Identifying and Ranking Factors Affecting Personal Branding in the Food Industry Using the Network Analysis Process (ANP) Method

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The purpose of this study is to identify and rank the factors influencing personal branding in the food industry. Accordingly, this research is exploratory in nature and was conducted in two stages. The first stage employed the grounded theory approach, which is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of methodology. Specifically, Strauss and Corbin's (1998) systematic coding procedure was used, encompassing three main steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The second stage applied the Analytic Network Process (ANP) method, which is applied in terms of purpose and quantitative and descriptive–survey in terms of method. The statistical population consisted of managers in Iran's food industry, from whom 19 individuals were selected through non-probability judgmental (purposive) sampling. Using the ANP technique, the relative importance of the identified factors was analyzed, and the prioritization was conducted with the aid of Super Decisions software. The results indicated that, within the variable of causal conditions, individual characteristics ranked first, followed by business characteristics. Within the context variable, social, economic, and political issues, cultural values, global dynamics, and public opinions and beliefs were prioritized. For the intervening conditions, criticism and feedback, audience expectations, the gap between virtual and real environments, and social norms were prioritized. Regarding the strategies variable, the priorities included adopting distinctive approaches, market research, social responsibility, social networking, appropriate visualization tools, goal orientation, and behavioral identity tools. Finally, in the outcome variable, the priorities were advancing company objectives, attracting and retaining audiences, saving time and space, enhancing communication quality, achieving internal satisfaction, and gaining reputation.

Keywords: *personal brand, personal branding, food industry, Analytic Network Process (ANP)*

1. Introduction

In today's dynamic and hyperconnected business environment, the concept of personal branding has evolved into a strategic necessity rather than a mere marketing trend. Individuals—particularly professionals, entrepreneurs, and leaders—are increasingly perceived as brands whose identity, reputation, and value proposition can shape not only their career trajectories but also the performance and image of their organizations (Vinmalar, 2025). The growing attention to personal branding stems from the convergence of digital transformation, globalization, and the rise of social media as dominant communication platforms, where identity and visibility have become core elements of professional success. In this context, personal branding represents a deliberate and strategic effort to influence public perception and establish a distinct professional persona in the marketplace (Szántó et al., 2025).

Personal branding is broadly defined as a process of creating, positioning, and maintaining an individual's professional identity that differentiates them from others in similar fields (Szanto & Radácsi, 2023). As emphasized by Montoya (2024), one of the pioneers of the concept, personal branding involves identifying unique value propositions, aligning them with audience expectations, and communicating them consistently across platforms. This process extends beyond self-promotion; it encompasses authenticity, competence, and emotional resonance with the audience (Montoya, 2024). Scholars assert that successful personal branding enhances credibility, visibility, and perceived expertise, allowing individuals to build trust-based relationships with stakeholders (Muszyńska, 2021).

In managerial and organizational contexts, personal branding has become a strategic factor influencing both individual and institutional success. Managers who develop strong personal brands contribute to organizational reputation and stakeholder trust (Smolarek & Dzieńdziora, 2022). According to Walczak-Skałecka (2022), personal branding serves as a tool for shaping organizational culture and promoting values such as transparency, innovation, and ethical behavior. The image and communication style of top managers often reflect the organization's identity, linking personal and corporate brands in a symbiotic relationship (Scheidt, 2021). Thus, understanding and managing personal branding among executives and employees is crucial for achieving organizational legitimacy and market differentiation (Mollaei et al., 2021).

