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Conceptualisation and Operationalisation of the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool

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Abstract

The purpose of our manuscript is to conceptualise and operationalise the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool. The V.A.L.U.E. acronym stands for Vision, Ability, Love, Understanding, and Ecosystem. The paper adopts a case study design based on qualitative insights via an in-depth and semi-structured interview with an individual who has used the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool over five years, initially in their final year of university (2018-2019) and subsequently as a graduate in the labour market (2019-2023). The lived experience provided through the case study provides insights into the operationalisation of the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool for (i) preparing and navigating the university-to-work transition, (ii) navigating an unplanned career transition, and (iii) navigating a planned career transition. The theoretical contribution comes from conceptualising the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool. The practical contribution comes from offering implications for (a) students and universities and (b) workers and organisations to operationalise the tool. A future research agenda is also presented.

Keywords/key phrases: career development, case study, employability, graduates, intrapersonal brand, interpersonal brand.

1. Introduction

In 1997, Tom Peters coined the term ‘personal branding’. He stated,

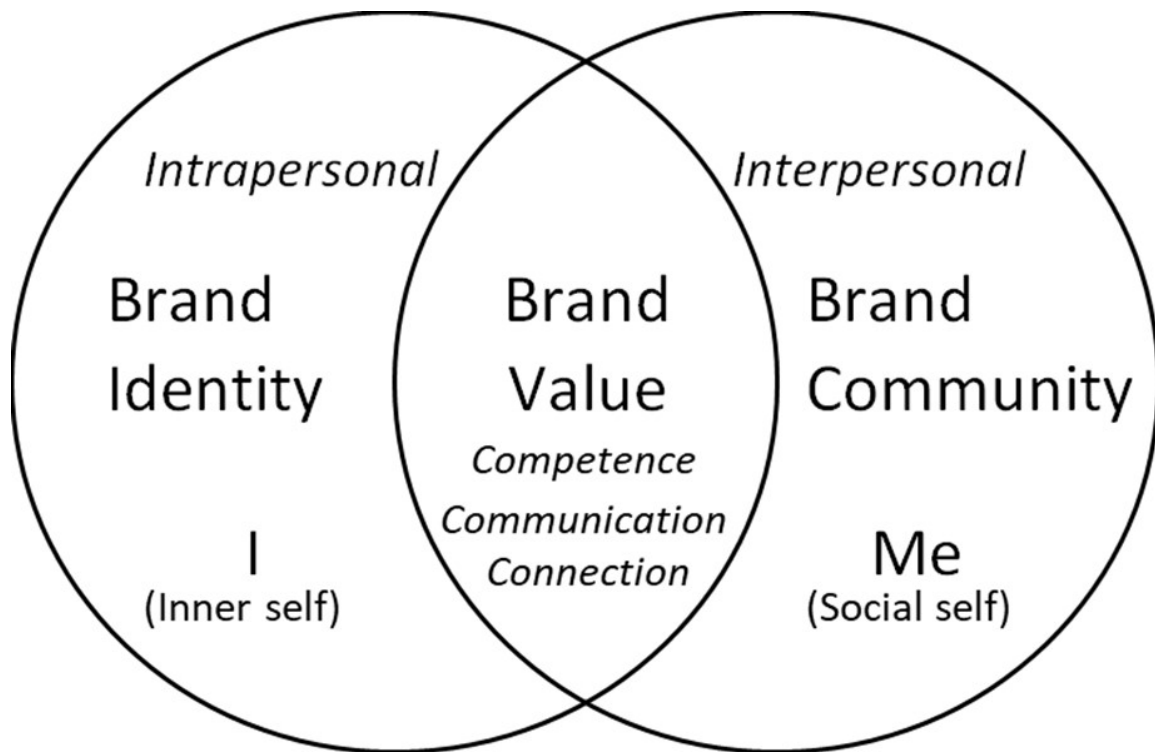
We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business, today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You. It’s that simple – and that hard. And that inescapable. (Peters, 1997, Online)

Peters’ perspective took the concept of ‘branding’, which had historically applied to corporations or products, and applied it to individuals to demonstrate authentic reputation and value (Sylvester, 2016; 2019). Therefore, personal brand value is the reputation, meaning, and

association derived from two-way communication (Sylvester & O'Reilly, 2017). Consequently, “your personal brand should be about how you want to show up in the world, not just about what you want to achieve” (Brower, 2019, p. 81).

