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Designing a Learning Model for Personal Brand Digital Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

Personal brand digital storytelling as a powerful tool by which students can distinguish themselves in the business world has been widely noticed in recent years. The purpose of this research was to design a personal brand digital storytelling learning model. The present research was conducted with a qualitative approach using content analysis and theme analysis. The research community included all the written sources, articles, books and research related to the digital storytelling of personal brands in various scientific bases in the years 2000 to 2024 and all specialists and experts in the field of personal branding. The purposeful sampling method was of the criterion type and the criterion for determining the sample size was to reach the saturation volume. The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview and a researcher-made questionnaire. Qualitative analysis and thematic analysis were used to collect the data. In this way, the theoretical foundations of storytelling were studied and analyzed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 experts from educational, commercial, and industrial fields familiar with personal brand storytelling at Allameh Tabataba'i University. After completing the thematic analysis, a model was created based on the data of content analysis and theme analysis. The research findings showed that the personal brand digital storytelling learning model has 4 dimensions: personal branding, personal brand storytelling, personal brand story content production, and personal brand story content evaluation, and includes 15 components and 57 indicators. The results showed that the personal brand digital storytelling learning model for students is a multi-dimensional and multi-component process and its realization demands the comprehensive attention of higher education officials and students.

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Introduction

The job market has changed dramatically in the 21st century, making it more difficult for everyone, including college students and graduates, to find employment opportunities (Habets et al., 2020). In this context, universities must act as active social institutions in society and offer their educational programs in line with the sustainable development of society and industry. In addition, attention should be paid to the skills of students who are entering the current job market (Piątkowski, 2020). Among the basic aspects of the qualitative development of educational institutions is the cultivation of people who have the ability to critically evaluate scientific knowledge (Farazandeh et al., 2023). People with the ability of critical and goal-oriented evaluation have more agency, which will be the foundation of their career success (Samadieh et al., 2024). Higher education graduates, as one of the largest groups of job seekers, need to be prepared to enter this market (Tomlinson, 2017). However, education systems have been weak in providing vocational skills training, and the future careers of higher education graduates are at risk (Expósito López et al., 2019).

Graduate unemployment has become a pressing issue plaguing many societies, including Iran. According to the latest statistics from the Iranian Statistical Center in winter 2023, 39.0% of the total unemployed population in Iran are university graduates (Statistical Center of Iran, 2023). Unemployment not only leads to the waste of human and social capital but can also result in criminal activities, psychological harm, and disruptions in marriage and family formation for the unemployed, as research by Tengku Kamarul Bahrim et al. (2019) indicated. ATEŞ (2019) further highlighted in his study that problems such as depression, anxiety, anger, irritability, restlessness in interpersonal relationships, and obsessive-compulsive traits are among the consequences of graduate unemployment. Therefore, the Iranian higher education system, as an institution that plays a constructive role in national development, must identify and implement appropriate solutions to bridge the gap between education and industry and overcome the detrimental effects of the growing unemployment of university graduates. This underscores the critical need for rigorous and scientific studies in this area.

In today's competitive job market, personal branding has emerged as a powerful tool that can significantly increase graduates' chances of securing employment and escaping unemployment. Regardless of our age, gender, profession, or educational background, we all possess a brand. Everything we do, from the way we speak to our body language, leaves an impression on others. This impression is our personal brand (Korzh & Estima, 2022). The process of personal branding involves identifying and highlighting one's skills, experiences, personality, and values to create a positive and lasting image in the minds of target audiences (Putra & Vipraprastha, 2022). Just as a good advertisement can influence a group of consumers, a strong personal brand can attract a range of employers and clients (Sharif & Islam, 2017). In essence, personal branding is self-marketing for individuals, aiming to make others eager to become our customers and facilitating our path to career opportunities (Allison et al., 2018). Students and young professionals need to develop and manage appropriate personal brands in both academic and professional settings (Ilieş, 2018). By establishing a strong brand, individuals can significantly increase their chances of finding suitable employment, achieving career advancement, and achieving long-term success (Setiawan, 2018). Therefore, every individual needs to build a personal brand to secure their professional future. Personal branding helps individuals stand out from the crowd of job seekers, build trust, and increase their chances of being invited for interviews and hired (Silalahi et al., 2023). Consequently, learning effective personal branding strategies is essential for students, as it directly impacts their career trajectory.

