

Understanding Student Perceptions of Their Personal Branding in Higher Education

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Research on personal branding has recently gained momentum as various factors have gained importance in building personal branding. Higher education provides an environment where students build knowledge and skills to elevate their marketability. This study examines the student perceptions of the importance of various aspects that help them build their personal brand and to what degree they perceive ready and/or made ready by their higher education institution. Data were collected at two universities in the Central and Mid-Atlantic regions of the U.S. The findings confirm the existence of differences in the perceptions of importance and performance in creating student personal brands.

Keywords: personal branding in higher education, self-evaluation of personal branding

INTRODUCTION

Personal branding is a concept that has recently gained interest in the marketing literature. Khedher (2015) traces it to the 1980s when Ries and Trout (1986) suggested in their book entitled, “Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind” that individuals could benefit from using positioning strategy to advance in their career. After the late 1990s, the popularity of the personal branding concept has increased in many marketing areas and contexts. Among those are celebrities (Rein et al., 2005) and athletes (Arai et al., 2013) in advertising, politicians (Omojola, 2008; Manai & Holmlund, 2014) in promoting political parties, and individuals, especially students and young professionals (Bendisch et al., 2013; Manai & Holmlund, 2014) in marketing themselves as the best candidates for open positions.

In the current competitive global environment, creating a personal brand has gained utmost importance for college students when they seek successful career opportunities in the job market upon graduation. Universities play an important role in providing students with an environment in which students can participate in various curricular and extra-curricular activities to build their experience and skills that employers prefer as well as establish a personal brand image for professional life.

In this regard, this study aims to explore the student personal branding from students' perspectives. The following sections include a literature review on published personal branding studies, the research objectives, methodology, results, discussions, and limitations and suggestions for future studies.

BACKGROUND

Tom Peters (1997) explains personal branding as a form of marketing communication through which individuals are the marketers and managers of their own brand (Hood et al., 2014). The majority of the research to date on personal branding has focused on the use of social media, other online tools, and search engines to enhance one's brand image, job searching process, findability, and recruitment by employers. However, little empirical research exists examining personal branding management in the university environment and the universities' role in helping students build their personal branding (Gershon, 2014; Ollington, et al., 2013; Hood et al., 2014). Even though the studies of student personal branding in a university setting are limited, the published empirical and qualitative studies provide a valuable foundation. Among the relevant published research, several studies identified personal branding attributes in the context of university experience. Gujarathi and Kulkarni (2018), for example, empirically examined the perceptions of management graduates with regard to their intentions and attitudes toward personal branding and institutional support for building their personal brand. They found that younger alumni appreciated their institute's support in helping build their personal brand more than senior alumni did. Gujarathi and Kulkarni (2018) also confirmed that alumni perceived the institutional support helping them build personal brand was significant.

In a study about employers' perceptions of important work skills and readiness of students, Ahmad and Pesch (2017) identified the preferred skills as communication (verbal and written), teamwork skills, motivation, honesty/integrity, work ethic, interpersonal skills, professionalism/etiquette, analytical thinking, utilizing technology, flexibility/adaptability, project management, problem-solving, leadership, and organizational skills. They concluded that students need to be more aware that skill sets like flexibility/adaptability and detail-orientation are more important than what they perceive.

Several other studies (Burnison, 2018; Korach, 2015; Job Outlook, 2016; NACE, 2018) also pointed out attributes related to recruitment, some of which overlap with the attributes in the personal branding literature. In his book, Burnison (2018) identified motivation, various technical skills, leadership potential, communication skills, poise and appearance, problem solving skills, interpersonal skills, willingness to accept responsibility, being able to work well under pressure, and culture as desirable attributes that employers look for in candidates. Korach (2015) suggested that employers who value attributes before hiring include: full or part-time work experience, involvement in student organizations, connections with the firm's employees, leadership positions, GPA, extracurricular activities, athletics, honors and awards, and community service. Additionally, in some cases, employers place importance on attributes such as the emphasis on a certain major, leadership positions, school attended, volunteer work, foreign language fluency, and study abroad. A report issued by the National Association of College and Employers (NACE, 2018) lists the attributes employers seek as: leadership, ability to work in a team, written communication skills, problem-solving skills, verbal communication skills, strong work ethic, initiative, analytical/quantitative skills, flexibility/adaptability, technical skills, interpersonal skills, computer skills, detail-oriented, organizational ability, friendly/outgoing personality, strategic planning skills, creativity, tactfulness, and entrepreneurial skills/risk-taker, which are similar to those of other research (i.e., Job Outlook, 2016).