According to Sylvester and Donald (2023), personal brand management has three distinct themes: identity, community, and value. Brand identity focuses on the intrapersonal aspects of the inner self. Brand community focuses on the interpersonal aspects of one’s social self. Brand value intersects brand identity and community, focusing on competence, communication, and connection. Figure 1 illustrates the three themes.

FIGURE 1. THE THREE THEMES OF PERSONAL BRAND MANAGEMENT



Source: © Sylvester, 2023. Used with permission.

In the context of higher education, “students possess a high degree of awareness about the need for employer-oriented personal branding” (Kushal & Nargundkar, 2021, p. 48). The findings are promising because crafting an intentional and authentic personal brand has been shown to increase the chances of career success, getting noticed, and getting ahead in a competitive labour market (Gorbatov et al., 2019; 2021).

However, a versatile tool for personal branding that (a) incorporates these three themes and (b) can be used across educational and workplace contexts to prepare for and undertake career transitions is lacking. One plausible reason for this specific gap is that graduate and worker employability literature streams have tended to develop in parallel (Akkermans et al., 2023), as has the employability and career development literature (Healy et al., 2022), despite sharing similar tenets. Additionally, existing models that focus on aspects of personal branding fail to integrate different career theories or lack a holistic approach, which risks an overly narrow view and limits the potential benefits.

To address this gap, the purpose of our manuscript is to conceptualise and operationalise the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool. The V.A.L.U.E. acronym stands for **V**ision, **A**bility, **L**ove, **U**nderstanding, and **E**cosystem. The manuscript is structured as follows: The initial focus is on the conceptualisation of the tool. Next, an overview of the case study method is presented, outlining our approach of interviewing an individual who has used the tool for the last five years across higher education (2018-2019) and labour market contexts (2019-2023). Our attention then turns to the lived experience provided through the case study, offering insights into the operationalisation of the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool for (i) preparing and navigating the university-to-work transition, (ii) navigating an unplanned career transition, and (iii) navigating a planned career transition. The manuscript concludes with (i) the theoretical contribution of conceptualising the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool, (ii) the practical implications for (a) students and universities and (b) workers and organisations to operationalise the tool, and (iii) a future research agenda.

2. Conceptualisation of the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool

Having introduced the three themes of personal brand management: brand identity, brand community, and brand value (Sylvester & Donald, 2023), our attention now shifts to conceptualising the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool.

The tool is the creation of the lead author. He was the world's first Professor of Marketing and Personal Branding. He is also a personal and business brand strategy coach and consultant. The V.A.L.U.E. acronym stands for **V**ision, **A**bility, **L**ove, **U**nderstanding, and **E**cosystem, which we introduce sequentially. Moreover, the tool incorporates the intersectionality of Persistence, Purpose, Positioning, Profile, and Talent. Our conceptualisation of the tool concludes with a visual representation.

2.1. Vision

The vision dimension facilitates the establishment of purpose and direction in one's life and career by shaping an enduring strategic course to define a brand's essence and future objectives. This approach aligns with the Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005), whereby an individual's values, mission, and aspirations drive their vision. A clear and compelling vision is critical to successful brand management (Kapferer, 2020). Subsequently, creating a unique brand identity enables a person to influence their image and reputation in the minds of others, which can be a powerful way of signalling employability to prospective employers as a means to operationalise employability (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021).