On the other hand, story is one of the best personal branding strategies. Humans are natural storytellers, and we have long used stories to entertain, educate, and connect with one another (Fisher, 1984). Frunză (2019) emphasized that storytelling in brand communication leads to the symbolic transmission of meaning and concept. Similarly, valuing personal stories and their impact on personal development is an integral part of the personal branding process. Storytelling is the act of narrating a tale with a chronological sequence, whether real or fictional (Westby & Culatta, 2016). In essence, storytelling is something we do every day by sharing our content, opinions, experiences, and values with others, both digitally and non-digitally. The power of storytelling to capture attention, evoke emotions, and create lasting memories in the minds of audiences is undeniable. Personal branding also aims to create a positive and lasting image of an individual in the minds of their target audience, and storytelling can effectively achieve this goal by narrating an individual's experiences, challenges, and achievements in an engaging and inspiring manner. Because of that storytelling is an important tool for building a personal brand with characteristics such as: authenticity, consistency, attractiveness, purposefulness, strong personality, creativity, adaptability, persuasiveness, memorability, distinction, and clarity (Korzh & Estima, 2022).

Stories can play a vital role in "connecting the dots, creating connections, and giving meaning to individual events" (Roxo, 2020). However, with the widespread use and application of technology, standing out from a crowd of individuals all vying to create a compelling brand narrative has become a significant challenge. In this context, digital storytelling emerges as a powerful tool to overcome this challenge by fostering connections and building trust that can pave the way for employment and career development (Balula & Vasconcelos, 2020). Digital storytelling in social networks helps develop a personal brand. Branding in digital social networks provides the basis for creating trans-social connections because the popularity of social networks creates centers of communities interested in the brand (Ahmadi et al., 2023; Lacap et al., 2024).

Digital storytelling offers several advantages over traditional storytelling, including diversity of media, accessibility, flexibility and adaptability, and increased engagement and immersion (Bakhtiary & Behzadi, 2023). It involves the narration of engaging and inspiring stories through digital technologies (text, image, sound, and video) and contributes to the development of various skills, including research, writing, organization, technology application, presentation, interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Jones & Leverenz, 2017). This approach strengthens connections by diversifying and expanding information dissemination methods and facilitates meaning-making in an appropriate context, allowing employers and clients to perceive applicants from a different perspective (Vasconcelos & Balula, 2021). The research results of Henrickson et al. (2022) also confirmed that digital storytelling for personal branding can lead to strengthening critical self-thinking, self-confidence, self-belief and personal brand development. Therefore, digital storytelling itself is interpreted as a tool for personal branding that helps individuals enhance their differentiation for their target audience and it increases the possibility of finding a job in them. Therefore, programs and networks must be created to learn and implement it (Pera et al., 2016).

Balula and Vasconcelos (2020) found that an educational strategy for developing personal branding skills through digital storytelling techniques helps tourism students create a professional brand that aligns with the industry and current hiring trends. Jones and Leverenz (2017) proposed an educational approach for framing an identity-enhancing electronic portfolio based on storytelling. They found that this approach could maximize student engagement, develop personal branding, and enhance 21st-century skills. Vasconcelos and Balula (2021) designed and implemented an educational strategy to examine the capabilities of digital storytelling in managing personal branding skills of students. Their results indicated that learning digital storytelling could help students manage and develop their personal brand, create a strong digital presence, and increase their employability.

