



Crafting Digital Identities: A Case Study of Gen Z Personal Branding on Tiktok

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Abstract. Personal branding has emerged as a critical communication strategy for Generation Z influencers on TikTok, where digital identities directly translate into social capital and career opportunities. This study examines how emerging TikTok influencers construct and maintain personal brands within the platform's algorithm-driven environment. The research investigates Nathanael Abednego's personal branding strategy, analyzing his content design, audience engagement tactics, and adaptation to evolving platform trends. Grounded in Goffman's self-presentation theory and computer-mediated communication frameworks, this study applies Frischmann's twelve-step personal branding model, which encompasses skill set development, discoverability enhancement, identity formation, first impression management, aura creation, and brand experience cultivation. A qualitative single-case study methodology was employed, using digital ethnographic approaches, including semi-structured interviews with three key informants, six months of systematic content analysis across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and participant observation of community interactions. Data analysis followed both inductive and deductive coding procedures, organized according to Frischmann's theoretical framework. Results demonstrate that Abednego successfully operationalizes eleven of Frischmann's twelve branding principles, particularly excelling in skill demonstration, audience engagement, and adaptive evolution strategies. His approach emphasizes collaborative content production, analytics-driven decision-making, and selective trend adoption while maintaining an authentic self-presentation. The findings validate the relevance of established personal branding frameworks for Generation Z digital creators while highlighting the need to integrate collaborative practices and algorithmic literacy into existing theoretical models for social media contexts.

Keywords: Personal Branding, Tiktok, Generation Z Influencers, Social Media Strategy, Digital Identity, Content Creation

1 Introduction

Generation Z influencers on TikTok, with over 1.1 billion monthly active users, more than 60 percent born between 1997 and 2012, craft digital identities that translate into social capital and career opportunities. Individuals generally use personal branding to enhance their attractiveness or key selling points (Ardianto & Zulfiningrum, 2022, p. 5980). The individual builds a personal brand through their work or profession, transforming everyday people into influential digital personalities (Dinata & Aulia, 2022, p. 156). By blending accessible editing tools, algorithmic amplification, and authentic storytelling, these creators apply classic marketing principles, identifying unique value

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propositions, targeting niche communities, and reinforcing brand promises, to sustain engagement and professional growth (Arruda, 2019). Based on that phenomenon, millennials are now also adopting the trend, creating TikTok videos and uploading them to Instagram (Ruth & Candraningrum, 2020, p. 207).

Personal branding is employed to shape how individuals are perceived, leveraging both direct and indirect social media activity to create a positive public image (Budiarti & Dewi, 2023, p. 537; Ishihara & Oktavianti, 2021, p. 76). Grounded in Goffman's (1956) self-presentation theory and framed by computer-mediated communication research, it now underpins social standing, recruitment prospects, and commercial partnerships, with 70 percent of recruiters evaluating candidates' social media profiles (Arvidsson, 2018).

TikTok's algorithm-driven virality, with an average view rate of 99.5 percent versus 54.4 percent for Instagram Reels and 5.8 percent for YouTube Shorts, creates fertile ground for Gen Z influencers, 57 percent of whom aspire to influencer careers (Daherman & Taufiq, 2023, p. 162). TikTok also enables digital marketing strategies and brand building by influencing follower behavior (Ardiansyah & Sinduwiatmo, 2023, p. 169). As a short-form video platform, it offers editing tools, songs, and facial effects for 30–60 second clips, distinguishing it from photo-and-video platforms like Instagram (Ruth & Candraningrum, 2020, p. 207). Its core feature, the For You Page (FYP), can elevate frequent posters into TikTok celebrities with large followings (Putri & Azeharie, 2021, p. 280).

This study examines Nathanael Abednego's (@abednego_n) content design, audience engagement tactics, and adaptation to TikTok's evolving trends, 214,000 followers, and 6.4 million likes, to illuminate how emerging influencers navigate platform dynamics, authenticity demands, and feedback loops to construct enduring personal brands.

2 Literature Review

Personal branding is a strategic process of shaping and communicating one's unique value, comprising skills, expertise, and personal qualities, to targeted audiences via digital channels (Arruda, 2019; Widyastuti et al., 2017). Personal branding is an ongoing process of building a defined image or impression in the minds of others about an individual, group, or organization" (Erika & Alawi, 2024, p. 53). It balances authenticity with aspiration, using consistent visual imagery, content creation, and reputation management to foster trust, recognition, and opportunities (Arruda, 2019).