Peter and Gomez (2019, p. 11) investigated how students could build personal branding and what tools they could use to promote their personal brand. They pointed out that "students who are good at personal branding have an edge over the competition." Therefore, understanding student perceptions of what they see as important to build their personal brands and to what level they see themselves performing on the personal branding attributes carries great importance. To achieve this goal, the following study objectives are pursued.

Study Objectives

Drawing from the published literature, the study identifies the relevant attributes and experiences (i.e., brand associations) that contribute to transforming a student in to a highly employable and attractive candidate for future employment in competitive job markets. The specific research objectives of the study are to:

- 1) Examine the importance of relevant personal brand attributes for creating a strong student personal brand as perceived by students;
- 2) Examine how students evaluate themselves on the branding attributes in becoming a strong student brand;
- 3) Compare the perceptions of importance and performance of attributes (or brand associations) to determine if there are any differences (gaps) regarding the attributes;
- 4) Examine if the perceptions of the attributes (brand associations) are impacted by demographic factors

METHODOLOGY

To accomplish the research objectives above, a survey instrument with student branding attributes are compiled from the relevant literature (e.g., Ahmad and Pesch, 2017; Burnison, 2018; Job Outlook, 2016; Ahmad and Pesch, 2017; Korach, 2015; NACE, 2018) and through exploratory qualitative research with recruiters at a university career fair. In finalizing the branding attributes, the survey instrument was initially pretested with academicians who are experts on branding and survey development. They provided valuable feedback for the content and comprehension of the survey questions. Next, we pretested the survey instrument with students who are the target population of the study. The pretests provided insights for improvement of the questions and face validity of the items (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2005). The final survey included 28 attributes relevant to student personal branding. The attributes are self-motivation, work ethic, verbal communication skills, written communication skills, problem solving skills, interpersonal skills, critical thinking skills, being self-disciplined, having a university degree, analytic thinking skills, organizational skills, having career goals, positive thinking, self-confidence, technology skills, creativity, being results oriented, extra-curricular activities, work experience relevant to major, internship experience relevant to major, internship at reputable company, leadership, teamwork, campus involvement, project work, having 3.5 or higher GPA, knowing at least one language, and study abroad. The importance of the attributes for creating a strong personal brand was measured using a 5-point Likert like scale where 1=very unimportant and 5=very important. In addition, because the study also intends to determine students' evaluation of their performance on the attributes, the self-evaluation was measured using a 5-point Likert scale of 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. The survey also included demographic questions of age, gender and student class level.

Sampling and Data Collection

The survey was administered to students at a private university in the mid-western United States and at a large public university. We used purposeful convenience sampling with the goal of including students from all disciplines and semester standing. To accomplish this goal, the surveys were distributed to students at the beginning of class and the instructions were read to them. This process was repeated in each class, where survey was administered. Students were told that taking the survey was optional; they were assured confidentially of their responses. In addition, an online survey link was prepared and administered to students in various colleges where the authors did not have an opportunity to distribute the survey to students in a class setting. The survey link also indicated that taking the survey was optional and the respondent could stop at any point while taking the survey. This hybrid method of in-class survey administration and online link administrations produced 298 usable responses for analysis. The selected profiles of respondents show that 61.3% of respondents are male, 38.7% are female, 20.9% are freshmen, 32.5% are sophomore, 14.1% are junior and 32.5% are senior. The average age of the respondents is 20.2 years.