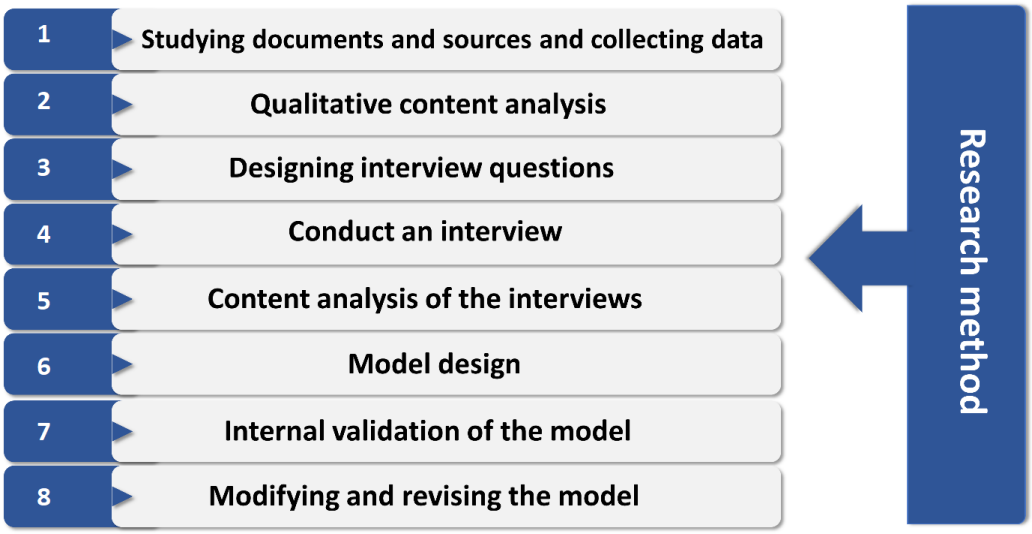
Therefore, digital storytelling and personal branding are inextricably linked, and creating a lasting personal brand in the digital world requires storytelling in the digital language. Personal branding based on digital storytelling fosters trust by influencing the emotions of the audience, strengthening 21st-century skills, and creating extensive connections. It sets university students and graduates apart from others in the job market. This is the missing link that higher education can use to prevent the waste of talented human capital. The reviewed literature highlights the lack of a comprehensive digital storytelling personal branding learning model for students (Balula & Vasconcelos, 2020; Henrickson et al., 2022; Jones & Leverenz, 2017; Pera et al., 2016; Vasconcelos & Balula, 2021). Such a model could introduce personal branding to students while familiarizing them with personal branding storytelling methods and tools, as well as the necessity and how to actively participate in the digital space. Therefore, this study aimed to design a digital storytelling personal branding learning model for students and sought to answer the following question:

What are the components of a digital storytelling personal branding learning model for students?

Method

The current study is an interdisciplinary applied-developmental research. Since the aim was to design a digital storytelling personal branding learning model for students, this research was conducted using a qualitative approach and content analysis research method. The method of qualitative data analysis in this research is thematic analysis, and the qualitative data were analyzed using the MAXQDA 2020 software. After analyzing the data and designing the digital storytelling personal branding learning model, the CVI content validity index was used to determine the content validity of the model, and Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the reliability of the model. Figure 1 shows the steps of the research.

Figure 1
Research Implementation Steps



The Corpus

The corpus of this study included all articles, books, theses, dissertations, resources, and written documents related to the keywords: Personal Branding, Personal Brand, Story, Storytelling, Digital Storytelling, students, graduates, Higher Education in the Google Scholar, Research Gate, ScienceDirect, ERIC, Springer, ProQuest, and Academia.edu databases within the time period of 2000 to 2023. All specialists and professors familiar with branding and education and industry experts were also part of the population of this study. The sample size for determining the components of the model included 13 sources, including: 10 articles and 3 books, and 11 experts and specialists in the fields of education and industry, management and business, measurement and evaluation, and information and knowledge science. The sampling method in this research was purposive sampling based on criteria, and the criterion for determining the sample size was the saturation of information. To conduct this research, a qualitative content analysis method of the inductive type was used. Qualitative content analysis is the process of studying and analyzing relationships and interpreting non-numerical and unstructured data. In the qualitative content analysis of this research, first, each of the sources was studied separately as units of analysis, and all phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that expressed a concept about digital storytelling personal branding were named or coded as units of analysis. After extracting and analyzing the initial codes, categorization was performed.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. In essence, this method involves identifying, analyzing, and organizing themes or topics. Themes are significant pieces of information and patterns within the collected data, and they describe aspects of the phenomena under investigation.