Personal branding is a process in which someone uses themselves or their career systematically as a brand, marketing themselves to others while actively shaping public perception (Ruth & Candraningrum, 2020, p. 209). According to Rampersad (2015), personal branding refers to a unique personal identity relevant to the target audience, so that the audience's perception and response align with the individual's intentions (Putri & Azeharie, 2021, p. 281). In this case, the role of images or visual content is significant. The interactive nature of social media can add a new dimension to image

projection. Using sound, unique, and exciting images is highly relevant to social media, as it supports personal branding (Erika & Alawi, 2024, p. 46).

Goffman's (1956) self-presentation theory and computer-mediated communication research frame online branding as a routine career activity that influences social standing and recruitment prospects (Arvidsson, 2018). Frischmann (2014) makes a simple formula: Skill set + Aura + Identity = Online Personal Brand (Hanifah & Sudrajat, 2024, p. 546).

A skill set is a set of capabilities a person has developed through work experience, education, and other experiences. It represents functional and rational value. Frischmann argues that this element underpins discoverability and beyond the credibility. Sensible and representational lies the intangible aura, the emotional resonance. Aura refers to how people perceive you online, based on your personality, appearance, style, and charisma, including both controlled and uncontrolled content. Equally vital is identity formation, the deliberate management of one's online representation. Identity is a representation of the networks one has and one's position within them, leveraging digital footprints to project a cohesive brand (Qonitat, 2019, pp. 109–110). Frischmann extends these principles into a twelve-step model, ranging from self-awareness and asset inventory to content curation, feedback loops, and adaptive evolution, that operationalizes three dimensions (skill rational set, discoverability), two representational dimensions (identity formation, first impression), and two affective dimensions (aura, brand experience).

Table 1. Comparison of Romeika and Griesiene (2022) Component and Frischmann (2014) Mapping. Source: Romeika & Griesiene, 2022, p. 141

Romeika and Griesiene (2022) Component	Frischmann (2014) Twelve Steps Mapping
Definition of skills reflecting human functional value, professional abilities and competence skill set)	Become Self-Aware (1); Take Inventory of Brand Assets (2)
Creating accessibility in search engines (getting found)	Build Personal Website (5); Create Social Media Profile (6)
Identity formation	Identify Target Audience (3); Analyze Competitors (4)
Creating a positive first impression	Curate Own Content (7); Make Connections in Social Media (9)
Creation of aura, reflecting a person's emotional value and ability to communicate	Behave According to Expectations (11); Align with Industry Norms (12)
Brand experience	Get Feedback (8); Evolve and Make Changes (10)

Romeika and Griesiene (2022) distill Frischmann's framework into six components: skill definition, search accessibility, identity formation, first impression, aura creation, and brand experience, providing a concise structure for analyzing online personal branding. By integrating these models, scholars gain both granular tactics and strategic building blocks essential for understanding how digital natives construct resilient personal brands.

The rise of TikTok as a social media platform enables users to build brands and develop personal brands through features such as editing tools, music, and facial effects for 30–60-second videos (Dinata & Aulia, 2022). Influencers—individuals with unique skills or content that inspire followers—use TikTok to boost self-confidence, creativity, and public image, often cross-posting to Instagram to increase visibility (Ardianto & Zulfiningrum, 2022, p. 5981; Ishihara & Oktavianti, 2021, p. 77). This platform's algorithm-driven For You Page (FYP) can rapidly amplify discoverability, consistency making and specialization critical for maintaining a strong personal brand (Putri & Azeharie, 2021, p. 280).

Putri and Azeharie's (2021, p. 280) research results indicate that communication management strategies employed by each TikTok celebrity were primarily achieved through their interaction and content. The types of interactions vary with personal choices and do not always depend on the content category. According to Ardiansyah and Sinduwiatmo (2023, p. 169), alternative personal branding frameworks have been successfully applied to TikTok influencers, with research demonstrating successful TikTok that celebrities achieve personal branding through eight core concepts: "specialization, leadership, personality, difference, visibility, unity, firmness and good name," creating characters that distinctive resonate with audiences through smart entertaining content.

3 Research Method

This qualitative, single-case study employed a digital ethnographic, multi-method approach to examine Nathanael Abednego's TikTok branding strategy. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with three informants (Abednego, his content manager, and his video editor), six months of systematic content analysis across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and participant observation of comment threads and community interactions. All interviews were conducted remotely (60-90 minutes each), transcribed, and inductively coded; emerging patterns were then organized deductively according to Frischmann's (2014) twelve-step framework (Romeika & Griesiene, 2022). Content themes and engagement metrics (views, likes, comments) were triangulated to contextualize qualitative insights. Ethical approval was secured, informed consent obtained, and detailed instruments (interview guide, coding schema) were developed.