RESULTS

To accomplish the study objectives, several analyses were conducted relevant to each of the study objectives. To address RO1, a one-sample t-test (test value=3) was conducted to determine whether the importance level students place on personal branding attributes are significantly different than the mid-point (neutral) on a 5-point importance scale. The results in Figure 1 for RO1 show that students perceive almost all attributes as important for creating a strong personal brand ($p < .01$). The exceptions are that respondents perceive knowing at least one foreign language as indifferent or neutral (mean: 3, $p > .05$) and perceive study abroad as significantly unimportant (mean: 2.85, $p < .05$). The mean values for most attributes (19 to be exact) are above 4.00 indicate that students perceive the attributes as important for student personal branding. While all but two personal branding attributes are perceived as unimportant, the top ten most important attributes for creating a strong student personal brand are self-motivation, having strong work ethic, verbal communications, problem solving, being self-disciplined, interpersonal, critical thinking, having university degree, leadership and analytical thinking. The attributes that are significant but not seem to be as important are 3.5 or higher GPA, extra-curricular activities, being results oriented, involvement in campus clubs, and project worked on.

To address the RO2, a one-sample t-test (test value=3) was conducted to determine whether the students' agreement level of their performance on personal branding attributes are significantly different from the mid-point (neutral) on a 5-point agreement scale. The results presented in Figure 1 indicate that students evaluate their performance significantly better than average (value=3) on all but two attributes ($p < .01$). As Figure 1 shows, the non-significant personal branding attributes on which students evaluate their performance as average know at least one foreign language ($p > .05$) and study abroad ($p < .01$). Though, they evaluate their performance on study abroad significantly lower than the average

Based on the results in Figure 1, the top ten attributes that students evaluate their performance the highest are problem-solving skills, having a strong work ethic, leadership, written communications skills, critical thinking skills, self-motivation, verbal communications skills, having career goals, being self-disciplined and interpersonal skills. Some of the attributes that are evaluated as significant but at a lower level of performance are internship at reputable company, 3.5 or higher GPA, work experience in major, involvement in campus clubs, projects worked on, and creativity. It is interesting to note in Figure 1 that students evaluate their performance lower than the importance of most of the personal branding attributes, except for six attributes where importance is perceived higher than performance.

For RO3, the comparison of the student perceptions of importance with performance of the personal branding attributes (or brand associations), the paired samples t-tests were conducted to determine if there are any differences (gaps) between perceived importance and performance of the attributes. The results in Figure 2 show significant differences or gaps ($p < .01$) between the perceived importance and performance for most of personal branding attributes (21 attributes), and those (7 attributes) that have non-significant differences or gaps ($p > .05$). The positive and significant ($p < .01$) differences (gaps) (18 attributes) indicate that the students perceive their performance lower than the importance of the personal branding attributes, indicating their performances are below expectations on those attributes. The negative and significant differences (3 attributes) suggest that students perceive their performance higher than the importance of these personal branding attributes. The non-significant differences indicate that students have similar perceptions regarding the importance and performance of the attributes. As shown in Figure 2, the largest significant positive differences (or gaps, the importance - performance) are self-motivation, internship relevant to major, having work ethic, work experience relevant to major, verbal communications, being self-disciplined, interpersonal skills, internship at reputable company, being self-confident, having a university degree, positive thinking, critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, organizational skills, analytical thinking skills, creativity, study abroad and leadership. The largest significant negative differences are extra-curricular activities, being results oriented, and having 3.5 or higher GPA. Finally, the attributes that students perceive no differences between importance and performance ($p > .05$) are projects worked, having career goals, written communication skills, being part of a team, good technology skills, involvement with campus clubs, and knowing at least one language. The findings have important

implications for creating a strong student brand and developing curriculum development for universities that will be discussed later in the paper.

