

***Personal Branding on Instagram:
The Challenges Encountered by Saudi Female Fitness Trainers***

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Abstract

In Saudi Arabia, significant investments in fitness field reinforcements were started since the announcement of the 2030 vision. Instagram is a popular marketing platform for fitness professionals. This study investigates the challenges Saudi female fitness trainers face when using Instagram as a personal branding tool. A purposive, typical sample of eleven Saudi female fitness trainers participated in two focus groups. The results indicated that factors such as media coverage, branding professionals and branding awareness were needed to enhance the personal branding strategies among the trainers. Social shyness was found as a personal barrier, which was associated with society's expectations' of females' social roles. There was also a relation between the type of sport and the choices to start the personal branding journey. Moreover, religious values, family traditions, and conservatism were identified as the main challenges for Saudi female fitness trainers.

Keywords: Athlete Branding, Instagram, Saudi Female Exercises, Self-presentation, Sports Marketing

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Introduction

As Saudi women are expected to be conservative regarding their presentation in public, veiling could affect their online visual presentation selections. Instagram is one of the most popular applications among Saudi women (CITC 2015). It was launched in 2010 as a visual communication facility. It was created by Mike Krieger mainly for sharing photographs. Studying Instagram from an academic position represents how it is valuable and practical as a tool for personal branding (Al-Eisa et al. 2016, Doherty 2017, dos Santos and Fermino 2016, Gainor 2017, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2016, Lupinetti 2015, Smith and Sanderson 2015).

This study investigates the online personal branding challenges for Saudi female fitness trainers. Moreover, it tracks their drawbacks to present their online brand images. Furthermore, it contributes to Saudi Arabia's female empowerment campaign. It will target a significant part of the 2030 vision that aims to increase the numbers of weekly fitness practitioners from 13% to 40%. Athlete influencers are an essential part of this change, so I believe my study's findings will be helpful for our country's development and the Saudi women athletes who strategically use Instagram to build their brand names. Limited research has introduced evidence of the motivations, opportunities, and cultural challenges of using Instagram for athlete branding. Moreover, cultural aspects of Muslim women regarding their social roles and public presentation create a considerable gap to investigate.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Role Theory (RT)

Social roles are actions based on social positions or contexts. Those roles create different behaviours (Biddle 2013). In social science, the orientation of the role has progressively evolved from several social interests. The social psychologist George H. Mead theorised that individuals act on socially prescribed themes in prescribed situations (Incorvia 2014, Mead 1934). According to Parsons (2013), roles are crucial to comprehending social actions, and the performers are driven by a series of internal or external expectations. The social structure for their performance judges them.

In general, Role Theory RT includes expectations for how individuals should behave to secure society's acceptance (Lobpries, Bennett, and Brison 2018). This theory was defined by Biddle (2013) as, "a science concerned with the study of behaviours that are characteristic of persons within contexts and with various processes that presumably produce, explain, or are affected by those behaviours" (P:394).

The significance of testing the RT appears when investigating people's tendency to form stereotypes or cultural beliefs, based on their observations of sub-groups positions in the society and inferring that each position has similar role patterns (Eagly, Wood, and Diekmann 2000, Biddle 2013). For instance, men's and women's roles have their roots primarily in humans' evolutionary physical characteristics differences, particularly different size and strength of the body and unique female pregnancy ability (Eagly, Wood, and Diekmann 2000).

In line with RT, the Saudi female fitness trainers' public presentation's appropriateness is associated with cultural and religious codes. Being a Muslim woman and a Muslim family member adds unique cultural expectations from those women in terms of social roles they should play to satisfy society. Saudi female fitness trainers are limited based on Saudi and

Muslim society's expectations of social roles and acceptable behavioural tendencies for a Muslim woman.

1.1.1 Role Ambiguity

Some fundamental roles have always been associated with a clear foundation and definitions of that role. For instance, a father is responsible for protecting his children even if this fatherhood role has been differently performed within different cultural perspectives. However, some social roles, mainly those considered new, are differently defined and performed concerning different cultural needs. For instance, bringing Saudi women into the fitness field as professionals adds new social roles for them and a lack of information around the characteristics and structure of these roles in society (Gleave et al., 2009).