The digital age has amplified the strategic importance of personal branding. Platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter have transformed the way professionals construct and communicate their personal brands (Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). Through these channels, individuals can directly interact with audiences, showcase expertise, and build emotional connections (Trang et al., 2023). Studies show that Generation Z professionals and students actively use social media to display personal attributes aligned with career goals and organizational fit (Trang et al., 2023). Similarly, athletes, artists, and influencers leverage digital storytelling to create multidimensional brand identities (Vincent et al., 2024). Vincent et al. (2024) highlighted how public figures such as Marcus Rashford have transformed personal branding into a form of social leadership, merging personal values with community engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the convergence of digital presence and personal reputation, making virtual platforms indispensable tools for personal brand management (Pazmino & Pack, 2022). In the post-pandemic landscape, online visibility became synonymous with professional credibility. Remote work, virtual collaboration, and global networking have blurred traditional boundaries of professional identity, compelling individuals to redefine how they present themselves to diverse audiences (Pazmino & Pack, 2022). This shift highlights the growing need for strategic, ethical, and sustainable personal branding practices that maintain authenticity while adapting to digital ecosystems (Ramli, 2021).

From a theoretical standpoint, the foundations of personal branding can be traced to principles of identity construction, self-presentation, and symbolic interactionism. Scholars such as Szántó et al. (2025) argue that despite its growing significance, personal branding remains conceptually fragmented. Their study emphasizes the need for a standardized framework for measuring personal brand equity, integrating elements of brand awareness, perceived authenticity, and stakeholder trust (Szántó et al., 2025). Similarly, Kunkel et al. (2022) expanded the discussion by exploring strategic philanthropy as a means for individuals—particularly athletes—to enhance personal brand authenticity and societal relevance. Through philanthropic engagement, personal brands can transcend commercial objectives and evolve into vehicles of social value creation (Kunkel et al., 2022).

In the Iranian context, research on personal branding has gained considerable attention in recent years. Hassanpoor et

al. (2021) identified key dimensions of employee personal branding in the Iran Insurance Industry, highlighting competencies such as communication, professionalism, and ethical conduct as central components. Their findings underscore the contextual and cultural nature of personal branding in non-Western environments (Hassanpoor et al., 2021). Similarly, Mollaei et al. (2021) proposed a model emphasizing the role of organizational training in fostering employee personal brands within the Iranian judiciary, revealing how institutional support can enhance self-development and professional visibility (Mollaei et al., 2021). Mortazavi et al. (2021) specifically examined personal branding in Iran's food industry, identifying causal conditions such as individual characteristics, business traits, and environmental dynamics as determinants of brand success (Mortazavi et al., 2021).

The food industry provides a particularly rich context for studying personal branding, as it integrates both tangible and experiential dimensions of consumer engagement. Professionals in this sector—chefs, product designers, marketers, and entrepreneurs—must balance creativity, authenticity, and technical expertise to establish credible personal brands (Ramazani et al., 2024). Moreover, food-related brands are increasingly tied to ethical consumption, sustainability, and cultural identity, which demand transparency and trust from industry actors (Zarei et al., 2023). As Zarei et al. (2023) demonstrated, the use of social networks by managers in business companies provides opportunities to express personal values and differentiate brand identities in competitive markets.

Personal branding is not only a matter of individual advancement but also of strategic organizational value creation. As Smolarek and Dzieńdziora (2022) noted, the development of strong personal brands among managers positively influences professional career trajectories and organizational performance. When employees cultivate distinctive personal brands, they enhance their employability and simultaneously reinforce the organization's overall image (Smolarek & Dzieńdziora, 2022). Muszyńska (2021) further argued that managerial personal branding in service companies strengthens customer relationships by humanizing the corporate brand and creating emotional resonance.

At the same time, personal branding entails ethical and managerial challenges. The pressure to maintain idealized online personas may lead to authenticity dilemmas, particularly among younger professionals seeking employment (Trang et al., 2023). Furthermore, overemphasis on self-promotion may create tension between individual and collective organizational goals (Walczak-Skałecka, 2022). As Ramli (2021) observed, the expressive dimensions of brand personality must remain consistent with genuine behavior and core values to avoid reputation risks. Effective personal branding therefore requires balance between self-expression, authenticity, and ethical accountability (Ramli, 2021).

Recent studies have also examined the intersection of personal branding with leadership and organizational reputation. Scheidt (2021) investigated how top managers strategically construct personal brands to project authority, vision, and trustworthiness, emphasizing the symbolic role of communication and visibility in executive leadership. Similarly, Szanto and Radácsi (2023) proposed that personal brand equity operates as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing identity differentiation, perceived value, and stakeholder loyalty (Szanto & Radácsi, 2023). Their findings underscore that personal branding functions both as a self-marketing strategy and a relational capital-building mechanism.

