

Science in the spotlight – What academics think about personal branding?

29.12.2025

In a world where attention is becoming currency, also academics must learn to position themselves. However, there is a tension between academic integrity and personal branding. A German-Finnish study conducted as part of a master's thesis reveals the expectations and attitudes of academics towards personal branding and the cultural differences that play a role.

Personal branding as a new key competence

Today, companies and institutions communicate via social media, careers are international, and competition is intensifying. The digital professional world challenges employees to increasingly also publish and publicize their work. Targeted positioning through personal branding is therefore gaining importance in all professional groups (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Qyll, 2021; Spall & Schmidt, 2019; Szántó et al., 2025). Academia is also turning its attention to this area and investigating the impact of personal branding (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Scheidt, 2020; Szántó, 2023; Tazi Riffi & Zohri, 2024). Some studies focus on specific occupational groups (Chen & Chung, 2016; Horky & Rudeloff, 2024; Kannasto, 2020, 2021; Qyll, 2021), and more recently also on academics (Borman-Shoap et al., 2019; Mantulenko et al., 2020; Phutrakul et al., 2017; Ramezani et al., 2024).

The invisible researcher

Academics play a central role in the knowledge society (Ramezani et al., 2024). They conduct research, teach, and contribute their findings to societal development – yet they often remain in the background. Self-promotion is frequently considered inappropriate in academia (Jankowitsch, 2021). However, reality is changing: Funding, projects and careers increasingly depend on the status researchers achieve with their expertise and public visibility (Adlmaier-Herbst & Mayer, 2021), thus adding emphasis on personal branding. The responsibility to communicate knowledge effectively and position oneself as a competent voice in the field is also growing within the context of science communication (Jankowitsch, 2021). Studies that specifically address the wishes and attitudes of academics and their relation to personal branding are lacking, as are country comparisons regarding cultural factors. Anna Wirz addresses this topic in her master's thesis, "Personal Branding Framework for Academics – An Analysis of Expectations, Motivations, and Settings in Finland and Germany." The aim was to capture the expectations, motivations, and necessary framework conditions of academics regarding personal branding and to examine the cultural components in a cross-country comparison to create a basis for target group-specific personal branding concepts and further research.

Mixed-methods study in Finland and Germany

A quantitative online survey asked staff members who hold a doctoral degree and work at Ansbach University of Applied Sciences in Germany and Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences in Finland about their attitudes toward personal branding. Qualitative interviews with branding experts from both countries provided deeper insights. The comparison between Finland and Germany revealed differing attitudes and cultural aspects of personal branding.

Perceptions on personal branding

The study showed that academics are well aware of the meaning of personal branding and consider it crucial, but rarely implement it strategically. The biggest hurdle is a lack of time, compounded by cultural skepticism towards self-promotion, inhibitions about public exposure, and fear of potential criticism. While Finnish participants generally have a positive attitude towards personal branding, in Germany a negative attitude prevails, along with the pressure to position oneself through academic competition. Concerns about data protection also play a limiting role in Germany, which was found less relevant in Finland. Based on the analysis, the "fun factor" in personal branding is missing in both countries. Differences also emerge in the development of necessary skills. German researchers see the greatest need in developing a brand identity and creating suitable content, as well as in media skills; Finnish academics would like more technical support. In both countries, personal branding primarily aims to position oneself as a subject matter expert – not on self-promotion, but on visibility for research. Credibility, professionalism, and authenticity were found crucial, while financial incentives seemed irrelevant.

Institutions as partners and supporters

Many respondents perceived the support they receive from their university regarding personal branding as insufficient yet considered it an important factor. German academics prefer a personal contact person, while Finnish participants prefer templates and forms. Both groups want practical and easy-to-use digital tools that they can use independently. The results imply that by providing resources, training, and appropriate measures, universities could play a key role, thereby not only strengthening their staff but also their own brand perception. Several studies conclude that the academic's personal brand also contributes to the institution's brand (Borman-Shoap et al., 2019; Mantulenko et al., 2020; Phutrakul et al., 2017).

A contribution to the future of academic visibility

The thesis study makes an important contribution to the still-emerging field of academic personal branding. It shows that cultural factors, individual motivation and institutional frameworks are relevant and should be taken into account in personal branding strategies. Academics don't need basic training, but rather tailored concepts that are enjoyable, geared towards their needs, and support them in building their academic brand simply and efficiently. Universities play a central role in this, as they can use resources to promote the personal branding of their employees—and simultaneously their own brand. After all, personal branding is not a trend, but a future skill in the academic world.

Background of the article

This article is based on a master's thesis written as part of a double-degree program at Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences in Finland in the International Business Management master's program and at Ansbach University of Applied Sciences in Germany in the Public Relations and Corporate Communications master's program. Theseus: https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:amk-2025121838007

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