Role theory theorised that when individuals experience a lack of the information needed to practice their roles and positions or overcome the conflicts of their different roles, this ambiguity of roles would ineffectively impact their satisfaction and performance (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). Therefore, investigating the role ambiguity of being a Saudi Muslim female fitness trainer would benefit the athlete branding awareness degree and strategies utilised to present this role.

1.1.2 Role Conflict

RT provides a lens to study those Saudi female fitness trainers' who are aware and desire to present themselves to the public for branding purposes. However, they encounter challenges regarding the conflict of being expected to behave religiously and culturally strict within their selections of public presentations and their Instagram usage to build their brand image and show an attractive appearance to attract clients and sponsors.

Following Muslim traditions and values, some roles conflict with some aspects of athlete branding strategies, which led them to practice online self-presentation differently from non-Muslim female athletes. The Saudi female athletes' roles are highly associated with society's acceptance, where religious values and social respect dominate an individual's public behaviours and attitudes.

According to Biddle (2013), Role conflict is: "any condition of common or attributed polarised dissensus which poses (usually unspecified) problems for object persons", and polarised dissensus is: "a dissensus in which the expectations compared fall into two or more distinct modes" (P:196). Role theory as an umbrella for role conflict hypothesises that the inconsistency of behaviours that a person is expected to practice will lead to dissatisfaction, pressure and instability (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). The inconsistency here shows in Islam's veiling orders in public and athlete branding strategies to show attractive appearance. Therefore, RT can guide the understanding of the role conflicts that caused difficulties for Saudi female athletes, mainly those who follow the rules of Islam, regarding their different roles in Saudi society and their desire to build their public branded persona.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Personal Branding

The concept of personal branding was introduced in 1980 in *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* by Al Ries and Jack Trout. They described an action that increases career successes in a notion called "positioning" (Khedher 2014, Ries, Trout, and Kotler 2001). The positioning concept was adopted in the literature until the notion of "self-branding" was initially introduced by Peters (1997) in his book *The Brand Called You*. Personal branding did not focus at that time on online practices; however, it became increasingly essential to associate it with the digital world today, especially since marketing workers describe social media as a crucial marketing tool (Baym 2015, Duffy, Pruchniewska, and Scolere 2017, Gandini 2016, Hearn 2017, Khedher 2014).

Personal branding is how a person wants their image to be seen by employers, consumers, followers, and professional peers, by having a unique personality and identity (Brems et al., 2017, Chen 2013, Evans 2017). This process is also called self-branding, self-marketing and self-promotion. Those terminologies lead to the same concept of how individuals position themselves in the market to succeed in any career (Montoya and Vandehey 2009, Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber 2013). According to Marcoux (2017), personal branding is "building your reputation, growing your following, and constructing your name" (p:8). Differently, Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) described personal branding as promoting actions for individuals in the market instead of focusing on products. Furthermore, it was defined in her book chapter as; "a planned process in which people make efforts to market themselves"(p:29). In contrast, Johnson (2017) described it as an impression management tools for the audience.

Scholars adapted personal branding as a concept from business and marketing for products and services to social media and marketing. For example, studies have included fashion bloggers' branding by Duffy and Hund (2015), Youtubers' branding (Chen 2013, Cunningham and Craig 2017) and athletes' branding (Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou 2013, Arai, Ko, and Ross 2014, Carlson and Donovan 2013, Geurin 2017, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2016, Hambrick and Mahoney 2011, Hodge and Walker 2015, Kunkel et al. 2019, Park, Williams, and Son 2020, Parmentier and Fischer 2012, Sharifzadeh, Brison, and Bennett 2019, Yiran Su, Baker, and Thilo 2020).

2.2 Branding on Online Social Networks

OSN are useful tools for personal branding with visual and textual features that allow self-presentation. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat are websites and applications that enable users to establish their profiles to communicate with each other by several actions such as follows, comments, direct messages, likes, etc. (Al-Suwaidi 2014, Baker 2016). Thus, athletes should recognise the constant need to participate in digital markets and understand the vital role of OSN as a channel for human resources to find the right candidate (Johnson 2017; Wetsch 2012).