In the global marketplace, the strategic alignment between personal and corporate brands is increasingly recognized as a driver of organizational performance (Walczak-Skałecka, 2022). Montoya (2024) emphasized that professionals who maintain coherent personal brands can amplify brand loyalty and corporate reputation. Likewise, Kunkel et al. (2022) and Vincent et al. (2024) illustrated that personal branding grounded in social purpose enhances public trust and long-term stakeholder engagement. In a similar vein, Pazmino and Pack (2022) argued that post-pandemic branding strategies integrating human connection and digital storytelling are essential to maintaining relevance and emotional engagement in hybrid work environments.

Despite the growing literature, there remains a lack of empirical consensus on the determinants, structures, and consequences of personal branding, particularly within industry-specific contexts such as food production and distribution (Szántó et al., 2025). Vinmalar (2025) pointed out that while theoretical models of personal branding are well-developed, contextual applications remain underexplored, necessitating more domain-specific and culturally adapted frameworks. Furthermore, Ramazani et al. (2024) highlighted that for knowledge workers, personal branding involves integrating expertise, communication skills, and academic integrity to create an authentic professional identity. The same logic can be extended to

entrepreneurs and managers in creative industries such as food production, where expertise and personality jointly influence public perception (Ramazani et al., 2024).

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that personal branding is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. It operates at the intersection of individual psychology, organizational behavior, and marketing communication. The integration of grounded theory and network analysis methods, as used in recent studies of the Iranian food industry, provides a systematic framework for identifying causal conditions, contextual variables, and strategic actions shaping personal brand outcomes (Mortazavi et al., 2021). Such methodological integration enables researchers to move beyond descriptive accounts toward a structured understanding of personal brand formation, management, and impact.

In summary, personal branding represents a strategic response to the complexities of modern professional life. It allows individuals to differentiate themselves, communicate value, and build trust in a crowded and competitive environment. The literature underscores its significance across cultural, organizational, and digital contexts, revealing both its potential and its challenges. Yet, as recent research indicates, there remains a need for empirical studies that contextualize personal branding within specific industries and cultural frameworks. In the food industry, where authenticity, creativity, and social responsibility intersect, personal branding becomes not only a means of individual distinction but also a mechanism for organizational and societal influence. This study therefore seeks to identify and rank the factors affecting personal branding in the food industry using a mixed-method approach

2. Methods and Materials

This research employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches; therefore, the overall research design is exploratory. Data analysis was conducted using the systematic grounded theory method proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This method includes three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In accordance with the selected research design, a non-probability sampling method was adopted in the qualitative phase, specifically the judgmental (purposive) sampling technique. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, whereby participants were selected intentionally

based on their ability to provide specific and relevant information to the research objectives.

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 managers from Iran's food industry. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, depending on the participant's interest and familiarity with the topic. To enhance validity, feedback was provided to participants, and they were informed about the research process in a way that did not influence their responses. After each interview, the emerging pattern was presented to the interviewee for review and discussion. To ensure reliability, both internal and external evaluation methods were employed. Specifically, the coding results were shared with several experts to solicit their feedback on the accuracy of the labels and coding process.

In the quantitative phase, the study population comprised managers of Iran's food industry. A non-probability sampling method was used to determine a representative number of participants. The main data collection instrument was a questionnaire designed to rank the components of personal branding in the food industry based on the opinions of 19 industry managers. Respondents assigned priority rankings to variables on a 1-to-9 scale (from lowest to highest importance). This stage involved calculating the relative weights of each variable, and by integrating these relative weights, their final (absolute) weights were determined.

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, the consistency ratios of pairwise comparison matrices were examined to confirm the accuracy of respondents' judgments. Quantitative validity was verified using *SuperDecisions* software, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. After data collection, *SuperDecisions* software was also employed to analyze and rank the variables according to the results of the Analytic Network Process (ANP).