4 Results and Discussions

This section interprets Nathanael Abednego's branding practices through Frischmann's (2014) online branding model, as refined by Romeika and Ingrida (2022). Drawing on semi-structured interviews, six months of content analysis across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and digital observations, we examine how Abednego's core badminton expertise underpins his functional value (skill set), how strategic platform optimization enhances discoverability, and how consistent visual and narrative choices forge a coherent online identity. Key findings highlight that self-presentation techniques and

adaptive feedback loops, manifested in curated tutorial formats, interactive community engagement, and responsive content evolution, simultaneously drive audience growth and reinforce brand credibility (Arruda, 2019). Additional observations note emergent themes in collaborative content production, analytics-driven decision making, and the selective adoption of TikTok trends to sustain long-term engagement.

4.1 Definition of skills reflecting human functional value, professional abilities, and competence skill set

Definition of skills reflecting human functional value, professional abilities, and competence skill set (Aji et al., 2022, p. 336). Becoming self-aware, the first stage in Frischmann's (2014) model (Romeika & Griesiene, 2022), laid the groundwork for Nathanael Abednego's digital identity by anchoring his brand in genuine expertise and personal strengths. Early interviews indicate that years of badminton practice transformed a childhood hobby into professional competence, while successes in local competitions bolstered his confidence and sociability. During the pandemic, Abednego began sharing concise tutorials and motivational drills on TikTok, forging an "approachable educator" persona that resonated with viewers and spurred high engagement. Comments frequently cited newfound inspiration and improvements in training. This iterative feedback loop not only validated his technical authority but also reinforced his communication style and relaxed demeanor, aligning with Generation Z's preference for authenticity over polish (Arruda, 2019; Twenge, 2017) (Twenge, 2017). By transparently showcasing both skill and personality, Abednego demonstrates how deep self-knowledge translates into a coherent brand narrative that conveys both functional value and emotional trust.

4.2 Creating accessibility in search engines (getting found)

Improving search engine accessibility, or getting found, depends on strategically optimizing one's digital footprint to facilitate organic discovery. Frischmann (2014) positions a personal website as the central control point for brand narrative, offering greater freedom in design, storytelling, and resource hosting than social platforms can match (Romeika & Griesiene, 2022). As Abednego's influence expanded beyond TikTok, a dedicated site would enable him to showcase case studies, downloadable training guides, and reflective essays in a stable environment unaffected by algorithmic fluctuations or policy changes (Arruda, 2019). This permanence enhances credibility among recruiters, sponsors, and collaborators who increasingly vet professionals online, while providing a flexible canvas for iterative identity refinement through multimedia integration and customized layouts.

Complementing a personal hub, cohesive social media profiles on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube create a multi-channel ecosystem that maximizes reach and engagement (Hanifah & Sudrajat, 2024, p. 546). On TikTok, Abednego harnesses the FYP algorithm to amass 216,400 followers and 6.6 million likes by May 2025, delivering concise, trend-aligned badminton tutorials within users' typical 15–30-second at-

tention span. Instagram Stories, Reels, and direct messaging deepen follower relationships through behind-the-scenes insights and interactive Q&A sessions, while YouTube serves as a repository for in-depth analysis and extended tutorials. This platform synergy, mirroring Frischmann's emphasis on interconnected profiles, ensures that each touchpoint reinforces a consistent visual and verbal identity, amplifying trust and recognition across digital channels. Platform studies note that "TikTok is a conversation that develops the opinion of presidential candidates to the digital community" (Daherman & Taufiq, 2023, pp. 163–164), underscoring its persuasive reach.

4.3 Identity Formation

Identity formation hinges on precisely defining and continually refining one's audience (Aji et al., 2022, p. 336). For Abednego, this meant targeting Gen Z badminton enthusiasts who seek both entertainment and instruction, aligning with TikTok's demographic and motivational orientation. Through systematic analysis of FYP metrics: views, likes, comments, shares, and watch time, he and his manager, Clarissa, iteratively adapt video length, tone, and content themes to surface before users predisposed to sports content. Integrating psychographic segmentation principles (Kotler et al., 2021), Abednego crafts narratives that resonate with viewers' values, framing badminton as an accessible pathway to fitness and confidence, thereby deepening emotional connection and positioning himself as a relatable mentor.

Ongoing competitor analysis further sharpens his strategy: by mapping peers' technical deep dives, wellness integrations, and humor-centric skits, he identifies gaps in beginner-friendly education and synthesizes multi-part tutorials that blend substance with spontaneity, yielding higher engagement rates. TikTok's algorithmic matchmaking amplifies this approach, driving organic growth as he continuously monitors shifting audience tastes and platform trends to maintain relevance and foster a vibrant, loyal community.