Studies assert the need for consistency on OSN to build a personal brand; unregulated online interactions might lead to pressure and risk of reputation and negative judgements and feedback that could harm the athlete (Marwick 2015, Marwick and Boyd 2011). For example, Morrison, the basketball player, was downgraded to Florida's minor league because of his

Twitter activities. Despite this, many athletes use OSN to promote themselves and brand their names (Brown 2011, Sanderson 2013; Smith and Sanderson 2015, Whitmer 2018).

This study will discuss the branding challenges for Saudi female fitness trainers on Instagram. Companies consider the Instagram platform a powerful marketing tool (Alharethi 2016). Park et al. (2020) found that Instagram is the most favourable platform for athletes utilising social media for personal branding purposes. Thus, Instagram was chosen as a practical context to discuss the exercisers' online branding challenges.

Research Questions

Based on the above discussion, the following questions have been generated:

RQ 1. What are the cultural challenges that Saudi female fitness trainers encounter in their online branding journey?

RQ 2. What are the personal challenges that Saudi female fitness trainers face in their online branding journey?

RQ 3. What are other challenges of personal branding that Saudi female fitness trainers encounter in their online branding journey?

3. Methods

For my descriptive qualitative research, I aim to understand the online personal branding challenges, such as privacy, veiling and gender segregation. I already built an initial understanding of the challenges that I encountered in my branding practices as a Saudi woman through my personal experience on Instagram (Basabain et al., 2021). In his book *The Body Silent*, the cultural anthropologist Robert Murphy (2001) advocates the need to connect auto-ethnographies with existing theories to build an initial understanding of the research problem. Therefore, this study investigates the phenomenon of Saudi female fitness trainers' online personal branding challenges by conducting focus groups to build an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of other Saudi female fitness exercisers.

3.1 Virtual Focus Groups

To collect data about the challenges of personal branding practices, I moderated the virtual mode of conducting FGs. Virtual focus groups are defined as: "Focus group conducted using some form of mediated communication, such as the internet or telephone, rather than face-to-face" (Braun and Clarke, 2013. p.457). FG method started before the digital era. It was first laid by the social scientist Robert Merton and colleagues in the 1940s (Braun and Clarke 2013: 159), even earlier in 1926 by Emory Bogardus, described it as group interviews in marketing research (Bogardus 1926, Liamputtong 2011: 2, Robson and McCartan 2016: 298).

Many researchers have recently conducted virtual forms such as chat, audio, and video applications for many reasons (Adler and Zarchin 2002, Fox, Morris, and Rumsey 2007, Reisner et al. 2018, Rezabek 2000). Online FGs overcome the participants' physical barriers in different places, let them feel more comfortable in their homes or workplaces, and overcome the fear of meeting strangers in unfamiliar places (Fox, Morris, and Rumsey 2007). Researchers switch to virtual FGs to have a record for the session transcribed easily for thematic analysis (Robson and McCartan 2016). Furthermore, due to the Coronavirus global pandemic social distancing guidelines, I include one more significant need to shift for digital communication technologies.

My main direction in the typical case approach sampling procedure is to recruit Saudi female fitness trainers to understand how they negotiate their branding challenges. Following the sample size guide of conducting inductive FGs, I invited eleven heterogeneous Saudi female fitness trainers to my three online FGs to ensure a more profound understanding. The first FG that was conducted as a pilot study contained three trainers. The other two focus groups consisted of four participants each. Small numbers of participants help to better moderate the chances of answering and negotiating the questions. The participants were given pseudonyms as “Fatina, Dalal, Amna, Marwa, Areen, Ruba, Daleen, Reemas, Nawal, Fawzya and Farah”. Heterogeneity refers to people with different perspectives and diverse opinions of the phenomenon (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Liamputtong, 2011b), which leads to collecting a wider image of the Saudi exerciser's opinions and experiences.

4. Result and Discussion

The following are the thematic analysis guidelines used in this study by Davis et al. (2012, pp. 361-362): (1) analytical reading and notation for the focus groups data; (2) generating codes, (3) specifying thematic categories, (4) formulation and building connections that build understanding and answer research questions. Thematic analysis (TA) is defined as follows: “form of analysis which has the theme as its unit of analysis, and which looks across data from many different sources to identify themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 455). It was also defined as: "A method of categorizing data into thematic categories" (Davis et al., 2012, p. 343).