3. Findings and Results

This research employed the grounded theory approach. Coding in grounded theory represents a form of content analysis aimed at identifying and conceptualizing key themes and relationships within the data. During the interview analysis, the researcher identifies words, expressions, and recurring ideas that reveal essential aspects of the studied phenomenon. Coding should be conducted with an open mindset, free from preconceived assumptions. The founders of grounded theory emphasize that researchers

should avoid forming premature hypotheses and instead allow theoretical insights to emerge inductively from the data itself. The coding results are presented in the following table.

Table 1

Dimensions, Components, and Indicators of Personal Branding in the Food Industry

Indicator	Component	Dimension
Personal interests and preferences	Personality and attitude	Individual characteristics (Causal conditions)
Innate and acquired abilities	Lifestyle	
Knowledge and expertise		
Creative thinking of the commercial brand	Brand characteristics	
Cultural conflict	National culture	Cultural values (Background conditions)
Individual culture		
Political, economic, and social challenges	Global issues	
National perspectives	Individual beliefs	
Religious beliefs		
Expansion of virtual space	Technological changes	
Negative and positive feedback	Criticism and suggestions	Intervening conditions
Gap between online and offline persona	Difference between virtual and real worlds	
Reduced perception and recognition in virtual spaces		
Initial expectations of the audience	Audience expectation level	
Product experience and generalizability		
Virtual space regulations	Social norms	
Social restrictions and rules		
Maintaining authenticity	Behavioral honesty	Identity tools defined in behavior (Strategies)
Adherence to behavioral norms		
Continuous presence	Product promotion through influencers	
Product presentation with narratives	Alignment of brand with social values	
Use of motivational techniques	Communication with audience	
Use of hashtags	Continuous and stable interaction	
Professional networking	Knowledge transfer and awareness creation	
Communication through Q&A		
Contribution to social improvement	Environmental concern	
Focus on health and hygiene		
Enhancing awareness	Responsiveness to audience needs	
Addressing competitors' weaknesses	Non-imitative and unique behavior	
Providing exceptional services	Publishing engaging content	
Offering diverse and high-quality products		
Aligning personal and organizational goals	Goal orientation	
Avoiding fragmented content		
Developing strategic and intellectual policies		
Identifying competitors	Market selection	
Leveraging borderless virtual platforms	Increasing sales	Advancing organizational goals (Consequences)
Appropriate platforms for online advertising	Career success	
Evaluating potential employees		
Reducing time and cost of customer acquisition	Time and cost efficiency	
Lowering branding and reporting costs		
Decreasing advertising expenses		
Enjoying audience feedback	Internal satisfaction	
Experiencing pleasure and fulfillment at work		
Increasing followers	Audience attraction and retention	
Increasing engagement (likes and views)		
Influencing purchasing decisions		
Increasing loyalty		
Achieving peace of mind	Brand reputation growth	
Enhancing company brand reputation		
Strengthening interpersonal communication	Communication quality improvement	
Engaging audience in business development		
Improved brand evaluation and perception		
Building trust and credibility		

Table 2 presents the inconsistency ratio of the main and sub-factors, calculated to assess the internal consistency and validity of the questionnaire.

Table 2

Inconsistency Ratio of Main and Sub-Factor Indicators

Indicator	Number of Dimensions	Inconsistency Ratio
Causal conditions	2	0.0000
Background conditions	4	0.0908
Intervening conditions	4	0.0441
Strategies	7	0.0919
Consequences	6	0.0594

According to the results obtained from SuperDecisions software, all pairwise comparison matrices exhibited an acceptable level of inconsistency (less than 0.1), indicating satisfactory logical consistency across judgments.

In the present study, the reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to determine the internal consistency of the constructs. The results corresponding to the main research factors are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Cronbach's Alpha Values for Research Indicators

Indicator	Number of Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha
Causal conditions	2	0.74
Background conditions	4	0.82
Intervening conditions	4	0.81
Strategies	7	0.87
Consequences	6	0.84

As indicated in Table 3, the reliability coefficients for all factors exceeded 0.70, confirming acceptable reliability levels.