FIGURE 1
PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE AND PERFORMANCE OF BRANDING ATTRIBUTES

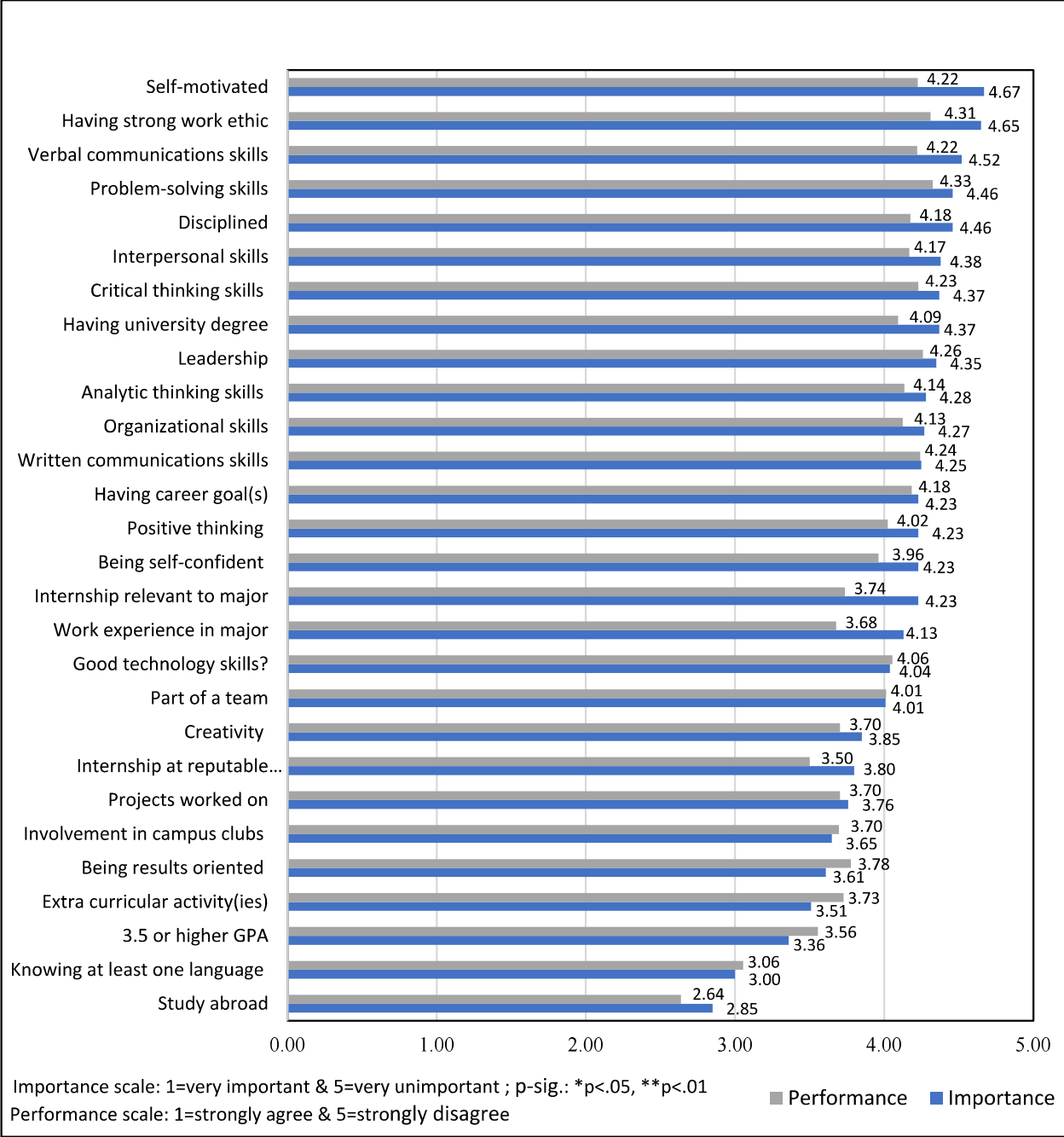
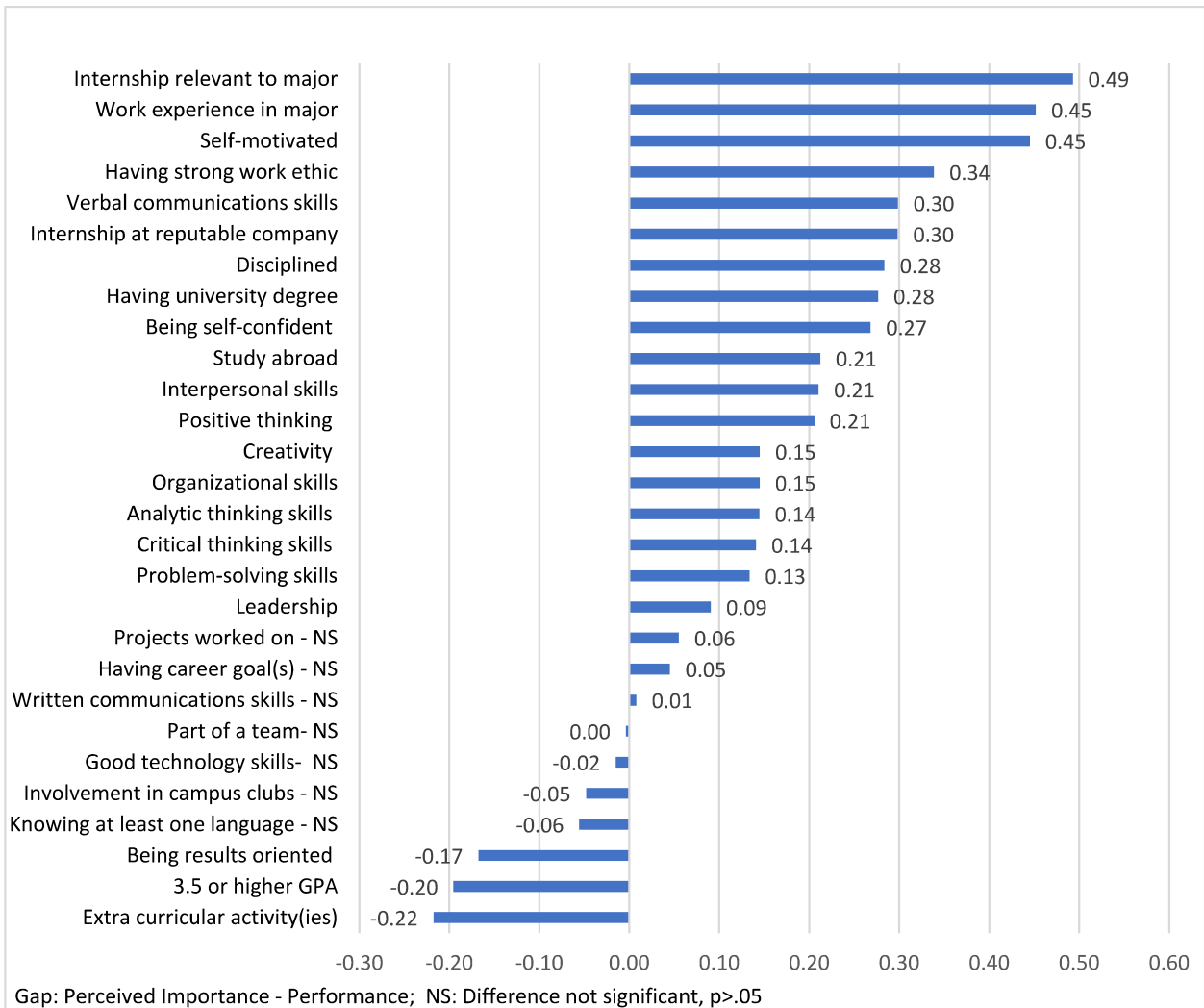