2.2. Ability

Ability captures the interplay among expertise, innovation, fostering social connections, consistent performance, and resilience in adversity. It is the competence to perform a specific function or task effectively and efficiently, thus meeting (or exceeding) other people's expectations and requirements. The ability dimension aligns with the Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), whereby acquiring personal resources, including psychological resources such as resilience, can lead to increased employability and well-being (Nimmi et al., 2021; 2022). Furthermore, ability is linked to forms of graduate and employability capital (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Donald et al., 2023; Pham & Jackson, 2020) and the indicators of a sustainable career of health, happiness, and productivity (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Ability thus reflects the need for an individual to equip themselves with the necessary competencies and mindset to navigate contemporary labour markets (Marine, 2023),

whereby psychological strengths and skill enhancement can facilitate an individual's ability to navigate uncertainty in the labour market (Nimmi et al., 2023). Such benefits can also transcend to one's direct reports and employer because contemporary managers need to be responsive and resilient to threats and opportunities to cope with uncertainty and risk (Kelly, 2023).

2.3. Love

Love signifies a profound emotional connection and strong affinity for a particular career. Love can be driven by a combination of rational and emotional factors, acknowledging the complex interplay of various influences such as family, personality, self-image, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). The love dimension aligns with the Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005), whereby identifying one's passion can inform self-efficacy and identity construction. Love can also evolve over time, leading to an individual navigating various workplace contexts over their career span, which maps to Sustainable Career Theory's person, context, and time dimensions (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). The influence of the interconnected and interdependent nature of different actors captured by Career Ecosystem Theory (Baruch, 2015), when combined with Sustainable Career Theory (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015), is captured by Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (Donald, 2023; Donald & Jackson, 2023).

2.4. Understanding

Understanding refers to the job and industry a person currently works in or plans to enter. Understanding involves researching the job and industry, acquiring knowledge about the necessary skills and qualifications, and gaining insight into the job responsibilities and prevailing work culture. The understanding dimension ensures that a person's choice of job and industry aligns with their values and goals, according to Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005). Additionally, understanding facilitates an individual to identify and acquire the necessary resources, according to the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), and to show one's capabilities to a potential or current employer, per Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973).

2.5. Ecosystem

An ecosystem refers to the interactive nature of the different dimensions of one's personal brand to prepare for and navigate career transitions across one's career span. The ecosystem dimension also draws together the Career Ecosystem Theory (Baruch, 2015) and Sustainable Career Theory (Van der Heijden and De Vos) into the Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (Donald, 2023; Donald & Jackson, 2023). It also bridges Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973) and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) to capture the interactions between a person and other actors, thereby determining the sustainability of a career ecosystem. The approach also acknowledges an underlying reciprocity mechanism between the individual and their employer (Ahmad, 2018). Interestingly, Akkermans, Tomlinson et al. (2023) recently proposed bridging these two theories to advance career theory research.

