence on personal branding. Developing a clear and consistent personal identity, combined with authentic self-expression, enhances visibility, trust, and recognition in professional contexts. Personal branding thus serves as the strategic link connecting identity differentiation and expressive communication with tangible performance outcomes.

Keywords: Self-brand distinctiveness; Self-brand expression; Personal branding; Personal brand performance; Brand differentiation; Digital identity.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital marketing and personal branding, individuals and organizations alike are increasingly recognizing the strategic value of building and maintaining distinctive brand identities. As the boundaries between personal and professional domains blur, particularly in creative and service-oriented sectors, the ability to express one's identity through a clear and consistent personal brand has become an essential component of success. Within this framework, *self-brand distinctiveness* and *self-brand expression* emerge as two interrelated constructs that fundamentally shape personal brand performance. Self-brand distinctiveness refers to the degree to which an individual perceives their

brand as unique and different from others, while self-brand expression involves the extent to which that identity is communicated authentically across various social and professional contexts [1]. The dynamic interaction between these two dimensions provides the foundation for achieving a sustainable personal brand that resonates with audiences, enhances visibility, and fosters loyalty.

Recent studies have shown that self-branding—conceptualized as the strategic management of one’s reputation, image, and value proposition—has become critical in the digital era, particularly with the rise of social media platforms that allow for direct audience engagement [2]. The increasing emphasis on digital visibility has compelled individuals to develop strong self-brand identities that not only differentiate them from peers but also communicate their unique expertise, values, and creativity. In this sense, self-brand distinctiveness functions as the cornerstone of brand equity at the individual level, much as corporate brand uniqueness drives competitive advantage in business markets [3]. However, distinctiveness alone is insufficient without effective expression—articulating one’s identity and expertise through visual, verbal, and behavioral cues that reinforce brand authenticity and consistency [4]. Together, these constructs create a synergistic effect that enhances personal brand performance, measured through perceived credibility, recognition, and audience engagement.

Brand performance, traditionally examined within corporate or product contexts, is now being redefined within personal branding to encompass metrics such as reputation, trust, and audience influence [5]. In this regard, the theoretical basis for understanding personal brand performance draws heavily from customer-based brand equity models, which emphasize the role of perceived value, experience, and satisfaction in determining brand outcomes. Translating these principles into personal branding implies that self-brand distinctiveness contributes to the perceived uniqueness of the personal brand, while self-brand expression influences emotional connection and relational engagement. This interaction aligns with the concept of communal-brand connection, where individuals cultivate a shared sense of identity and belonging with their audience, ultimately strengthening loyalty and advocacy [5]. Hence, a personal brand that is both distinct and well-expressed becomes more memorable, persuasive, and impactful.

The expansion of social media platforms has radically transformed how individuals build and manage their personal brands [6]. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn have become arenas for continuous brand expression, allowing users to communicate their professional values, showcase creativity, and form parasocial relationships with audiences. The era of digital self-presentation has amplified the importance of self-brand distinctiveness as a competitive differentiator and self-brand expression as the mechanism through which individuals achieve social visibility. Research indicates that consistency in brand expression, coupled with emotional authenticity, significantly enhances engagement and trust among followers [7]. This is consistent with findings that social media marketing activities strengthen customer-brand relationships by fostering interaction, identification, and emotional attachment [8]. Consequently, self-branding is no longer a passive representation of identity but an active, ongoing process of self-promotion and relationship management.

The effectiveness of self-branding strategies is further influenced by underlying psychological and sociocultural factors. Individuals engage in self-branding not only to communicate professional competencies but also to construct and negotiate social identity [9]. This process parallels corporate branding strategies where brand image and consumer perception are shaped through storytelling, symbolic communication, and experiential design [10]. In both contexts, perceived authenticity remains central to audience acceptance and trust. For personal brands, authenticity manifests through alignment between personal values and public representation, leading to deeper emotional resonance and sustained engagement [11].

Additionally, the degree to which an individual's self-brand reflects social responsibility and ethical conduct can influence audience perceptions, mirroring trends observed in corporate social marketing [12]. Therefore, self-branding success depends not only on differentiation but also on perceived integrity and value congruence.

From a marketing communication perspective, self-brand expression operates as a multidimensional construct encompassing verbal (language, tone), visual (style, imagery), and behavioral (interaction patterns) elements [13]. These elements serve as symbolic representations of the individual's identity and positioning within their professional ecosystem. The effectiveness of self-brand expression lies in its coherence—the degree to which various elements consistently reflect the intended brand message [14]. A lack of consistency can lead to cognitive dissonance among the audience, reducing trust and engagement. Conversely, consistent and expressive self-brand communication can evoke emotional responses that foster audience loyalty and advocacy [15]. Furthermore, gamified and immersive online experiences, such as those offered by augmented reality (AR) and interactive media, can enhance brand engagement by enabling individuals to creatively express and reinforce their unique brand narratives [15].