4.4 Creating a positive first impression

Creating a positive first impression hinges on deliberate content curation and authentic engagement to convey professionalism and personality within seconds of viewer interaction (Hanifah & Sudrajat, 2024, p. 547). Abednego selectively publishes concise technique demonstrations, training highlights, and rally snapshots that foreground his badminton expertise and teaching style, ensuring his brand message is immediately clear. He further amplifies visibility by inviting both praise and measured critique, embracing controversy that adheres to community guidelines, to spark discussion and broaden reach (Arruda, 2019). Consistent scheduling through batch production maintains high-quality output without compromising training commitments, reinforcing his image as a disciplined athlete.

Ishihara and Oktavianti's (2021, p. 76) research shows that influencers' characters align with their personal ambitions, namely, creating TikTok content to inform their followers. Next, influencers are consistent in their focus on one area, experience, and

professionalism toward clients, including making self-improvement efforts when they receive criticism or evaluation.

Furthermore, Putri and Azeharie (2021, p. 280) note that communication management strategies employed by each TikTok celebrity are achieved through interaction and content. The types of interactions vary with each TikTok celebrity's personal preferences and do not always depend on the content created.

Audience feedback informs iterative refinements: positive comments guide content themes, and critical insights prompt adjustments, exemplifying a feedback-driven approach to first-impression management that builds credibility and fosters trust.

4.5 Creation of aura, reflecting a person's emotional value and ability to communicate

The creation of an aura, reflecting a person's emotional value and ability to communicate, arises from the alignment of promises and performance (Aji et al., 2022, p. 336). According to Montoya and Vandehey (2002), aura is how a person perceives an individual, including both controllable and uncontrollable aspects (Qonitat, 2019, p. 110). When digital transparency subjects every gesture to scrutiny, credibility hinges on consistent behavior and content that embody one's professed values (Hamzah et al., 2023).

Abednego cultivates this aura by consistently projecting discipline, education, and authenticity in his videos and interactions, while selectively embracing dissenting viewpoints that spark meaningful dialogue without undermining his core identity. This aligns with evidence that effective social media practice can develop "personal branding as an icon that motivates, inspires, and arouses emotions" (Erika & Alawi, 2024, p. 40). Rather than chasing superficial trends, he integrates platform innovations in ways that reinforce his professional ethos, demonstrating how purposeful adaptation, grounded in personal principles, builds enduring trust and emotional resonance with audiences (Arruda, 2019).

4.6 Brand Experience

Consistency is essential in personal branding, conveying a consistent message to the audience and enabling them to trust and rely on that individual (Putri & Azeharie, 2021, p. 283). While feedback serves as both a diagnostic mirror and an iterative engine in personal branding, it reveals how one's digital identity resonates with colleagues, followers, and broader communities and guides ongoing refinement (Hanifah & Sudrajat, 2024, p. 547). As Arruda (2019) emphasizes, "Personal branding is about delivering value to others," and Abednego operationalizes this by closely monitoring engagement comments, metrics, and conversational cues to assess which content formats and themes elicit genuine connection.

Positive successful constructive remarks strategies, criticism self-reflection and reinforce while prompts strategic adjustments in style and subject matter, demonstrating his commitment to authenticity and empathy (Clarissa, communication). responsiveness aligns personal This with Frischmann's (2014) Get Feedback principle, signaling a growth-oriented dialogue rather than a one-way broadcast (Romeika & Griesiene,

2022). Continuous evolution complements feedback by transforming insights into action. Acknowledging that a personal brand is a living process, subject to environmental, technological, and audience shifts.

Abednego tracks performance data to detect waning formats and experiments with new narrative structures, visual collaborative styles, features and while remaining true to his core values. Benchmarking peer creators informs these innovations; rather than mimicry, he draws inspiration to refine his unique voice. This balance of consistent foundational identity and adaptive experimentation, characteristic of digitally native Gen Z users (Twenge, 2017), sustains audience interest and ensures that his brand remains both relevant and resilient amid TikTok's fast-paced landscape. Comparative cases on Instagram also show that groups can "establish personal branding as an icon of an inspirational group," reinforcing durable audience identification (Erika & Alawi, 2024, p. 53).

5 Conclusion

Abednego's TikTok strategy validates Frischmann's online personal branding model for Generation Z influencers by demonstrating effective skill showcasing, active audience engagement, and strategic adaptation. His authentic, data-driven use of platform features and responsiveness to feedback underscore the need to combine foundational branding principles with continuous innovation. As social media landscapes evolve, personal branding success hinges on harmonizing core identity elements with collaborative content creation and analytics-informed adjustments.

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