2.6. Intersectionality

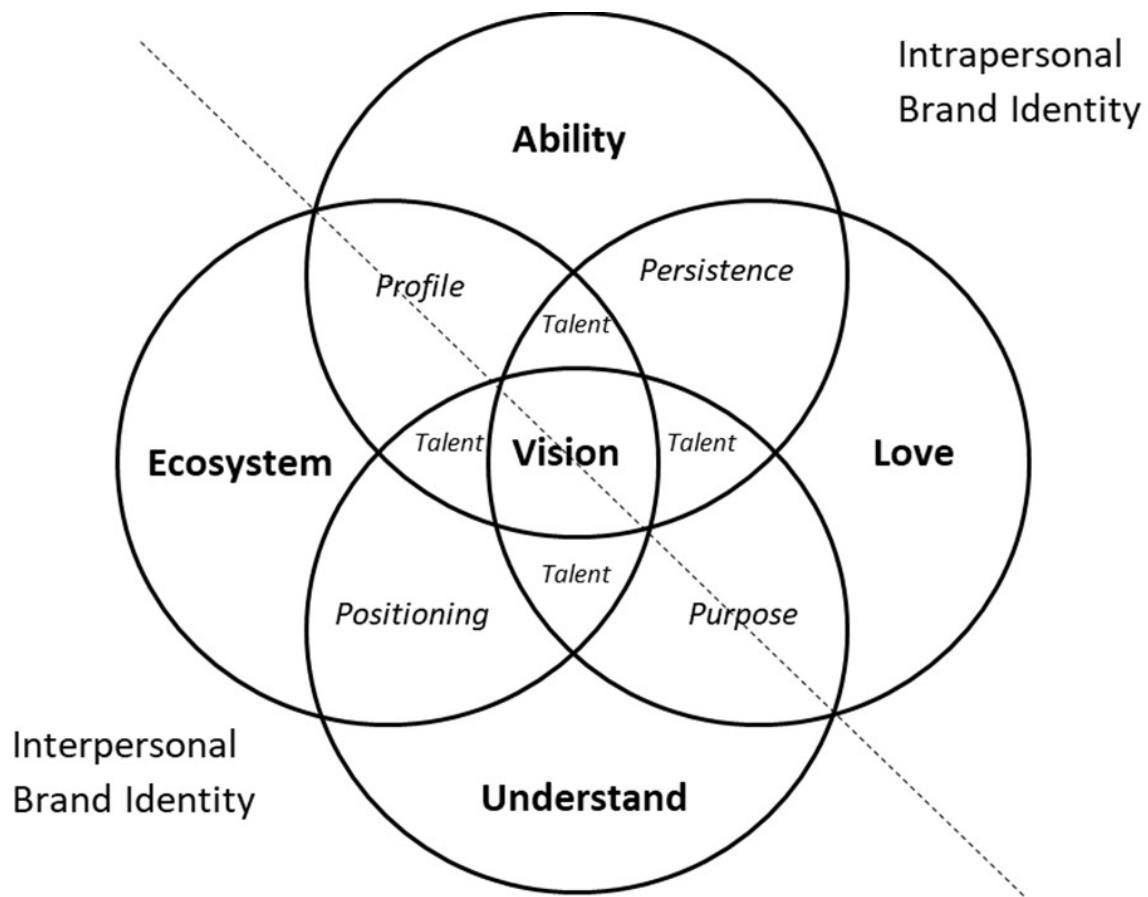
The Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool also incorporates the intersectionality of **P**ersistence, **P**urpose, **P**ositioning, and **P**rofile. The four **P**s represent intersectionality between two of the V.A.L.U.E. dimensions: Persistence (Ability + Love), Purpose (Love + Understanding), Positioning (Understanding + Ecosystem), and Profile (Ecosystem + Ability). Additionally, Talent captures the intersectionality of any three of the

V.A.L.U.E. dimensions. Please see Sylvester and Donald (2023) for additional information on the intersectionality of the tool.

2.7. Visual Representation of the Tool

Figure 2 visually represents the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development tool.

FIGURE 2. PERSONAL BRAND V.A.L.U.E. CAREER DEVELOPMENT TOOL



Source: © Sylvester, 2023. Used with permission.

3. Method

3.1. Research Stance

The purpose of our manuscript is to conceptualise and operationalise the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool. Consequently, a case study design is appropriate when seeking to understand more about an emerging phenomenon (Stake, 2000), and a qualitative approach using a single case study method was adopted (Yin, 2003). Within a case study method, a case can look at the micro, meso, or macro levels and incorporate single or multiple actors (Swanborn, 2010). We focused on the lived experience of a single individual (micro level) as they used the model across the university and labour market settings (meso levels).

3.2. Sample and Data Collection Procedure

The participant in this study used the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool during their final year of university studies in the USA (2018-2019), where they completed a Music Business Major, a complimentary Major in Musical Theatre, a Minor in Marketing, and

a Cognate in Personal Brand Management. They subsequently used the tool to navigate the labour market in the years since graduation (2019-2023). We refer to the participant throughout this manuscript using the pseudonym Ruby.

Before data collection, we secured ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (ERGO: 89074). Next, the lead author emailed Ruby and provided her with a copy of the participant information document and the opportunity to ask any questions about the study. Ruby then provided informed and written consent to participate. The lead author subsequently conducted a semi-structured interview with Ruby in October 2023, which lasted for 1 hour and 32 minutes. Example questions included “How did you use the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool during your time at university to prepare for the university-to-work transition?”, “How did you use the tool during your time since graduating from university?”, “What did you find helpful about the tool?”, “Did you feel there were any limitations to using the tool?”.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The lead and second authors each listened to the interview recording multiple times independently of one another, making notes under three pre-agreed headings: (i) preparing for and navigating the university-to-work transition, (ii) navigating an unplanned career transition, and (iii) navigating a planned career transition. The focus was to establish how Ruby operationalised the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool in these three scenarios.