The mediating role of personal branding between self-brand distinctiveness, expression, and brand performance is supported by theoretical and empirical evidence. Studies indicate that personal branding acts as a strategic interface that translates self-perception and expressive behaviors into measurable performance outcomes such as recognition, reputation, and influence [1]. The stronger an individual's sense of distinctiveness, the more likely they are to engage in expressive and consistent branding behaviors, which in turn improve brand performance outcomes [3]. Moreover, personal branding efforts are amplified through digital networks, where engagement, credibility, and storytelling collectively enhance visibility and authority [16]. In this sense, self-branding can be conceptualized as an integrated process combining cognitive differentiation (what makes one unique), affective connection (how one is perceived emotionally), and behavioral communication (how one expresses and enacts that identity).

Within the broader marketing literature, the shift from traditional to digital branding paradigms has underscored the importance of personalization and interaction. Modern consumers—and by extension, audiences of personal brands—seek relational experiences rather than transactional ones [17]. This paradigm shift has redefined brand success not merely as awareness or visibility, but as emotional engagement and loyalty, driven by perceived authenticity and relational closeness [18]. Therefore, personal brand performance must be evaluated not only in terms of market outcomes but also through relational metrics such as trust, engagement, and reputation capital [19]. The ability to build such relational capital depends heavily on how distinctiveness and expression are managed strategically and authentically over time.

In recent years, research on branding within the Iranian and regional context has emphasized the importance of cultural adaptation and innovation. For example, studies have shown that brand innovation contributes significantly to brand resonance when mediated by brand experience [1], and that social media marketing can enhance brand equity through co-creation of value between firms and customers [4]. Similarly, findings from studies on financial and service brands highlight that reputation, satisfaction, and trust mediate the relationship between brand communication and loyalty [5, 20]. Translating these insights into personal branding, one can infer that individuals who innovate in how they express their identities and engage their audiences can create stronger emotional connections, leading to higher perceived performance. The same mechanisms that govern brand loyalty and advocacy in corporate settings apply to personal brands—distinctiveness draws attention, expression sustains engagement, and consistency builds trust.

In addition, recent developments in sustainable and ethical branding underscore the growing expectation for brands—whether corporate or personal—to reflect broader social and environmental values [3]. Individuals who successfully integrate these values into their self-brand narratives not only differentiate themselves but also appeal to ethically conscious audiences. In the context of creative industries, where self-expression and social relevance intersect, this alignment can significantly enhance perceived authenticity and brand resonance [21]. Therefore, self-brand distinctiveness and expression should not be viewed merely as aesthetic or communicative tools but as strategic levers for building socially meaningful and sustainable personal brands.

Taken together, the growing body of research underscores that personal brand performance is the outcome of an interconnected system of identity differentiation, expressive communication, and relational engagement [22, 23]. Distinctiveness provides the foundation for identity clarity, expression operationalizes this identity in communicative behavior, and performance reflects the effectiveness of these efforts in achieving recognition, trust, and loyalty. This conceptual triad—distinctiveness, expression, and performance—mirrors the broader logic of brand management applied at the individual level. Accordingly, this study seeks to model and empirically test the effect of self-brand distinctiveness and self-brand expression on personal brand performance

Methodology

Study Design and Participants

The present research employed an applied, descriptive-survey design with a correlational approach to examine the relationships among self-brand distinctiveness, self-brand expression, and personal brand performance among contemporary artists and creative professionals. The study aimed to construct and validate a model that explains how personal branding constructs function in artistic contexts such as painting, music, and architectural design. Since the outcomes of this study can be utilized by artists, art educators, and brand consultants, it falls under the category of applied research.

The research was conducted under real-world conditions to ensure the ecological validity of the findings. Therefore, it adopted a field study approach rather than an experimental one, allowing participants to respond to survey instruments within their natural professional environments. The statistical population comprised contemporary artists, art designers, architects, and students of art and design in Tehran. These groups were chosen because they actively engage in developing and communicating personal brands through creative expression, making them ideal representatives for studying self-branding dynamics.