After structuring the sub-factors for each pairwise comparison matrix of the main factors, matrices reflecting interdependencies among the main and sub-factors were developed. The consistency of these matrices was subsequently verified. This process was conducted for the primary categories of causal conditions, intervening conditions, contextual conditions, strategies, and consequences. The elements of each primary pairwise comparison matrix were derived from the geometric mean of the expert judgments provided by managers in Iran's food industry.

The initial pairwise comparison matrix for the sub-factors of causal conditions was developed using SuperDecisions software based on the questionnaire results. The matrix is presented in Table 4.

The normalized final matrix was then computed, and the results are shown in Table 5.

Table 4

Initial Pairwise Comparison Matrix for Causal Condition Sub-Factors

Causal Conditions	Business Features	Individual Characteristics
Business features	0.1	0.333
Individual characteristics	3.000	0.1

Table 5

Normalized and Idealized Final Matrix for Causal Condition Sub-Factors

Name	Normalized	Ideal	Rank
Business features	0.249	0.333	2
Individual characteristics	0.750	1.000	1

The initial pairwise comparison matrix for the sub-factors of contextual (background) conditions was calculated based on the questionnaire results, as shown in Table 6.

The normalized and idealized final results are shown in Table 7.

Table 6

Initial Pairwise Comparison Matrix for Contextual Condition Sub-Factors

Background Conditions	Ideas and Beliefs	Cultural Values	Dynamic World	Social, Economic, and Political Issues
Ideas and beliefs	0.1	0.25	0.333	0.5
Cultural values	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.5
Dynamic world	0.3	0.5	0.1	0.5
Social, economic, and political issues	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1

Table 7

Normalized and Idealized Final Matrix for Contextual Condition Sub-Factors

Name	Normalized	Ideal	Rank
Ideas and beliefs	0.1037	0.2718	4
Cultural values	0.3119	0.8176	2
Dynamic world	0.2028	0.5318	3
Social, economic, and political issues	0.3814	1.000	1

The initial pairwise comparison matrix for the sub-factors of intervening conditions was developed using SuperDecisions software and is presented in Table 8.

The normalized and idealized results are shown in Table 9.

Table 8

Initial Pairwise Comparison Matrix for Intervening Condition Sub-Factors

Intervening Conditions	Virtual–Real World Difference	Criticism and Suggestions	Social Norms	Audience Expectation Level
Virtual–Real World Difference	0.1	0.25	2.000	0.333
Criticism and Suggestions	0.4	0.1	0.4	0.2
Social norms	0.5	0.25	0.1	0.5
Audience expectation level	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.1

Table 9

Normalized and Idealized Final Matrix for Intervening Condition Sub-Factors

Name	Normalized	Ideal	Rank
Virtual–Real World Difference	0.1354	0.2794	3
Criticism and Suggestions	0.4846	1.000	1
Social Norms	0.1047	0.2160	4
Audience Expectation Level	0.2752	0.5678	2

The initial matrix of strategic sub-factors was generated using SuperDecisions software and is presented in Table 10.

The final normalized matrix was then computed, as shown in Table 11.

Table 10

Initial Pairwise Comparison Matrix for Strategy Sub-Factors

Strategies	Distinctive Approach	Goal Focus	Behavioral Identity Tools	Market Research	Visualization Tools	Social Networking	Social Responsibility
Distinctive approach	0.1	2.0	3.0	2.0	2.0	3.0	4.0
Goal focus	0.5	0.1	3.0	0.5	2.0	0.5	0.333
Behavioral identity tools	0.333	0.333	0.1	0.5	0.333	0.5	0.5
Market research	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2
Visualization tools	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.1	0.5	0.2
Social networking	0.333	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.5
Social responsibility	0.25	0.333	0.2	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.1

Table 11

Normalized and Idealized Final Matrix for Strategy Sub-Factors

Name	Normalized	Ideal	Rank
Distinctive approach	0.2798	1.000	1
Goal focus	0.1098	0.3925	6
Behavioral identity tools	0.0573	0.2049	7
Market research	0.1807	0.6457	2
Visualization tools	0.1166	0.4166	5
Social networking	0.1213	0.4336	4
Social responsibility	0.1342	0.4797	3

The initial matrix of sub-factors for consequences was created using SuperDecisions software, as shown in Table 12.