Once the authors had independently captured the operationalisation approaches across these scenarios, supported by relevant participant quotes, they then met to discuss their respective findings. Inter-rater reliability was determined using Cohen’s *K* value, where alignment was very high [0.92] because it exceeded 0.82. Differences between the coders were discussed until an agreement was reached. After the meeting, the second author merged the findings into a single report, and both authors listened to the interview independently for the final time, which included capturing additional participant quotes.

Once the two authors reached a final consensus (Saldaña, 2015) on the finalised report, a copy was sent to Ruby to confirm the information. Thus, our analytical procedure demonstrates trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and credibility (Choi & Roulston, 2015). The final case study report is now provided.

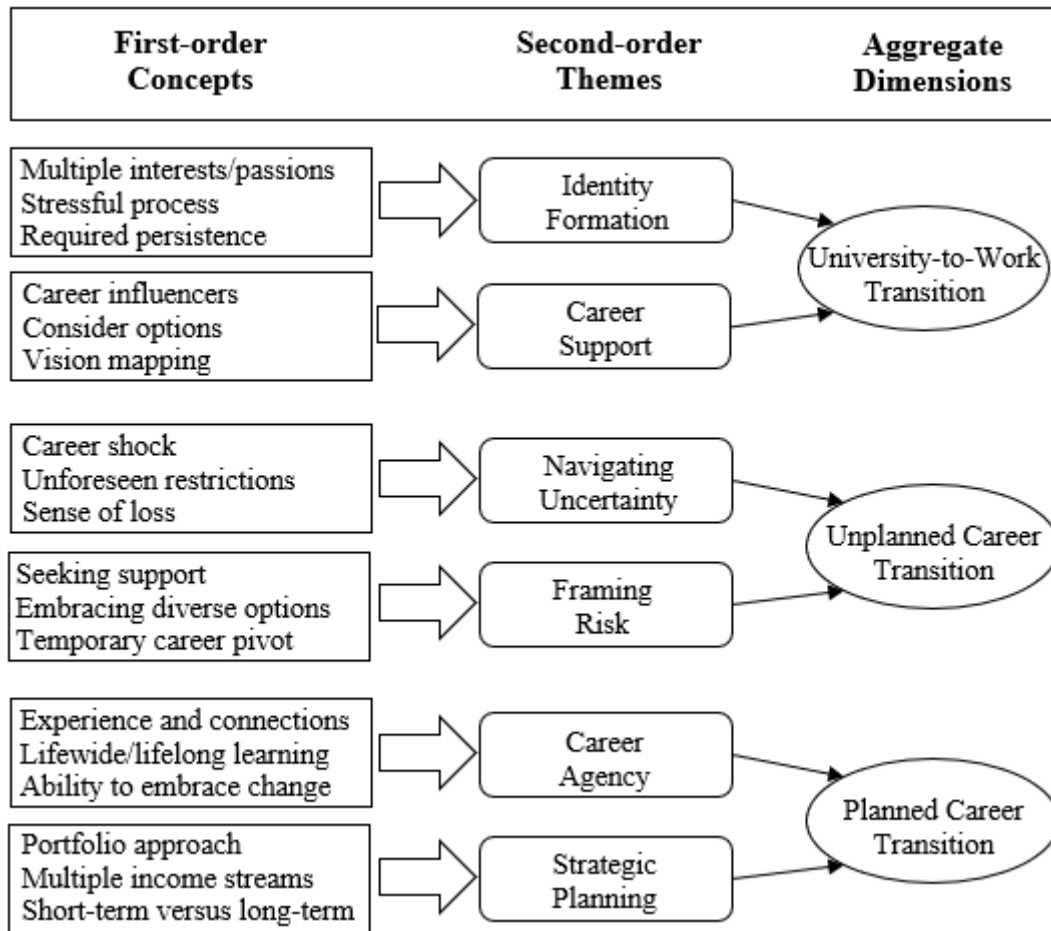
4. Operationalisation of the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool

4.1. Overview of the Findings

Figure 3 (next page) shows the first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions, demonstrating the final data structure as approved by Ruby.