A simple random sampling method was used to ensure that every member of the target population had an equal chance of selection. Based on preliminary estimates, the total number of eligible individuals in the target population was approximately 600. Applying Cochran's sample size formula, with a confidence level of 95% and an error margin of 0.06, a final sample size of 234 respondents was determined. This sample size was sufficient to perform robust statistical analyses, including Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach. All participants were informed of the study objectives, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any stage, ensuring ethical compliance with social science research standards.

Data Collection Tools

To gather empirical data, both library research and a structured questionnaire were employed. Library research was first conducted to review and synthesize theoretical foundations, conceptual models, and prior empirical findings related to personal branding, self-brand distinctiveness, and self-brand expression. Sources included academic books, peer-reviewed articles, theses, and reputable online databases. This preliminary phase ensured that the research model was theoretically sound and grounded in established literature.

The primary instrument for data collection in the empirical phase was a structured questionnaire. It consisted of two main sections: demographic information and research constructs. The demographic section included variables such as age, gender, artistic field, and years of professional experience. The second section measured the key latent constructs—self-brand distinctiveness, self-brand expression, personal branding, and personal brand performance—through validated scales adapted from prior studies.

Specifically, items related to self-brand distinctiveness were derived from Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) and Wong and Merrilees (2008); items for self-brand expression were adapted from Kim et al. (2001); and indicators for personal branding and personal brand performance were drawn from Ajzen (1991, 2002) and Babbie (2013). Each construct was measured by three items, making a total of twelve items for the core variables. Respondents indicated their agreement with each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5). This scaling allowed for the quantification of subjective perceptions and facilitated the use of parametric analyses.

Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by academic experts and practitioners in branding and art management to ensure both face and content validity. Their feedback led to minor revisions in item phrasing and sequencing for greater clarity and contextual fit.

The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach’s Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Factor Loadings within the PLS framework. Cronbach’s Alpha values above 0.70 were considered acceptable, while CR values exceeding 0.70 confirmed internal consistency. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was examined to ensure convergent validity, with a threshold of 0.50. Discriminant validity was verified using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, ensuring that each construct shared more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs in the model.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two main stages: descriptive and inferential analysis. Descriptive statistics were first employed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and provide an overview of the data distribution. Frequency tables, means, and standard deviations were computed using SPSS to describe respondents’ profiles and their responses to each variable. These analyses established a foundational understanding of the sample before moving on to hypothesis testing.

For inferential analysis, the study utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) via SmartPLS software (version 4.0). The PLS approach was selected because of its suitability for exploratory model development, its robustness in handling smaller sample sizes, and its ability to model complex relationships between latent constructs without strict normality assumptions. The model evaluation process followed three main steps: assessment of the measurement model, assessment of the structural model, and hypothesis testing.

In the measurement model assessment, the reliability and validity of each construct were verified using factor loadings, Composite Reliability, Cronbach's Alpha, and Average Variance Extracted. Items with factor loadings below 0.40 were considered for removal to enhance model fit. Convergent validity was established if AVE values exceeded 0.50, and discriminant validity was confirmed when the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than its correlation with other constructs.

In the structural model evaluation, the strength and significance of hypothesized relationships were examined through path coefficients (β) and t-statistics obtained via the bootstrapping method (5,000 resamples). Hypotheses were accepted when t-values exceeded 1.96, indicating significance at the 95% confidence level. Additionally, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was computed to determine the proportion of variance in the dependent variable—personal brand performance—explained by self-brand distinctiveness and self-brand expression. Higher R^2 values indicated a stronger explanatory power of the model.

Model fit indices such as the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) were also considered to assess the overall adequacy of the model. An SRMR value below 0.08 signified acceptable model fit. Finally, predictive relevance (Q^2) was evaluated using the blindfolding procedure in PLS to determine the model's predictive accuracy.

All statistical analyses were carried out with a confidence level of 95%. The results obtained from these analyses formed the basis for hypothesis evaluation and subsequent interpretation in the discussion section.

Findings and Results

The demographic analysis of the study sample, consisting of 234 respondents, revealed that a majority of participants were male, with 159 individuals representing 67.94% of the total sample, while 75 participants, accounting for 32.05%, were female. This gender distribution indicates a higher participation rate of male artists and designers in the studied population. Regarding educational attainment, the largest proportion of respondents held a bachelor's degree (49.57%), followed by those with an associate degree (26.92%) and a master's degree (15.81%). A smaller percentage of participants had completed only a diploma (6.83%), while the least represented group comprised individuals with a doctoral degree (0.85%). These findings suggest that the majority of the sample possessed higher education qualifications, reflecting a relatively well-educated population engaged in professional and creative fields such as art, design, and architecture.