FIGURE 2
PERCEIVED DIFFERENCE BETWEEN IMPORTANCE AND PERFORMANCE OF
BRANDING ATTRIBUTES

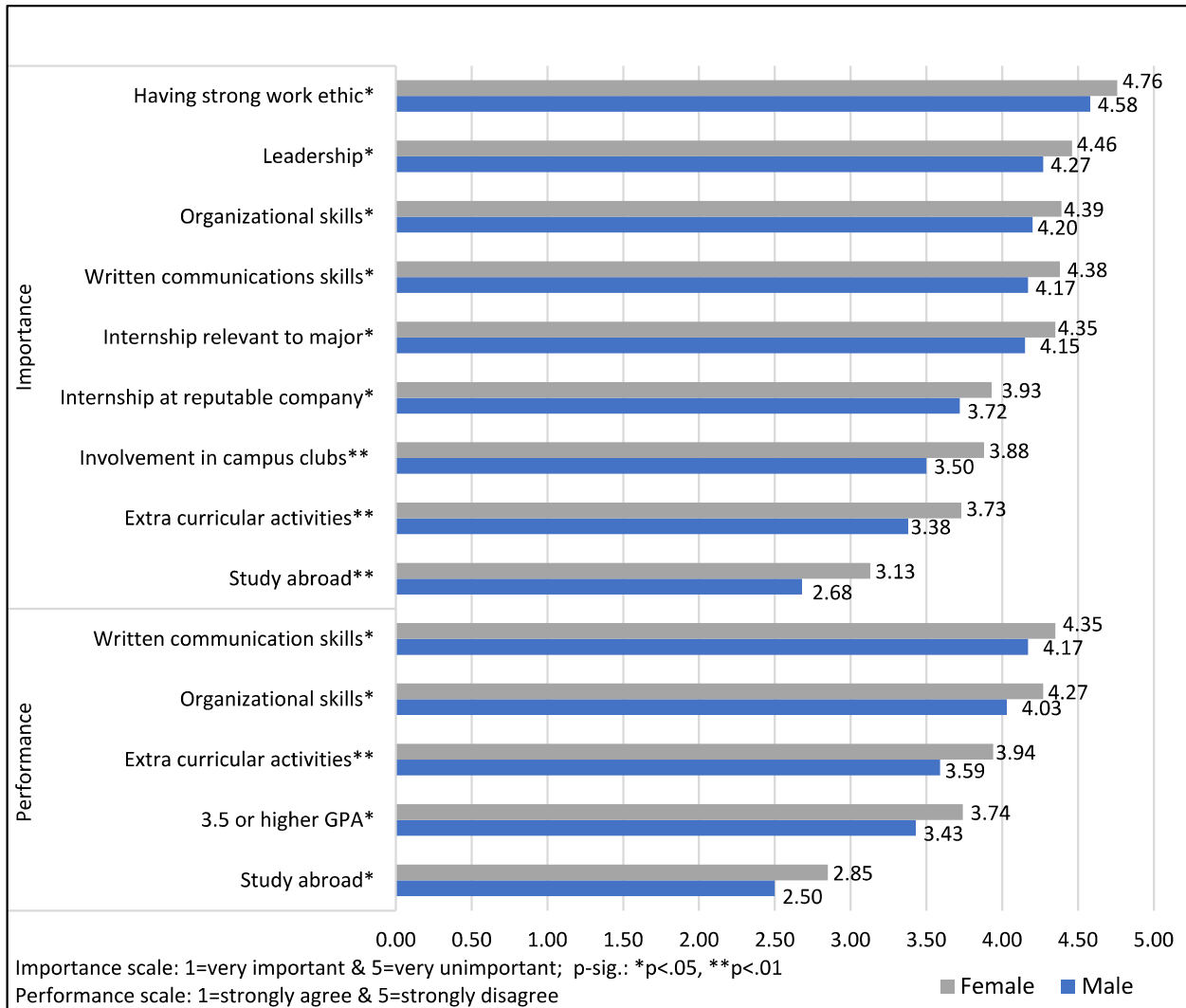


Personal Branding Attributes by Demographics

The RO4 examined how the perceptions of the attributes (brand associations) are impacted by demographic factors. To address this objective, the importance and performance of student personal branding attributes are examined by student gender and class levels. To determine if student gender has any impact on the branding attributes, two-sample independent t-tests were conducted to compare the male and female perceptions of all attributes for both importance and performance measures. Figure 3 presents only the significant results. The comparisons in Figure 3 indicate that female students consistently attach significantly higher importance to the branding attributes than male students ($p < .05$ or $p < .01$). The non-significant differences (not presented in Figure 3) indicate that both male and female students have similar perceptions of importance of the personal branding attributes. Concerning comparisons of performance, as shown in Figure 3, female students perceive that they have significantly higher performance than male students on the five personal branding attributes that are significantly different ($p < .05$ or $p < .01$). The attributes include written communication skills, organizational skills, extracurricular activities, 3.5 or higher GPA, and study abroad. Since the comparisons for most of the attributes are not significant, it appears

that both male and female students have similar perceptions of their performance for most of the branding attributes.