We now use the three aggregate dimensions as subheadings to frame our analysis to evidence the operationalisation of the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool.

FIGURE 3. FIRST-ORDER CONCEPTS, SECOND-ORDER THEMES, AND AGGREGATE DIMENSIONS EVIDENCING THE FINAL DATA STRUCTURE



Source: Authors' own creation based on guidance and notation by Gioia et al. (2013, p. 21).

4.2. Preparing For and Navigating the University-To-Work Transition

4.2.1. Theme 1: Identity Formation

Ruby decided on a Music Business Major, a complimentary Major in Musical Theatre, a Minor in Marketing, and a Cognate in Personal Brand Management. As Ruby explains,

Marketing and branding is how you make money, so it's an important part of the music business. I chose the Music Business Major over the Marketing Major. I wanted to take more music business classes because I thought those were bringing together two of my interests more than Marketing. But I still wanted all of the Marketing classes that I thought would be beneficial, so that's where the Marketing minor came in.

Consequently, the pursuit of multiple interests and passions often meant that certain people only knew about certain aspects of Ruby's identity:

My Finance Professor didn't know I was in the musical until I invited him to go. And he replied, "You are one of the best students in the class. I had no idea you also sing". Same thing with my Choir Professor not knowing about my business courses. So I think because I have multiple interests, everyone in my life knew me in a very compartmentalised way.

Her choice of studies enabled Ruby to pursue multiple interests and passions. However, this was a stressful process:

Yes, I did find it quite stressful. I took over 20 credit hours a semester, which not everybody does. I could not have done it on my own. There were several times I went to a Professor's office crying. College is a stressful time for almost anybody, but my workload added to the stress. There were particular times of the year, like finals season or the push right before Christmas break, when everything was due at once: assignments, a big show.

Therefore, taking on so much, while beneficial to identity formation, also required persistence:

If I had not been persistent, it would have been really easy for me to just give up on performing and say I'm going to be practical and only do business because I want to make money. I've definitely had moments of imposter syndrome. But I loved performing. I loved it too much to get rid of it, to not be persistent.

My friends thought I was a little crazy, trying to do the major, the complementary major, the minor, and the cognate. But nobody thinks I'm crazy now because I followed through. Every class I took has been useful for me in the four years since graduating.

4.2.2. Theme 2: Career Support

During university, Ruby also spoke about various career influencers and their roles in helping her consider her options. Ruby's parents, specifically her father, were pleased with her decision to add business, marketing, and personal branding courses.

A lot of parents have a hard time with the idea of their kids majoring in the Arts in general because they are worried they will spend a lot of money on a degree and then not make any money in performing, and there are people where that's what happens. So, I think they had their reasons to be a little bit worried. But when I started taking the business classes, my dad, specifically, was like, "Good, you're going to provide a backup plan for when performing doesn't work out. You can go into a business job, so this is great".

Nevertheless, her approach was met with resistance by some of the Professors:

They [my Professors] thought that because I was not committing to one thing, I was not committed to pursuing musical theatre.

However, another Professor had a different view:

Other people thought I was doing too much or not committing to anything. Then my Personal Branding Professor said, "It's ok, you can be multifaceted. You can have multiple passions. You should absolutely pursue multiple passions".

Interestingly, in retrospect, all Ruby's Professors now recognise the value of her approach:

They thought I was not committed to one thing at the time. But now I've been out of university for four years, I've had more musical theatre jobs than a lot of others have. So they don't think that now.