Table 1

Descriptive Indicators of Research Variables

Row	Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Self-Brand Distinctiveness	3.97	0.97
2	Self-Brand Expression	3.24	1.24
3	Personal Branding	3.54	0.87
4	Personal Brand Performance	3.15	1.02

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 illustrate the central tendency and dispersion of the research variables. The mean value of Self-Brand Distinctiveness (3.97) was the highest among the variables, indicating that respondents generally perceived themselves as having a clear and unique personal brand identity within their professional fields. Personal Branding exhibited a mean of 3.54, suggesting a moderate to high level of awareness and practice of branding-related behaviors among participants. Self-Brand Expression showed a mean of 3.24, reflecting that respondents moderately engage in articulating

and communicating their personal brand through creative or professional channels. Finally, Personal Brand Performance had the lowest mean (3.15), implying that while participants maintain self-branding efforts, their perceived outcomes in terms of brand performance—such as recognition, reputation, or market influence—were somewhat moderate. The standard deviation values ranged between 0.87 and 1.24, indicating an acceptable level of variability and heterogeneity in participant responses across all constructs.

Table 2

Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test for Research Variables

Variable	Test Statistic	Sig. (p-value)	Result
Self-Brand Distinctiveness	1.635	0.001	Not normal
Self-Brand Expression	2.548	0.001	Not normal
Personal Branding	1.269	0.001	Not normal
Personal Brand Performance	1.154	0.001	Not normal

As shown in Table 2, the results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test indicated that all variables violated the assumption of normality, as their significance values ($p = 0.001$) were less than 0.05. This means that the distributions of Self-Brand Distinctiveness, Self-Brand Expression, Personal Branding, and Personal Brand Performance were not normal. Consequently, non-parametric statistical techniques or variance-based modeling methods, such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), were employed for hypothesis testing and model estimation. This analytical choice ensured the robustness of the results despite deviations from normal data distribution.

Table 3

Cross Loadings of Items on Research Constructs

Variable	Self-Brand Distinctiveness	Self-Brand Expression	Personal Branding	Personal Performance
Self-Brand Distinctiveness 1	0.82	0.49	0.46	0.46
Self-Brand Distinctiveness 2	0.81	0.54	0.51	0.53
Self-Brand Distinctiveness 3	0.78	0.54	0.56	0.58
Self-Brand Expression 1	0.42	0.76	0.39	0.58
Self-Brand Expression 2	0.42	0.78	0.40	0.44
Self-Brand Expression 3	0.49	0.84	0.56	0.49
Personal Branding 1	0.29	0.51	0.86	0.27
Personal Branding 2	0.50	0.46	0.87	0.42
Personal Branding 3	0.52	0.51	0.83	0.48
Personal Performance 1	0.27	0.22	0.21	0.72
Personal Performance 2	0.25	0.24	0.23	0.88
Personal Performance 3	0.22	0.16	0.22	0.86

The results presented in Table 3 show the cross loadings of measurement items on their respective constructs, providing evidence for discriminant validity within the measurement model. As indicated, all items demonstrated higher loadings on their intended latent variables compared to other constructs. For instance, the items corresponding to Self-Brand Distinctiveness loaded strongly on their factor (0.78–0.82) and less strongly on other constructs, confirming that they measure a distinct dimension. Similarly, the items of Self-Brand Expression exhibited loadings between 0.76 and 0.84, indicating a high internal consistency within the construct. Personal Branding items loaded between 0.83 and 0.87, further validating the measurement of this construct as a separate dimension. Lastly, Personal Brand Performance items showed loadings between 0.72 and 0.88, which also exceeded the cross-loadings with other constructs. These findings confirm that the constructs demonstrate satisfactory discriminant validity, meaning each latent variable is empirically distinct from the others in the model.

Table 4*Correlation Matrix and Square Roots of AVE for Research Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Personal Branding	0.85			
2. Self-Brand Distinctiveness	0.760**	0.81		
3. Self-Brand Expression	0.553**	0.530**	0.79	
4. Personal Brand Performance	0.813**	0.721**	0.565**	0.82

Note: Diagonal elements in bold represent the square roots of the AVE values. Off-diagonal values indicate correlations between constructs. $p < 0.01$

The data in Table 4 demonstrate the Fornell–Larcker criterion results used to assess discriminant validity. The square root of each construct's Average Variance Extracted (AVE), shown on the diagonal, is greater than its correlations with other constructs, confirming adequate discriminant validity. For example, the square root of AVE for Personal Branding (0.85) exceeds its correlations with Self-Brand Distinctiveness (0.760), Self-Brand Expression (0.553), and Personal Brand Performance (0.813). Similarly, all other constructs meet this criterion, demonstrating that each latent variable captures more variance from its indicators than it shares with other constructs. Moreover, the correlations among constructs are positive and significant, indicating meaningful associations among self-brand distinctiveness, self-brand expression, and both personal branding and its performance. These results confirm the robustness and validity of the measurement model, supporting its suitability for subsequent structural analysis.