Participants

In the thematic analysis of this study, the data obtained from the interviews conducted with 11 experts from educational, commercial, and industrial fields familiar with personal brand storytelling at Allameh Tabataba'i University was first extracted. Then, the obtained data was reviewed and initial coding was performed. Subsequently, in an iterative process, similar codes were grouped, and the main and sub-themes were identified and refined. Finally, a network of themes was drawn using MAXQDA 2020 software, and the final analysis was conducted. Thereafter, the digital storytelling personal branding learning model for students was designed by combining the data obtained from content analysis and thematic analysis.

Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study: an interview and a questionnaire. The interview consisted of 6 questions designed based on the research objectives and the data obtained from the content analysis of the collected documents. To determine the validity of the interview questions, the Content Validity Index (CVI) was used. For this purpose, the opinions of 10 other experts were sought regarding the content of the interview questions. Each of them categorized the questions using a four-point Likert scale: "Completely

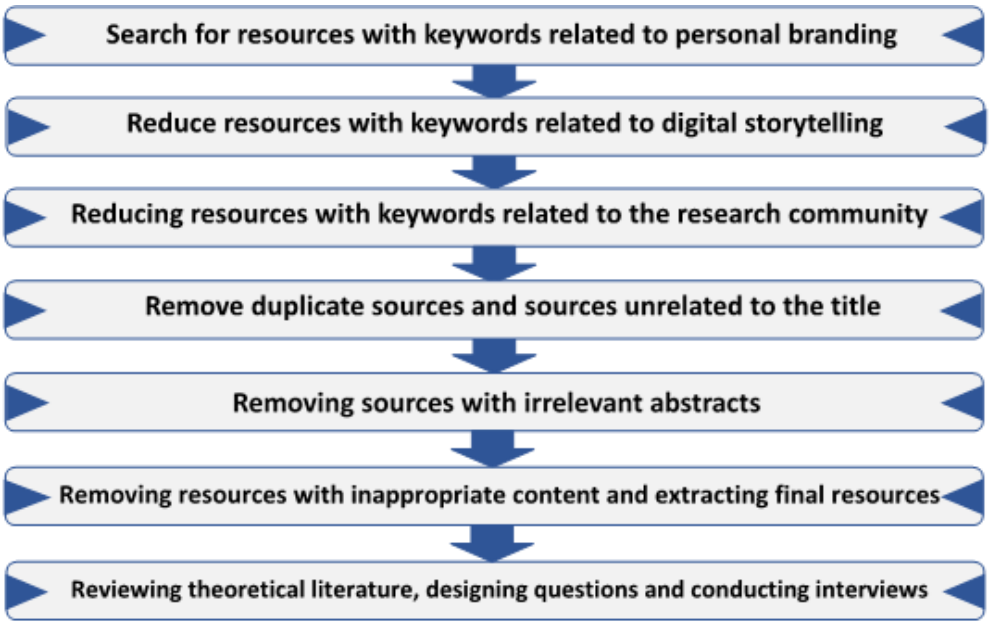
relevant," "Relevant but needs revision," "Needs serious revision," and "Irrelevant.

To enhance the research's accuracy, the codes were reviewed by colleagues (supervisors and advisors) and participants. Therefore, a 15-question questionnaire related to the research components was prepared and administered to experts in educational technology, technology management and entrepreneurship, psychology, and information and knowledge science who had academic and practical experience in education, industry, and personal branding. The results of the questionnaire were then analyzed, and based on the experts' opinions, minor changes were made to the model, and the model design was finalized. In order to validate the formulated learning model, after identifying and determining the dimensions and components of the model, a questionnaire of 15 questions on the Likert scale was designed according to the research objectives and dimensions and components of the model. This questionnaire was completed by 10 experts and its reliability was obtained with Cronbach's alpha test of .91.