Ruby also spoke of the use of a vision board as part of the Personal Branding V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool and the value her Personal Branding Professor provided in helping her to map out a vision for the future:

I truly think the vision board was the most useful thing I did in college because I still have it. Not much has changed on it. I've thought about re-doing it recently. But not because the subjects I put on it have changed. More so because I've ticked so many things off that I'm now ready to set new visions. It helped me get really specific about what I wanted. I wanted to live in New York. I wanted to work for Disney. I wanted to be a singer on a cruise ship with this cruise line... So, I didn't feel I should sacrifice learning about business to perform, but I also didn't want to stop performing. I wanted both. My Personal Branding Professor was the first person to say, "It's good that you want both, and you should do both".

The vision board also helped Ruby acquire applied experience, which proved invaluable:

And then you start thinking, what steps must I take now? I was really scared about some of the things on my vision board, but I really wanted to try. I wanted to work in these companies; I wanted to work in these industries. These are some of my dream jobs. So, I was more scared about not trying to achieve those dreams and goals. I interned at Disney, which offered networking opportunities and opportunities to learn about Disney as a company and brand.

When you're in a class, a lot of times, it's hard to see how this class relates to my actual career path. So, seeing in action the practical application during the degree was way more important. That is what employers look for – they don't care what classes I took. They care about 'what internships did I do?', 'what real-world experience did I provide?', and 'what projects were used in an actual business'.

4.3. Navigating An Unplanned Career Transition

4.3.1. Theme 3: Navigating Uncertainty

After graduating, Ruby secured a contract with her dream employer, Disney, in her dream role as a performer, following a semester-long internship with the company during her time at university. She was working full-time in the ecosystem that is 'performing'. Then, a career shock occurred due to unforeseen restrictions. As Ruby explains:

I started in January 2020, but it was cut short in March 2020 because of the pandemic. I was there for three months, but then everything shut down. The park shut down. The performances shut down. That was a really difficult period because I'd had the first internship at Disney and all these networking connections at Disney. I graduated and got to go back as a performer, which was always a dream of mine. I was enjoying it. I knew there were opportunities for me to be promoted. There were extra performance opportunities I was going to be able to audition for. So, the pandemic really sent me for a loop.

Subsequently, Ruby experienced this sense of loss, which was compounded by challenging labour market conditions:

It was particularly poor timing because it was such a dream of mine, and that particular thing was on my vision board. Then, a lot of people were in the same boat. A lot of theatre and performance opportunities during the pandemic with airborne transitions did not exist for a year and a half.

4.3.2. Theme 4: Framing Risk

Ruby then decided to reach out to her old Professor for support, in whose class she had originally been introduced to the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool and produced the vision board. As Ruby narrates:

I remember I called the Professor because I was looking for marketing jobs and feeling a little insecure about it. Because of the pandemic, not a lot of people were hiring. I was applying to a lot of things and getting denied. Not everybody was able to hire, and for any jobs that hiring was taking place, there were a lot of applicants for them.

Through these conversations, Ruby was encouraged to embrace diverse options:

So, the Professor said they knew of a Church that needed someone to help with marketing. I ended up working with them for over a year as their social media manager.

The outcome was to overcome the career shock caused by the pandemic via a temporary career pivot:

Once I started doing the social media manager job with the Church, I also ended up getting an internship with a marketing agency that turned into a long-term contractor position. Then, another of my former Professors contacted me about a non-profit, so I ended up working with them for a year. So suddenly, I had two clients of my own and clients through my internship with the marketing agency. Then, a Symphony Orchestra who I had interned with during university reached out and asked me to be the Interim Executive Director. Suddenly, I had four or five different contracts with different places, and I was making more money than I had ever made.

4.4. Navigating A Planned Career Transition

4.4.1. Theme 5: Career Agency

Ruby could draw on her personal brand portfolio of experience and connections to use the vision board to navigate a planned career transition. For example, her marketing roles came about through connections with her old Professors. The Symphony Orchestra role came about because Ruby had previously interned there. The next phase involved gaining tailored experience and connections, which began with a move to Nashville.

The job in Nashville was very much a music business job. It was a marketing apprenticeship for a music company owned by a Grammy-winning Songwriter and Producer. The owner knew a lot of people in the industry; he had just signed a publishing deal and was trying to enter the country music space. I just thought that even though they were not offering me a lot of money, the work experience and connections were really valuable to me.