FIGURE 3
COMPARISONS OF IMPORTANCE AND PERFORMANCE OF PERSONAL BRANDING ATTRIBUTES BY GENDER



To compare branding attributes by class level, a one-way ANOVA analysis was conducted and the significant results for both performance and importance are presented in Table 1. The ANOVA results for perceived importance were significant for three personal branding attributes of 3.5 or higher GPA, study abroad, and having career goals at $p < .05$ or $p < .01$ levels. The post-hoc pair wise comparisons in Table 1 indicate that freshmen students attach significantly higher importance to three of the branding attributes (having a 3.5 or higher GPA, study abroad, and having a career goal) than seniors ($p < .05$ or $p < .01$), and sophomore students attach significantly higher importance than seniors to two branding attributes (having a 3.5 or higher GPA and having a career goal). Concerning perceived performance of the branding attributes, the one-way ANOVA comparisons in Table 1 are significant for 14 out of 28 branding attributes. While there are no certain patterns for the results, the post-hoc pair wise comparisons indicate that the upper-class students of juniors and seniors perceive their performance on most of the branding attributes

significantly higher than the freshman and sophomore students ($p < .05$ or $p < .01$). The exceptions are knowing at least one foreign language and having a career goal, where freshman and sophomore students have a significantly higher perceptions of their performance on the branding attributes. The significant differences may reflect the upper-class students' educational experiences compared to the lower-class students. The findings have managerial implications for universities in helping their students to develop strong student branding that will be discussed later in the paper.

TABLE 1
COMPARISONS OF STUDENT PERSONAL BRANDING ATTRIBUTES BY CLASS LEVEL

Importance	1. Freshmen	2. Sophomore	3. Junior	4. Senior	p-sig.	Pair-wise Comparisons
3.5 or higher GPA	3.70	3.48	3.34	3.02	0.000	1>4**; 2>4**
Study abroad	3.19	2.87	2.70	2.71	0.030	1>3*; 1>4**
Having a career goal	4.34	4.29	4.39	4.02	0.021	1>4*; 2>4*
Performance	1. Freshmen	2. Sophomore	3. Junior	4. Senior	p-sig.	Pair-wise Comparisons
Projects worked on	3.25	3.52	4.10	4.11	0.048	3>1**; 4>1*; 3>2*
Involvement in campus clubs	3.58	3.63	4.29	3.59	0.006	3>1**3>2**; 3>4**
Work experience in major	3.36	3.47	3.98	3.96	0.001	3>1**; 4>1**; 3>2**; 4>2**
Internship relevant to major	3.25	3.52	4.10	4.11	0.000	3>1**; 4>1**; 3>2**; 4>2**
Having university degree	3.63	3.81	4.32	4.57	0.000	3>3**; 4>3**
Leadership	4.15	4.14	4.59	4.31	0.017	3>1**; 3>2**
Written communication skills	4.14	4.16	4.54	4.27	0.025	3>1**; 3>2**
Problem-solving skills	4.19	4.25	4.70	4.33	0.002	3>1**; 3>2**3>4**
Extra-curricular activities	3.73	3.65	4.19	3.62	0.035	3>1*; 3>2**; 3>4**
Critical thinking skills	4.07	4.15	4.61	4.24	0.001	3>1**; 3>2**; 3>4**
Analytic thinking skills	3.88	4.09	4.49	4.18	0.001	3>1**3>2**; 3>4*; 4>1*
Knowing at least one language	3.43	3.40	2.90	2.54	0.000	1>3*; 1>4**; 2>3*; 2>4**
Having a career goal	4.35	4.13	4.46	4.02	0.026	1>4*; 3>2*3>4**
Good technology skills	3.94	3.84	4.47	4.17	0.002	3>1**; 3>2**; 4>2**
Importance scale: 1=very important & 5=very unimportant; p-sig.: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ Performance scale: 1=strongly agree & 5=strongly disagree						

DISCUSSION

The findings of this exploratory study provided new insights about the attributes/factors (as brand associations) that students perceive as important in creating a student personal brand, as well as evaluations of their performance of each of the attributes/factors. While students perceive most of the attributes important for creating a strong personal brand, some of the most important attributes are intrinsic attributes that are related to person himself/herself. The top ten most important attributes for creating a strong student personal brand are self-motivation, having a strong work ethic, verbal communications, problem solving, being self-disciplined, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, having a university degree, leadership and analytical thinking. The attributes/factors that are relevant for student personal branding are consistent with those of prior research (e.g., Burnison, 2018; Chang, 2018; Job Outlook, 2016; Korach, 2015; NACE, 2018). Concerning the students' evaluation of their performance on the attributes, the highest are problem-solving skills, having a strong work ethic, leadership, written communications skills, critical thinking skills, self-motivation, verbal communications skills, having a career goal, being self-disciplined, and interpersonal skills. Even though the strength of these attributes depends on the individual, they can be improved with educational experience. It is interesting to note in Figure 1 that students evaluate their performance lower than the importance of most of the personal branding attributes, except a few attributes for which importance is perceived higher than performance.