The normalized and idealized results are presented in Table 13.

Table 12

Initial Pairwise Comparison Matrix for Consequence Sub-Factors

Consequences	Advancing Company Goals	Audience Attraction and Retention	Gaining Fame	Internal Satisfaction	Improving Communication Quality	Saving Time and Space
Advancing company goals	0.1	4.0	5.0	4.0	3.0	2.0
Audience attraction and retention	0.25	0.1	5.0	4.0	3.0	2.0
Gaining fame	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.5	0.333	0.333
Internal satisfaction	0.25	0.25	0.2	0.1	0.5	0.333
Improving communication quality	0.333	0.333	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.333
Saving time and space	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.1

Table 13

Normalized and Idealized Final Matrix for Consequence Sub-Factors

Name	Normalized	Ideal	Rank
Advancing company goals	0.3838	1.000	1
Audience attraction and retention	0.2302	0.5998	2
Gaining fame	0.0460	0.1198	6
Internal satisfaction	0.0657	0.1714	5
Improving communication quality	0.0991	0.2583	4
Saving time and space	0.1749	0.4559	3

4.   Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify and rank the factors influencing personal branding in the food industry using a combination of grounded theory and the Analytic Network Process (ANP) approach. The results revealed that *individual characteristics* ranked highest among the causal conditions influencing personal branding, followed by *business characteristics*. In terms of contextual conditions, *social, economic, and political issues* were identified as the most significant, followed by *cultural values*, *the dynamic world*, and *ideas and beliefs*. Among intervening factors, *criticisms and suggestions* and *audience expectation level* were of primary importance. In the strategic dimension, *adopting a distinct approach*, *market research*, and *social responsibility* ranked highest, while in the outcome dimension, *advancing company goals* and *attracting and retaining audiences* were prioritized. These findings illustrate that personal branding in the food industry is influenced by a complex interaction between individual, environmental, and strategic variables, reflecting the multidimensional and dynamic nature of personal brand formation.

The high ranking of individual characteristics as a causal condition aligns with previous research emphasizing the central role of personality, attitudes, and competencies in personal branding. As noted by Hassanpoor et al. (2021), employee personal branding fundamentally begins with self-awareness and self-knowledge, which shape professional identity and brand authenticity (Hassanpoor et al., 2021). In the food industry, where professional reputation is often built through creative expression and interaction with consumers, personal traits such as creativity, commitment, and consistency become essential components of a credible brand. Similarly, Muszyńska (2021) emphasized that managerial personal branding depends heavily on self-presentation skills and emotional intelligence, as these elements establish credibility and trust in service-oriented industries (Muszyńska, 2021). The current findings also align with Ramli (2021), who identified the expression of brand personality as a key factor in building a strong personal brand identity (Ramli, 2021). These results collectively reinforce the notion that successful personal branding begins with the cultivation of internal attributes that authentically reflect professional values and expertise.

The secondary importance of business characteristics suggests that organizational affiliation, professional expertise, and the commercial brand associated with individuals also influence personal brand success. This is consistent with the findings of Mollaei et al. (2021), who highlighted that organizational training and institutional reputation can enhance an individual's brand identity by embedding professional values within the broader corporate framework (Mollaei et al., 2021). In the food industry context, where brand credibility and customer loyalty are tied to perceived product quality and ethical conduct, personal branding serves as an extension of the organizational image. Mortazavi et al. (2021) similarly found that individual and business characteristics jointly form the foundation for brand differentiation among food industry professionals (Mortazavi et al., 2021). The present study's ranking results therefore indicate that while individual authenticity drives brand formation, alignment with business identity amplifies credibility and consumer trust.