RQ 1 examined the cultural challenges encountered by Saudi female fitness trainers in their online branding journey. They encountered several significant cultural challenges. The findings in this section were categorised into four main themes. Three themes are adopted from (Basabain et al. 2021), coded as: “ Family and social traditions, Followers bullying and Religious values”. Husband’s jealousy was raised as a cultural challenge encountered by the participants. The findings were demonstrated in table 1.

Table 1: Cultural Challenges

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>Findings examples</i> |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Family and social traditions</i> | <p>Dalal: Because Instagram is an open platform and because the values of the society in which we live do not allow for a more open appearance. I preferred to respect that.</p> <p>Amna: My family doesn't help me and never accepts seeing me unveiled in public, even though I believe I'm not making a mistake at all, and these are my true values, so I kept the idea out of my head to hold myself away from their criticism.</p> <p>Ruba: More than one TV channel asked me to appear on a live broadcast, and I could not attend because of my family's refusal; being seen visually is difficult for families to accept.</p> |
| <i>Followers bullying</i> | <p>Dalal: In real life, I am not veiled, but I cannot practice this online for preventing followers' anger.</p> <p>Ruba: Most of them are social obstacles.</p> |
| <i>Husband's jealousy</i> | <p>Dalal: My husband does not accept that I show myself in public; if he agrees on anything I decide to post, maybe I would be famous now. Before I got married, a long time ago, If I had an Instagram account, I could</p> |

Religious values

introduce myself with normal sportswear. My parents are not conservative, but now my husband is totally refusing that idea.

Amna: Laughs! and says to Dalal, even though my husband is open, his parents aren't.

Veiling

Fatima: because I do not want to show my body parts at all, and I am satisfied with keeping my religious values, But I still think that the veil is not a problem for me.

Fatima: The girl who is not veiling has a much higher chance of Instagram success regardless of her athletic level.

Gender Segregation

Amna: Being segregated from men in gyms does not make much difference regarding my performance, but sometimes I feel that I want my husband to be with me to enjoy our workout together.

Fatima: I feel that the presence of men in gyms is very enthusiastic because it is challenging; their strength sometimes generates high energy and increases performance. But it is still not a big issue for me.

Nawal: I was veiled; I attended a mixed-gender event for a competition, so I was shy, and my performance was unusual. I was not myself, and perhaps because we are not used to mixing gender.

Farah: As a taekwondo "black belt" trainer, I must practice with men to improve the level of my performance; same when it comes to kick Boxing, men have all the details of the game. So, the best exercises with men to perfect the movements of the game in all its details.

RQ 2 examined the personal challenges encountered by Saudi female fitness trainers in their online branding journey. They encountered several significant personal challenges. The findings in this section were categorised into seven main themes. Three themes are adopted and modified from (Basabain et al. 2021), coded as: “Faking personality, Low skills and Low commitment”. The findings were demonstrated in table 2.

Table 2: Personal Challenges

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>Findings examples</i> |
|---------------------------|---|
| <i>Faking personality</i> | Dalal: In real life, I am not veiled, but I cannot practice this online. Amna: I can't change myself; I'm not veiled, I want to show my real self, but I can't. Areen: in my private account, I post and reflect what I strongly believe in; with my Hijab, I present my real identity and reflect my beliefs. |
| <i>Social shyness</i> | Amna: naturally, I am a bashful person. You can say that I do not like to expose myself too much, especially on social media. Nawal: I am happy with women-only gyms. I had an experience in KAUST, I was veiled, and I attended a mixed-gender event for a competition, so I was shy, and my performance was unusual. I was not myself, and perhaps because we are not used to mixing gender. |
| <i>Lack of time</i> | Fatima: Time pressure is restricting me from keeping posting. Marwa: This matter requires time, effort and focus, and I am busy being a |