Table 5*Path Coefficients and Explained Variance*

Pathway	Path Coefficient	T-Value	Sig.
Self-Brand Expression → Personal Branding	0.204	2.56	0.01
Self-Brand Distinctiveness → Personal Branding	0.651	9.28	0.01
Self-Brand Distinctiveness → Self-Brand Expression	0.532	6.98	0.01
Personal Branding → Personal Brand Performance	0.813	26.65	0.01

As shown in Table 5, the path coefficients obtained through the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach demonstrate significant and positive relationships among all variables in the conceptual model. The path from Self-Brand Distinctiveness to Personal Branding yielded the highest coefficient ($\beta = 0.651$, $t = 9.28$, $p = 0.01$), signifying that distinctiveness in self-branding is the most powerful predictor of how individuals build and sustain their personal brands. The relationship between Self-Brand Distinctiveness and Self-Brand Expression was also strong ($\beta = 0.532$, $t = 6.98$, $p = 0.01$), indicating that individuals who perceive their personal brands as unique are more likely to express their identity consistently across various communication platforms. Furthermore, Self-Brand Expression positively influenced Personal Branding ($\beta = 0.204$, $t = 2.56$, $p = 0.01$), confirming that the expressive dimension of branding contributes meaningfully to the overall personal brand construct. Finally, the strongest direct effect was observed between Personal Branding and Personal Brand Performance ($\beta = 0.813$, $t = 26.65$, $p = 0.01$), underscoring the critical role of well-developed personal branding strategies in enhancing performance outcomes such as recognition, reputation, and influence. All t-values exceeded the threshold of 1.96, confirming statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. These results validate the hypothesized relationships and demonstrate the high explanatory power of the model.

Table 6*Explained Variance, Communality, and Redundancy Validity*

Variable	CV-Redundancy	CV-Communality
Social Media Marketing	–	0.341
Brand Awareness	0.352	0.329
Consumer Attitude	0.337	0.371
Customer Satisfaction	0.369	0.369

Table 6 presents the results of the communality and redundancy validity tests, which evaluate the predictive relevance and quality of the measurement model. The CV-Communality values, which measure how well each construct explains its own indicators, ranged from 0.329 to 0.371, exceeding the acceptable minimum of 0.30, thus confirming adequate convergent validity. The CV-Redundancy values, which assess the predictive capability of the endogenous constructs based on exogenous variables, were positive and ranged between 0.337 and 0.369. These results indicate that the model possesses satisfactory predictive relevance ($Q^2 > 0$), meaning the latent variables contribute meaningfully to explaining the observed indicators. Although the “Social Media Marketing” construct served as an exogenous variable and therefore lacked a redundancy value, its communality coefficient (0.341) suggests it was well represented by its measurement items. Overall, these findings confirm that the structural and measurement models are both reliable and valid, and that the model demonstrates strong internal consistency and predictive power in explaining brand-related behavioral outcomes.