Procedure

To gather information in a targeted manner, relevant keywords related to personal branding were searched in the Google Scholar, Research Gate, ScienceDirect, ERIC, Springer, ProQuest, and Academia.edu databases, limiting the publication date range from 2000 to 2023. The initial search yielded 7,641 sources. Next, keywords related to digital storytelling were added, and the number of sources found was reduced to 1,495. Subsequently, keywords related to the research community were added, and 284 sources were obtained. Then, duplicate sources and sources with titles unrelated to the research topic were removed, leaving 102 sources. Upon reviewing the abstracts of the sources, documents whose abstracts were not relevant to the current research were excluded, and a total of 23 sources were selected for study. After reviewing the full content of the sources and removing those with inappropriate content, 13 sources were selected as the final sources for content analysis. Based on the study and analysis of the obtained sources, interview questions were designed and conducted with experts in business management, technology management and entrepreneurship, tourism management, measurement and evaluation, and information and knowledge science who had academic or practical experience in personal branding. The interviewees were selected in a targeted manner, and their number was determined based on theoretical saturation. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, using a flexible framework adapted to the information provided by the interviewees. After thematic analysis of the interviews and combining the obtained data with the results of the content analysis, the final categories for shaping the model were determined. Figure 2 shows the steps of the research data collection.

Figure 2
Research Data Collection Steps



Findings

To answer the research question, which was to identify the components of the digital storytelling personal branding learning model for students, a qualitative content analysis method of the inductive type as well as thematic analysis were used to analyze the data. First, the theoretical foundations were identified by searching for relevant keywords in the identified databases and were placed within the qualitative content analysis system. Additionally, thematic analysis was conducted on the interview data. Finally, based on the combination of the 130 codes extracted from the content analysis of the resources and the thematic analysis of the interviews, 4 dimensions, 15 components, and 57 indicators were obtained for the digital storytelling personal branding model, which can be presented as follows:

Table 1

First Dimension: Personal Branding and Its Components

Dimension	Component	Indicator	Repetition of codes in content analysis	Repetition of codes in the interview	Total repetition of codes
Personal Branding	Necessity	The need to pay attention to personal branding	4	5	9
	concepts	The definition of personal branding , the dimensions of personal branding, and the characteristics of the personal brand identity , and the characteristics of the identity related to the brand (honesty, specific texture, optimal mining, value creation, differentiation and rarity, and social proof), and Identity features related to the person (appearance, ethics, behavior, motivation, academic resume, experiences, knowledge, expertise, skills, work experience, personality (type, social activity	2	8	10
	Media selection	The necessity of using media and social networks , introducing media and social networks	3	3	6
	Self-Development	Definitions of personal development, self-examination, Audience Analysis , personal brand DNA	2	6	8
	Learning methods	personal branding learning methods (courses and workshops, mentoring , coaching , personal brand (storytelling	3	4	7

Based on the combination of codes extracted from the content analysis of documents and the opinions obtained from interviews with experts and elites, the second dimension was called personal brand storytelling presented in Table 2:

Table 2
Second Dimension: Digital Storytelling and Its Components

Dimension	Component	Indicator	Repetition of codes in content analysis	Repetition of codes in the interview	Total repetition of codes
Personal Brand Storytelling	concepts	Definitions, circle of personal brand storytelling communication with self - awareness, love, emotions, rationality and brand communication	4	2	6
	Elements	General elements of personal brand storytelling (genre , personality, central issue, story message , attractiveness and brevity), specific elements of personal brand storytelling (visual components, acceptability, indirectness , focus , honesty , experience-oriented, talent central, and interactive features , elements of Joe Lambert , knowledge - oriented , practicality, fit with the society, fit with the audience, plan of achievements , plan of symbiosis , advertisements , influential persons , archetypes (and originality	8	5	13
	Learning methods	methods (application of general principles and participation in general storytelling courses) , specific methods (stories of successful people, artificial intelligence, archetypes , portfolio, Joe Lambert - style presentation , elevator presentation, Pixar -style presentation , Twitter presentation , Souq work , case study and (storyteller 's help	7	3	10
	challenges and considerations	Challenge (standing out and attracting the attention and interest of the audience), ethical considerations (respect for privacy, authenticity, attention to cultural sensitivity, copyright and intellectual property and data (security	5	2	7

The third dimension of the digital storytelling personal branding learning model was called personal brand storytelling content production described in Table 3:

Table 3
Third Dimension: Personal Brand Storytelling Content Production and Its Components

Dimension	Component	Indicator	Repetition of codes in content analysis	Repetition of codes in the interview	Total repetition of codes
Creating personal brand story content	Types of content	Text, image, sound and video	6	2	8
	Dedicated tools	Mendeley , Academia , PLOS , Research gate, Social networks , optimization mining, interview, artificial intelligence	2	8	10
	General principles, resources and tools	General principles of content production (use of sound, use of images, effectiveness of content, brevity of content, purposefulness of content, applicability of content and use of audio - visual media) , general tools for producing and editing text, sound, image and video, sources Free download of text, audio, image and video	3	7	10