The comparisons of importance and performance of the personal branding attributes in Figure 2 confirm the existence of differences or gaps (importance – performance) for perceived importance and performance in creating student personal brands. The positive gaps indicate that students do not feel they are performing well enough to meet their expectations in creating their personal brand. From the implication perspective, this suggests that university administrators should focus on providing a learning environment and educational experience for students to improve the deficient attributes during their education tenure. In fact, the gaps point out the so-called deficient areas for the university administrators to improve on to meet their students' expectations for becoming strong brands; this, in turn, could create a competitive advantage in attracting better students. For example, administrators could develop strategies to improve the largest gaps or deficient attributes of an internship relevant to major, work experience in a major, self-motivation, having a strong work ethic, verbal communications, an internship at a reputable company, being self-disciplined, having a university degree, and being self-confident. Improvement of the personal branding attributes, especially those perceived as the most important for personal branding, would benefit students for having a strong personal brand, as well as improving the image of the university.

In addition, the comparisons by student gender found that females attach significantly more importance to some of the attributes for creating strong student personal brands (Figure 3). The findings may suggest that females are more aware of the importance of the attributes for their personal brands; thus, more serious about creating strong personal brands. Regarding performance, female students believe that they perform higher on some of the attributes; however, the comparisons that revealed non-significant results (excluded in Figure 3) indicate that gender did not influence the students' perceptions of their performance on certain attributes. Concerning the comparisons by class level, the comparisons in Table 1 indicate that freshmen students attach significantly higher importance than seniors to all of the branding attributes and sophomore students attach significantly higher importance than seniors to two branding attributes. Additionally, while there are no certain patterns for the results, the post-hoc pair wise comparisons indicate that the upper-class students of juniors and seniors indicate that they perceive their performance significantly higher than freshman and sophomore students on most the branding attributes, which may reflect the upper-class students' educational experiences compared to the lower-class students.

The managerial implications are that a) universities must work harder to improve some of the attributes for males than females. In today's global and competitive marketplace, companies must recruit the best college graduates, regardless of their gender, in order to successfully compete and survive profitability. Moreover, given the growing importance of branding (Keller, 2013; Olins, 2003) and personal branding for differentiation (Khedher, 2015; Manai & Holmlund, 2014) and its potential benefits (Taylor, 1988; Knouse et al., 2011; Gault et al., 2000) in a global market, the findings of this study offer better understanding of

the importance and performance of the student branding attributes for creating strong student brands. In addition, as Khedher (2015) suggests that the dominant emphasis for personal branding is on self-management, the findings regarding the importance of personal branding attributes (brand associations), especially deficient areas (gaps), provide an opportunity for students to better manage their personal brands. Moreover, since students are the “products” of universities, successful, strong student brands positively contribute to university image in creating a strong university brand.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides new insights about the attributes for creating strong (student) personal brands, it has some limitations that should be considered while interpreting the findings. One limitation is that the study was conducted with American students at two universities. More studies can be conducted with students from other universities in the U.S. as well as in other countries for cross-country and/or economic level comparisons. The findings of such studies could be beneficial in the global marketplace. Second, the study focuses on understanding student perceptions of attributes that contribute to building their personal branding in higher education environments. However, it does not incorporate students’ perceptions of the attributes that evolve through their engagement in their social media platforms. A future study that incorporates student involvement with various social media and community sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, personal blog) to build their personal brand would offer a valuable insight. One such study, for example, investigates how Ball State University marketing students engage with personal branding in LinkedIn (Waggoner & Yates Habich, 2020). Third, using a convenience sample from two universities is another limitation of this research. Future studies can use a probability random sampling method to improve the generalizability of the findings. Finally, the study presents only the students’ perceptions. Future research can include employers and university administrators, faculty members, librarians, career counselors, and alumni so that the comparisons can provide a more holistic perspective for creating strong student brands.

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