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p>new mom. Fawzya: Time is the first hindrance.</p> |
| <i>Lack of skills</i> | <p>Areen: I am not fully aware of the capabilities currently available on Instagram to some extent. If I know all the features, it will be better. Fawzya: Likewise, I do not have much experience with technology, photography and montage. Nawal: I do not know much about using Instagram.</p> |
| <i>Lack of effort and commitment</i> | <p>Marwa: those who became famous, I think a big reason is because of their work, diligence, and development for themselves in the field of sports. Marwa: I have no problem when I return to the domain again to work harder to brand my name. Areen: another reason is that I do not put in my full effort. Fawzya: Yes, I have a small to medium number, and it suits my efforts.</p> |
| <i>Lack of branding awareness or desires</i> | <p>Nawal: I have no great experience with it, so I avoided it. Daleen: I just wanted to work, and I haven't thought of earning followers or sponsors.</p> |
| <i>Keeping privacy</i> | <p>Dalal: I show myself because I want to market myself and become known; this is more convincing to the clients; being a ghost in my account is ridiculous. that is why I keep my account require access approval, then I select who to accept even if minor.</p> |

RQ 3 examined the other challenges of personal branding the exercisers need to overcome. Two key findings were raised. One is categorised as professional challenges, and the other was challenges related to the type of sport. One of the themes under the category of professional challenges was adopted from (Basabain et al. 2021), coded as: “Lack of sports facilities”. The findings were demonstrated in table 3,4.

Table 3: Professional Challenges

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>Findings examples</i> |
|--|---|
| <i>Lack of media, brand management</i> | <p>Marwa: I am still not presented my work in the media, and I admit I don't attend sports meetings and events, which in my opinion, would increase the number of an athlete's Instagram followers. Fawzya: I must seek a specialist who organises my social media and helps me get more clients. Ruba: I believe that appearing in TV interviews could grant me more than the 11,000 followers I struggled to gain after I was invited on Radio channels and my efforts on social media.</p> |
| <i>Lack of sports facilities</i> | <p>Areen: I usually buy modest sportswear before travelling to Dubai for international qualifications courses. Amna: I attended international courses with men instructors. But that was under-covered because, before the new Saudi, it was not allowed to give mixed classes. They implemented some undercover courses by master trainers from the US and Canada; I am sure I gained huge knowledge and practice.</p> |

Table 4: The Challenges Related to Some Types of Sports

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>Findings examples</i> |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <i>inappropriate positions</i> | Fawzya: As a PT, I think I can post my exercises and pictures with my Hijab; there is no contradiction, especially that I can choose exercises that are simple and moderate in terms of their positions. Amna: In addition, Yoga has embarrassing and somehow unusual positions, and it is difficult for me to display comfortably, even with modest clothing. Farah: Regarding the Taekwondo movements, some movements can be done, and others are hard with Hijab. To be honest, I am more relieved when practising Taekwondo without the veil. exercises in terms of their positions. |
| <i>Inappropriate dress code</i> | Dalal: I am facing a big obstacle; although I don't mind showing up in moderate clothing, my sport type is difficult. I train an oriental dance, and it doesn't fully fit with the veiled appearance; it must show the body's charms almost half-naked. Imagine me dancing with a veil would be so funny! And just filming the leg area while dancing, that's never going to be convincing! |

This study's results indicate several significant findings that are associated with the previous literature. Regarding the athlete branding challenges, Lobpries et al. (2018) and Parmentier and Fischer (2012) reported that an athlete's professional image would not stand alone. There is a significant need for mainstream media brand management efforts to building an athlete brand. The current study confirms that the participants encounter a lack of media coverage and branding management in line with the previous finding. However, exposure to visual media was unexpected behaviour for Ruba's family, and this makes this finding shifted to a cultural challenge as well as a professional challenge; she stated that:

"More than one TV channel asked me to appear on a live broadcast, and I could not attend because of my family's refusal, while I believe that appearing in TV interviews could grant me more than the 11,000 followers I struggled to gain after I was invited on Radio channels and my efforts on social media, but being seen visually is difficult for families to accept".

Moreover, Marwa, who has a supportive family, said, "I am still not exposed to the media". Here she indicated that a lack of media representation could slow down her brand name construction, coded as a professional challenge.

On the other hand, Fawzya confirms that professional branding management needs to help her build her brand on social media "I must seek the help of a specialist, who organise my social media and help me through getting more clients".