Based on the combination of codes extracted from the content analysis of documents and the opinions obtained from interviews with experts and elites, the fourth dimension was called personal brand storytelling content evaluation presented in Table 4:

Table 4
Fourth Dimension: Personal Brand Storytelling Content Evaluation and Its Components

Dimension	Component	Indicator	Repetition of codes in content analysis	Repetition of codes in the interview	Total repetition of codes
Evaluating the content of the personal brand story	Types of personal brand story content evaluation	Self-evaluation, peer evaluation, facilitator evaluation	4	2	6
	Tools and methods of personal brand story content evaluation	Questionnaire, interview, receiving feedback, checklist , worksheet , gamification, content analysis, NPS index, social network analysis tools	3	6	9
	criteria of personal brand story content	The criterion of general elements of storytelling , the criterion of general principles of content production and other criteria including: comprehensiveness, compatibility, persuasion, coherence, attractiveness, diplomacy, differentiation, permanence and .originality	4	7	11

The dimensions, components, and indicators of personal brand digital storytelling and the formulated model are presented in Figures 3 and 4:

Figure 3

Concept Map of the Dimensions, Components and Indicators of Personal Brand Digital Storytelling Learning Package in MAXQDA 2020 Software

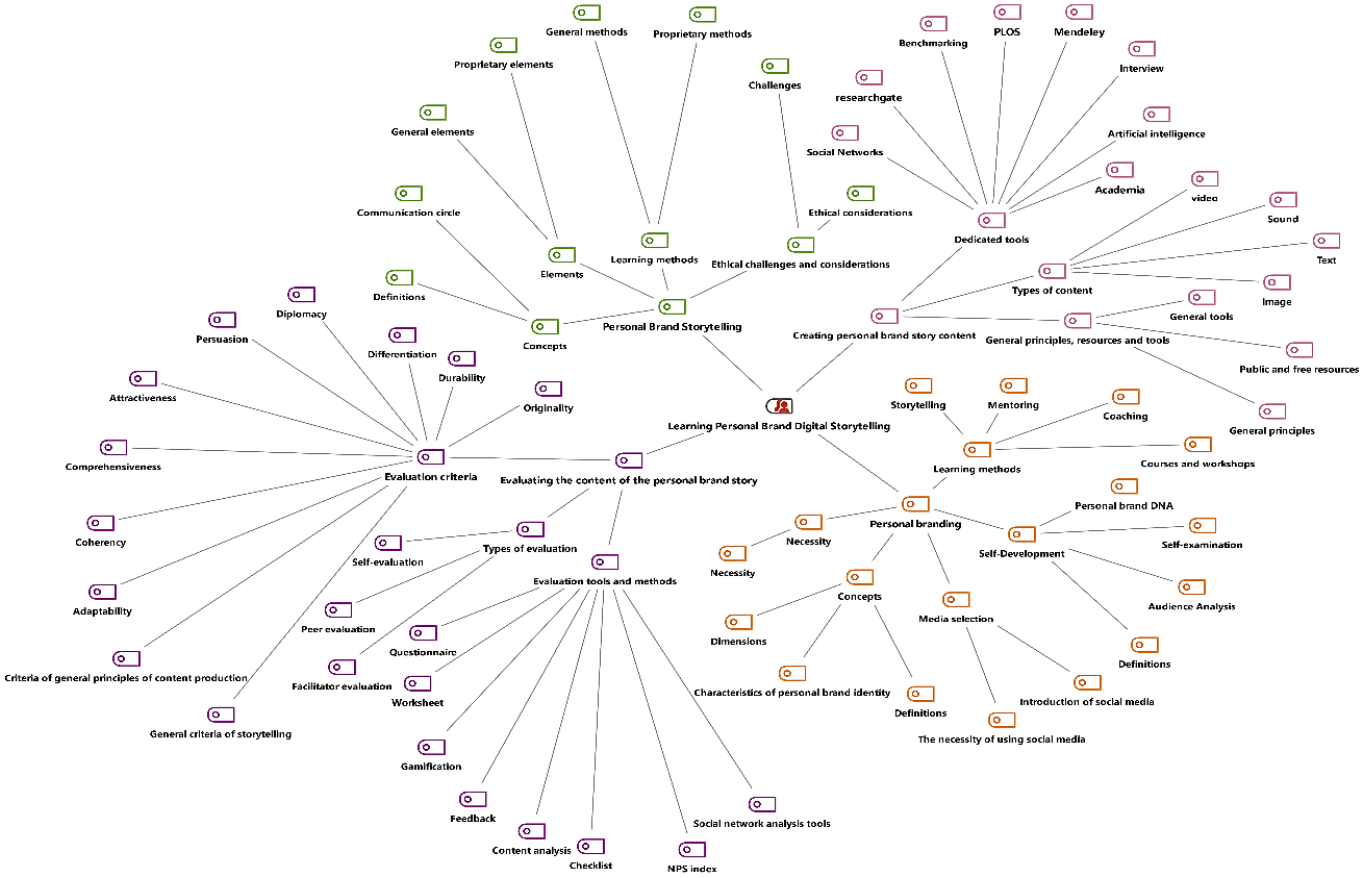


Figure 4

Personal Brand Digital Storytelling Learning Model

Discussion

This study aimed to design a digital storytelling personal branding learning model for students. Based on the findings of this research, four dimensions (personal branding, personal brand storytelling, personal brand storytelling content production, personal brand storytelling content evaluation), 15 components (necessity of personal branding, personal branding concepts, media selection, personal development, personal branding learning methods, personal brand storytelling concepts, personal brand storytelling elements, personal brand storytelling learning methods, types of personal brand storytelling content, general principles, resources and tools for personal brand storytelling content production, proprietary tools for personal brand storytelling content production, types of personal brand storytelling content evaluation, personal brand storytelling content evaluation criteria, tools and methods for personal brand storytelling content evaluation), and 57 indicators were identified as the dimensions, components, and indicators of the digital storytelling personal branding learning model for students. The designed model has satisfactory validity and reliability based on the content validity index (CVI) and Cronbach's alpha.