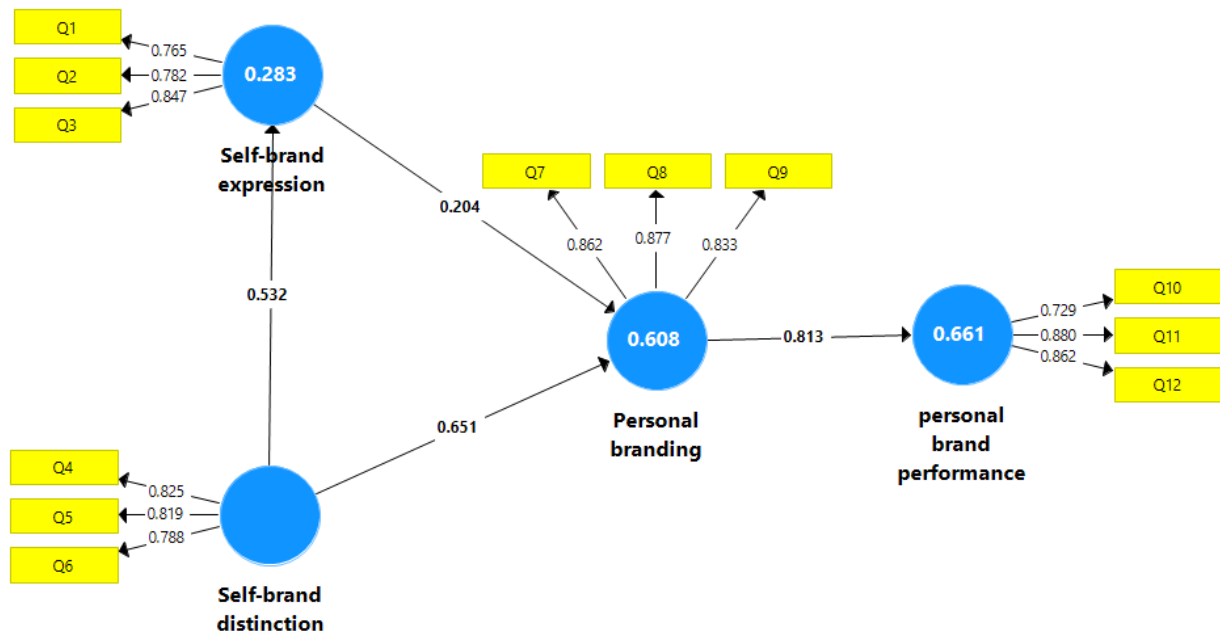
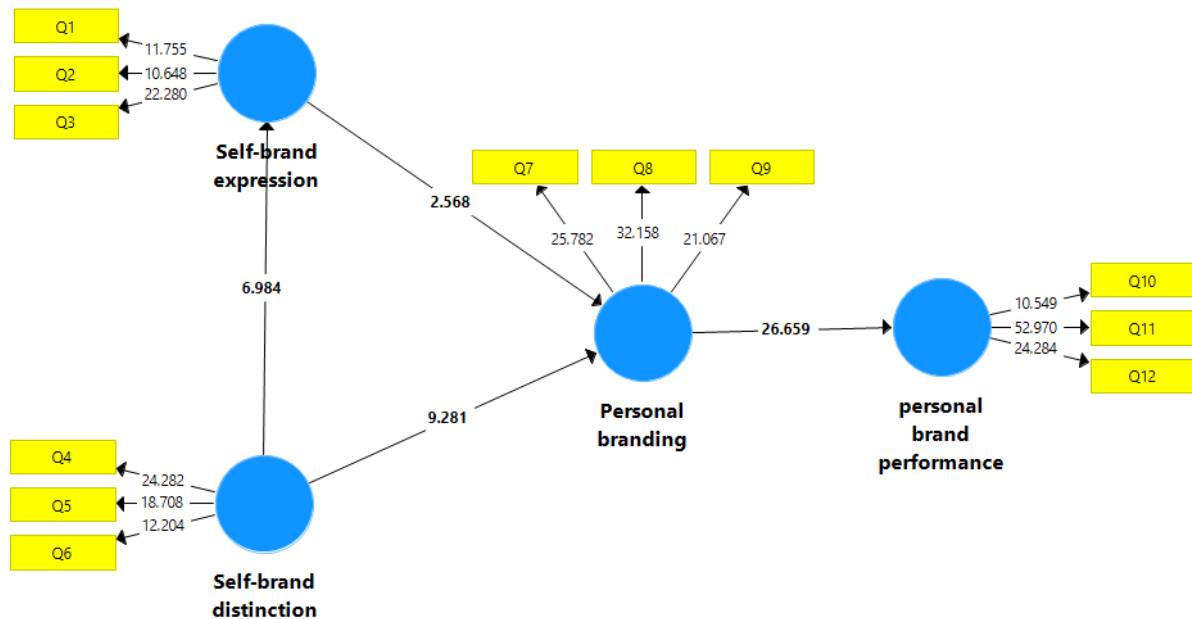
Figure 1*Model with Beta Coefficients*

Figure 2*Model with T-Values*

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study confirmed the hypothesized relationships between self-brand distinctiveness, self-brand expression, personal branding, and personal brand performance, demonstrating that self-branding is a multidimensional construct shaped by both cognitive differentiation and expressive behavior. The findings revealed that self-brand distinctiveness exerts a strong and direct effect on personal branding, suggesting that individuals who perceive their self-brand as unique are more successful in constructing coherent and resonant brand identities. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing the significance of brand differentiation as a foundation for brand equity and resonance [1]. Distinctiveness helps individuals stand out within saturated creative and professional markets, enhancing recognition and memorability—key attributes associated with effective brand positioning. The high path coefficient between self-brand distinctiveness and personal branding ($\beta = 0.651$) underscores that differentiation is the primary driver of brand development, reflecting similar patterns found in corporate branding studies where unique brand identity and innovation predict customer loyalty and resonance [3].