The current study also confirms the result of the study done by Wetsch (2012), which indicated the need to build awareness of practical branding opportunities, abilities, and strategies via social media. Some participants showed a lack of branding awareness, and they felt sufficiency with their usual routine.

"I have no great experience with it, so I avoided it".

"I just wanted to work, and I haven't thought of earning followers".

Types of sports raised a non-expected challenge. As being a personal trainer, this challenge was not encountered, which also the personal trainer Fawzya confirmed when she stated:

“As a PT, I think I can post my exercises and pictures with my Hijab; there are no contradictions, especially that I can choose exercises that are simple and moderate in terms of their positions”.

The challenge was encountered by three trainers of “Yoga, Belly dancing and Taekwondo”. As they stated that:

“I am facing a big obstacle; although I don't mind showing up in moderate clothing, my sport type is difficult. I train an oriental dance, and it doesn't fully fit with the veiled appearance; it must show the body's charms almost half-naked. Imagine me dancing with a veil would be so funny! I think Filming the leg area while dancing, that's never going to be convincing!”.

“Yoga has embarrassing and somehow unusual positions, and it is difficult for me to display comfortably even with modest clothing”.

“Regarding the Taekwondo movements, some movements can be done, and others are hard with Hijab. To be honest, I am more relieved when practising Taekwondo without the veil”.

In line with SRT, this result indicated that social shyness as a dominant female feature was found a challenge to some extent. As one of the participants stated that:

“Naturally, I am a bashful person. You can say that I do not like to expose myself too much, especially in social media”.

The above comments confirmed Lobpries et al.'s (2018) research, which reported that being bold and assertive is what some female athletes feel is not appropriate when they brand their names; they also imply that women have not been encouraged to talk about themselves. It also supports women's traditional stereotyping and expectations as more satisfied when supporting others, rather than talking about their strengths (Moss-Racusin and Rudman 2010).

It is also clear that the participants raised similar challenges as the researcher found through analysing her personal experience (Basabain et al., 2021). Most of the exercisers' families expect roles from them as women are stereotyped in relation to their religious values, customs, traditions, and conservatism level. The fear of being criticised by others in their community was also why they held back and kept away from branding themselves. As personal challenges, lack of time was found to be a barrier that affects their consistency.

Conclusion

This study resulted in several significant findings. It had reported various types of challenges that encountered by Saudi female fitness trainers through their Instagram branding journey. The findings were classified in four main categories as personal challenges, cultural challenges, professional challenges and The challenges related to some types of sports. The challenges faced by Saudi female fitness trainers were in line with the findings that were revealed in the literature of athletes personal branding challenges in regard to personal and professional challenges such as, social shyness, lack of branding awareness and lack of media coverage. However, cultural challenges and types of sports were an addition to the literature of Muslim female athletes' personal branding. Saudi and Muslim cultures are ruled by strict and conservative sharia laws, the appearance of Muslim women in public should be mostly

modest and lack of attractiveness. Thus, regarding social roles of the Saudi female fitness trainers, the participants showed role ambiguity and conflict around their two different roles as being Muslims and self branders, with the respect of their cultural norms. To secure their societies acceptance, they cared for avoiding followers' bullying, husbands' jealousy, breaking religious values and families' traditions. Which affected their selection of self presentation on Instagram. The types of sports revealed more challenges; for instance, the appropriateness of the sport's dress code. As an example, belly dancing outfits are typically far away from modesty which caused a major drawback for the Saudi female belly dancing trainer. Yoga's bold poses were also not appropriate with the modest Hijaby Saudi female Yoga instructor. Both reported that it is inappropriate and uncomfortable to practice their professions in public. Further studies are recommended to conduct a qualitative individual in-depth interviews on the challenges of personal branding among Muslim female athletes to build deeper understanding of the cultural challenges in the online personal branding practices that could be a start point for exploring thier practices. Researcher are recommended to find solutions to avoid the conflict for those athlete to practice their rights of utilising Instagram as a branding tool, within social acceptance of Muslim societies. Moreover, this research was limited to Instagram use, and researchers can investigate the challenges on other visual or textual based platforms used for self branding.

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