The prioritization of *social, economic, and political issues* as the leading contextual condition underscores the macro-environmental influences shaping personal branding. This finding resonates with the argument by Walczak-Skałecka (2022) that personal branding cannot be separated from the socio-cultural and institutional environments in which it operates (Walczak-Skałecka, 2022). In dynamic industries such as food production, regulatory policies, economic fluctuations, and social expectations play critical roles in determining how professionals construct and communicate their personal brands. Furthermore, cultural values were also ranked highly, highlighting the contextual importance of national culture in shaping the ethics and aesthetics of personal branding. This corresponds to Zarei et al. (2023), who found that cultural and social factors significantly affect how Iranian managers express their professional identities on social media (Zarei et al., 2023). The findings suggest that personal branding in the food industry is not only a function of individual behavior but also a response to external cultural norms, public expectations, and socio-political dynamics.

The importance of *criticisms and suggestions* and *audience expectation level* among the intervening conditions indicates that audience engagement and feedback mechanisms are vital in the personal branding process. In digital spaces, where interaction and immediacy dominate, audience perceptions directly shape brand authenticity and sustainability (Sharifzadeh et al., 2021). This finding aligns with Pazmino and Pack (2022), who demonstrated that post-pandemic personal branding increasingly relies on

reciprocal engagement between brand owners and followers to sustain relevance and trust (Pazmino & Pack, 2022). Moreover, in the food industry—where consumer satisfaction and word-of-mouth play a central role—managing criticism constructively and responding to audience expectations represent strategic tools for reinforcing credibility. The results also mirror the conclusions of Trang et al. (2023), who reported that Generation Z professionals consciously manage online feedback to construct a relatable yet competent brand image (Trang et al., 2023). Thus, the effective handling of audience feedback and social interaction constitutes a key mediator between personal identity and public perception.

In the strategies dimension, *adopting a distinct and differentiated approach* emerged as the highest-ranking factor, indicating that innovation and differentiation remain essential to personal brand development. This finding echoes Montoya (2024), who conceptualized personal branding as a process of differentiation through authentic self-expression (Montoya, 2024). Similarly, Kunkel et al. (2022) emphasized that distinctiveness, when supported by consistent behavior and value-driven communication, strengthens perceived authenticity and brand loyalty (Kunkel et al., 2022). In the competitive food industry, where product offerings often overlap, differentiation through storytelling, social responsibility, and unique customer experiences becomes an effective way to elevate personal brand visibility.

Market research and *social responsibility* were also ranked among the top strategic factors, revealing that knowledge of market dynamics and ethical engagement significantly contribute to personal brand success. The inclusion of social responsibility is consistent with Kunkel et al. (2022), who demonstrated that strategic philanthropy enhances personal brands by aligning them with social values, thereby fostering long-term emotional connections with audiences (Kunkel et al., 2022). Similarly, Vincent et al. (2024) illustrated that public figures who integrate social causes into their personal brands, such as Marcus Rashford's community initiatives, build enduring reputations grounded in authenticity and empathy (Vincent et al., 2024). These results also correspond with Ramazani et al. (2024), who identified social responsibility as an emerging pillar of academic and professional personal branding, linking ethical conduct to credibility and professional esteem (Ramazani et al., 2024).

The final component of the findings pertains to the *consequences* of personal branding. The study found that advancing company goals and attracting and retaining audiences were the most significant outcomes, followed by *saving time and space*, *improving communication quality*, *internal satisfaction*, and *gaining reputation*. This hierarchy reinforces the dual internal-external benefits of personal branding. Internally, personal branding enhances self-efficacy and professional motivation, while externally, it contributes to organizational visibility and customer retention. These findings align with Smolarek and Dzieńdziora (2022), who reported that personal branding positively affects both individual career advancement and organizational competitiveness (Smolarek & Dzieńdziora, 2022). Similarly, Muszyńska (2021) argued that personal branding in managerial roles humanizes the corporate image and strengthens customer loyalty (Muszyńska, 2021). The sense of *inner satisfaction* reported in this study echoes the psychological dimension of brand alignment discussed by Vinmalar (2025), who posited that personal branding leads to fulfillment by integrating personal and professional identities (Vinmalar, 2025).