Furthermore, the results demonstrated a significant and positive relationship between self-brand distinctiveness and self-brand expression, indicating that individuals with a clear sense of uniqueness are more likely to express their identity through consistent, authentic, and creative behaviors across digital and interpersonal platforms. This aligns with the argument that brand innovation and experiential differentiation encourage active engagement and expressive communication [21]. In essence, individuals who understand their brand's unique attributes feel more confident in articulating and exhibiting their professional persona. This finding resonates with contemporary marketing literature that emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between differentiation and expression: while distinctiveness defines “what” makes a brand different, expression determines “how” that difference is communicated and perceived [4]. Together, these constructs create a powerful mechanism for developing a coherent and emotionally engaging personal brand identity.

The analysis also confirmed that self-brand expression significantly predicts personal branding, albeit with a smaller effect size ($\beta = 0.204$) compared to distinctiveness. This finding implies that while expressive behavior contributes to brand construction, it functions more effectively when built upon a foundation of distinctiveness and self-awareness. In other words, expression without clear differentiation may result in fragmented or inconsistent branding. Previous studies have shown that effective brand communication and emotional expression play crucial roles in developing audience trust, engagement, and advocacy [7, 9]. Consistency in expressing one's personal values and professional identity reinforces brand authenticity, which in turn strengthens perceived credibility and attractiveness. Thus, self-brand expression serves as the operationalization of self-brand distinctiveness, transforming internal identity into visible brand behavior that audiences can relate to and engage with [8].

Perhaps the most striking result of the present study was the robust and highly significant relationship between personal branding and personal brand performance ($\beta = 0.813$). This finding provides strong empirical support for the proposition that effective personal branding strategies translate directly into improved performance outcomes, including recognition, reputation, and influence. The t-value of 26.65 indicates a remarkably stable and reliable relationship between these two constructs, confirming that individuals who actively manage their brand identity achieve superior results in terms of audience engagement and perceived value. This outcome is consistent with prior research in both corporate and personal branding domains, which highlights the mediating role of brand reputation, satisfaction, and relational quality in driving performance outcomes [5, 6]. Personal branding, therefore, functions as a mediating mechanism that integrates distinctiveness and expression into tangible achievements, echoing the logic of customer-based brand equity frameworks that link brand awareness, perceived quality, and loyalty to overall performance [10].

The theoretical implications of these findings extend to how personal brands are conceptualized within the broader context of brand equity and identity theory. The observed strong connection between distinctiveness and performance suggests that individuals who possess a unique self-concept and communicate it effectively are better positioned to create enduring and memorable brand associations [3]. In contrast, individuals lacking clear distinctiveness may rely excessively on external trends or mimicry, which can dilute their brand authenticity. The empirical evidence reinforces the notion that differentiation is the psychological core of self-branding, while expression serves as its behavioral and communicative extension. This relationship mirrors organizational branding dynamics, where innovative differentiation precedes customer engagement and loyalty [1]. Moreover, the predictive strength of personal branding for brand performance confirms the theoretical assertion that personal branding acts as a bridge between internal identity structures and external perceptions [4].

From a practical standpoint, these results highlight the importance of strategic coherence in self-branding. The alignment between what individuals claim to represent (distinctiveness) and how they communicate it (expression) determines how effectively they achieve brand performance outcomes. This observation is consistent with findings that brand consistency and authenticity are key drivers of loyalty and advocacy in both consumer and personal branding contexts [17]. The implication is that self-branding should not be approached as mere self-promotion, but rather as a systematic process of articulating, expressing, and reinforcing one's professional and personal identity. Individuals who manage to maintain alignment between these dimensions are more likely to cultivate trust, emotional engagement, and long-term recognition [11].

Another important insight derived from the findings relates to the mediating role of personal branding. The data indicate that distinctiveness and expression alone do not directly result in performance improvements; rather, their effects are channeled through the broader construct of personal branding. This supports the conceptualization of personal branding as an integrative mechanism that translates identity-level factors into market-level outcomes [16]. Previous studies have emphasized similar mediating mechanisms in corporate and destination branding, where constructs such as brand experience or customer satisfaction serve as intermediaries linking brand equity drivers to behavioral outcomes [17]. Accordingly, in personal branding, the process of systematically shaping perceptions through distinctiveness and expression leads to enhanced performance when framed within a coherent branding strategy.