The components of the model in the personal branding dimension include the necessity of personal branding, personal branding concepts, media selection, personal development, and personal branding learning methods. These components are consistent with the findings of Putra and Vipraprastha (2022). Additionally, the personal brand storytelling dimension encompasses the components of personal brand storytelling concepts, personal brand storytelling elements, and personal brand storytelling learning methods. The personal brand storytelling content production dimension includes the components of types of personal brand storytelling content, general principles, resources and tools for personal brand storytelling content production, and proprietary tools for personal brand storytelling content production. These components are in line with the findings of Vasconcelos and Balula (2021). Moreover, in the personal brand storytelling content evaluation dimension, three components were identified: types of personal brand storytelling content evaluation, personal brand storytelling content evaluation criteria, and tools and methods for personal brand storytelling content evaluation. These components are aligned with the research of Balula and Vasconcelos (2020).

Conclusions

Learning personal brand digital storytelling for students is a multi-dimensional and multi-component process, and its realization demands the comprehensive attention of higher education officials and students. The innovation of this research compared to previous researches is focusing on digital storytelling as an alternative to traditional storytelling in personal branding, providing a comprehensive plan for the use of all students and emphasizing the use of specific tools and methods for producing and evaluating the content of personal brand stories. Limitation of access to experienced experts and specialists in the field of personal brand digital storytelling for interviews, which included 11 experts at Allameh Tabatabai University, and the lack of similar studies for generalizations can be considered among the limitations of this research.

In order to respond to the limitations of this research and develop future studies in the field of personal brand digital storytelling learning for students, the following issues are suggested: In order to increase the generalizability in the future researches, help should be taken from specialists and experts in the field of personal brand digital storytelling across the country. The application of machine learning and artificial intelligence models in improving the digital storytelling experience of students' personal brand should be evaluated and studied. For the purpose of external validation and entering the results of this research into the operational space, a tool should be prepared and implemented and evaluated from the dimensions, components and indicators of the personal brand digital storytelling learning model.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest in this research.

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