The study's emphasis on *reputation and communication quality* as key outcomes further supports prior findings that communication competence and consistency are vital to maintaining a sustainable brand identity. As Scheidt (2021) noted, leaders with well-managed communication strategies project both authority and authenticity, resulting in enhanced stakeholder trust (Scheidt, 2021). Likewise, Montoya (2024) highlighted that personal branding is fundamentally a communication-driven construct that thrives on clarity, coherence, and consistency. The present findings therefore confirm that strategic communication not only fosters recognition but also contributes to deeper and more meaningful engagement between professionals and audiences.

Furthermore, the study provides empirical support for the integrated nature of personal branding, combining personal, social, and strategic dimensions within a systemic framework. The use of the Analytic Network Process method allowed for a quantitative assessment of interdependencies among variables, thus addressing the research gap identified by Szántó et al. (2025), who emphasized the need for standardized models to measure personal brand equity (Szántó et al., 2025). The multidimensional structure uncovered in this study complements Szanto and Radácsi's (2023) conceptualization of personal brand equity as a construct encompassing identity, perceived value, and stakeholder relationships (Szanto & Radácsi, 2023). In this regard, the

findings extend previous theoretical work by empirically demonstrating how contextual and strategic variables interact to influence brand success in a specific industry setting.

Finally, the study confirms that personal branding in the food industry, while sharing general features with other industries, is uniquely shaped by cultural and market dynamics. The emphasis on social, cultural, and ethical factors aligns with Mortazavi et al. (2021), who found that Iranian professionals in the food sector construct their personal brands through a combination of self-expression, customer orientation, and moral responsibility (Mortazavi et al., 2021). These findings also converge with the perspectives of Walczak-Skałecka (2022) and Zarei et al. (2023), reinforcing that personal branding, while an individual endeavor, is deeply embedded in collective and institutional contexts. In conclusion, the results underscore that personal branding in the food industry is a strategic, relational, and value-based process that integrates individual authenticity with social and organizational goals.

Although this study contributes valuable insights into the determinants and ranking of factors influencing personal branding in the food industry, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was limited to 19 managers within the Iranian food sector, which constrains the generalizability of findings to other industries or cultural contexts. Second, the cross-sectional design of the research limits causal inference; longitudinal studies would be needed to assess how personal brand factors evolve over time. Third, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews and expert judgments may introduce subjective bias, particularly in the assessment of qualitative dimensions such as personality traits or cultural values. Finally, while the ANP method allowed for prioritization and interrelationship analysis, future research could benefit from integrating structural equation modeling or multi-criteria decision analysis for more robust causal modeling.

Future research should aim to expand the scope of personal branding studies by incorporating cross-industry and cross-cultural comparisons to better understand contextual variability. Quantitative surveys with larger samples can validate the current findings and test the relative influence of each identified factor across different professional groups. Additionally, exploring gender differences, generational variations, and digital behavior patterns may reveal new insights into how diverse individuals construct their personal brands in virtual environments. Future studies could also examine the longitudinal effects of personal branding on career development, employee engagement, and organizational reputation. Finally, integrating psychological constructs such as emotional intelligence, self-concept clarity, and resilience may help explain the deeper cognitive mechanisms that underlie successful personal branding strategies.

From a practical perspective, managers and professionals in the food industry should view personal branding as a strategic asset that complements corporate branding. Organizations can support employees in developing personal brands through structured training programs focusing on communication, self-presentation, and digital literacy. Professionals should cultivate authenticity, engage in ethical and socially responsible practices, and align personal values with organizational missions to build sustainable and credible brands. Furthermore, active participation in social networks, responsiveness to audience feedback, and consistent storytelling can significantly enhance visibility and trust. Lastly, fostering collaboration between marketing departments and individual professionals can create synergistic branding strategies that strengthen both personal and corporate identities.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethics Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were considered.

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