The findings also echo the growing body of research highlighting the importance of digital environments in shaping brand-related outcomes. The positive influence of self-brand expression on personal branding and performance underscores the role of social media platforms as powerful tools for brand visibility and engagement [2, 22]. Through platforms like Instagram and TikTok, individuals can transform personal branding from a static concept into an interactive, audience-centered process that fosters relational trust and emotional attachment [6]. In this regard, expression functions as a dialogic process—one that allows for continuous feedback and adaptation to audience responses [13]. The capacity to express one's identity authentically and consistently across digital channels is thus a determinant of perceived credibility, which directly affects performance outcomes.

Moreover, the study's results resonate with recent research emphasizing the social and ethical dimensions of branding. Distinctiveness and expression, when aligned with socially responsible values and ethical self-presentation, can enhance the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of personal brands [18]. The integration of ethical considerations within personal branding strategies not only differentiates individuals in competitive environments but also fosters long-term relational capital. This perspective aligns with the notion of convergence marketing, where professional credibility is built upon both competence and moral character [12]. As such, the present findings support the idea that ethical distinctiveness and value-driven expression amplify personal brand performance in a socially conscious marketplace.

The overall model tested in this research achieved satisfactory levels of validity and predictive power, as evidenced by the strong reliability coefficients and acceptable levels of communality and redundancy. This reinforces the robustness of the proposed conceptual framework and its empirical generalizability to contexts involving artistic, creative, and professional branding. In line with the research of [20], well-structured brand communication strategies—whether in corporate or personal contexts—enhance both perception and behavioral intention, leading to greater loyalty and satisfaction. Likewise, [5] emphasized that communal-brand connections mediated by trust and satisfaction serve as pivotal determinants of loyalty and performance. The present findings parallel these insights, suggesting that the same underlying mechanisms govern human-to-brand relationships and self-to-audience relationships.

Finally, the strong positive relationship between self-brand distinctiveness and self-brand expression underscores the recursive nature of self-branding: as individuals express themselves more authentically, they receive feedback that further refines their distinctiveness. This cyclical process aligns with dynamic branding theories, where identity and perception evolve through ongoing interaction and feedback loops [8, 23]. It also supports the emerging notion that personal branding is not a static achievement but a continuously adaptive practice shaped by social, technological, and psychological factors [19]. In conclusion, the findings provide empirical validation for a model that positions self-brand distinctiveness and self-brand

expression as dual antecedents of personal branding and performance, contributing to the growing understanding of how individuals can strategically manage their personal identity in digital and professional environments.

Despite its theoretical and empirical contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was geographically limited to contemporary artists, designers, and architects in Tehran, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other professional contexts or cultural environments. Second, the study relied on self-reported data collected through questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccuracies in self-assessment. Third, although the model demonstrated strong predictive validity, it employed a cross-sectional design, preventing causal inference regarding the directionality of relationships. Longitudinal or experimental studies could provide deeper insights into the dynamic nature of self-brand development over time. Additionally, while the study used well-established scales, the constructs of self-brand distinctiveness and expression are still emerging areas of inquiry that may require further conceptual refinement and contextual adaptation for different professions.

Future research should aim to expand the scope of this study by examining personal branding dynamics across diverse professional sectors, such as entrepreneurship, sports, education, and digital content creation, to compare how self-brand distinctiveness and expression function in varying contexts. Cross-cultural studies could further explore how sociocultural norms influence the expression and perception of personal brands. Researchers are also encouraged to incorporate longitudinal designs to investigate how brand performance evolves as individuals gain experience and exposure. Integrating qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or content analysis of social media profiles could enrich understanding of the narratives and emotional dimensions underlying self-brand expression. Finally, future studies could consider additional mediators—such as self-efficacy, audience engagement, or emotional intelligence—that may influence the relationship between distinctiveness, expression, and performance.

Practitioners seeking to enhance their personal brand performance should prioritize developing a strong and authentic sense of self-brand distinctiveness before engaging in expressive activities. This requires introspection to identify one's unique skills, values, and positioning in the market. Once established, individuals should express their distinctiveness consistently across all touchpoints—visual design, communication style, and online presence—to ensure coherence and authenticity. Maintaining a balance between creativity and consistency is crucial for sustaining audience trust. Personal brand development should also be viewed as an ongoing process that evolves through feedback, learning, and adaptation. For professionals and organizations involved in brand coaching or marketing education, fostering self-awareness, storytelling skills, and ethical communication can significantly enhance clients' or students' ability to manage and grow their personal brands effectively.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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