Ruby explains the value of embracing lifewide and lifelong learning opportunities:

In early 2022, I secured a job to perform at a professional regional theatre right outside of Nashville. I was getting paid for it. I also had my marketing agency job that was remote. I also had my Nashville music industry job. I was doing all three of those things. I was so thankful. They were things I had developed skills for over time and could utilise everything I said I would two to three years after graduating.

Ruby was then offered a job on a cruise ship in August 2022. It offered her a dream job and dream remuneration, whereby Ruby now had a career agency and was in demand:

I had auditioned at this place earlier in the year, and suddenly, they called me and offered me this lead singer contract for a cruise ship. It was more money than I was making from all of the current three jobs combined. Cruise ship work has been on my vision board as well. And they happened to be rehearsing for two months in New York before we would board a brand new ship as the inaugural cast of performers.

However, it required Ruby to embrace continual change:

The catch was that I had to fly to New York within four days of this call, which I was not expecting. It meant I needed to pack up everything, quit, and move immediately. Letting other people down was the hardest part of all this. It put me in a really tough spot. But at the same time, this opportunity was very much in line with my vision for my life and career. It was an awesome opportunity, but the timeline was very stressful.

4.4.2. Theme 6: Strategic Planning

The initial portfolio approach generated multiple income streams. Ruby's income was much higher than the job offer in Nashville, but keeping some of the existing contract work enabled her to supplement the initial pay in Nashville and gain access to valuable contacts in the music industry.

Thankfully, I was making a decent amount of money from all of these clients that I had acquired because of the pandemic and could make it work with the lower pay in Nashville. I did both jobs for the first year. But for the first six months, I kept all my clients and then after that, I had too little hours in the day. So I helped two of my clients find other contractors. I'd also been able to save money during the pandemic to help fund this transition.

Ruby made a series of short-term decisions that ultimately helped her achieve her long-term dream and aspirations. She was planning, had a purpose, went down to Nashville, and then on the cruise:

During this time in Nashville, I still had my vision board. I still had New York on my mind because that's where most of the musical theatre is – and obviously, there are a lot of business and marketing jobs. So Nashville was always a stepping stone to New York.

Her vision was to integrate music business, musical theatre, and marketing with a career based in New York, which she has now achieved.

I planned from the beginning. When I accepted the cruise job, I knew that moving to New York after would make the most sense. I worked and saved as much money as I could. I went with the cheapest place I could find in New York to live, but it is safe and

an easy commute. I currently work at a rehearsal studio space in midtown in the theatre district, Broadway, where I book and sell space to theatres and performers who need a place to rehearse. I've also got back into digital marketing. I've literally been able to use everything and continue to use everything I've acquired through university and since.

5. Discussion

Our attention now turns to considering (a) theoretical implications, (b) practical implications for students and universities, (c) practical implications for workers and organisations, and (d) limitations and future research agenda.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The theoretical contribution comes from conceptualising the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool. Our approach addresses the need to bridge the graduate and worker employability literature (Akkermans et al., 2023), as well as the employability and career development literature (Healy et al., 2022). Additionally, the tool captures the three distinct themes of personal branding offered by Sylvester and Donald (2023): brand identity (intrapersonal), brand community (interpersonal), and brand value (the intersection of intrapersonal and interpersonal). It also helps to advance an emerging interest in integrating personal branding and career research (Gorbatov et al., 2019; 2021), offering interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches.

Moreover, the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool integrates various theories without being limited by the constraints of any single theory. In the conceptualisation section of the manuscript, references were made to a myriad of theories, including Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973), Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005), Sustainable Career Theory (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015), Career Ecosystem Theory (Baruch, 2015), Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (Donald, 2023), and Employability Capital (Donald et al., 2023). The outcome of blending these theories is a theoretically sound yet pragmatic tool that ensures versatility and real-world impact, representing the focal contribution of our work. Consequently, the insights from the case study offer practical implications.

5.2. Implications for Students and Universities

The Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool offers a critical sequence of five questions encompassing a multi-perspective and interdisciplinary understanding of personal branding and career development. The five-question areas enable students to consider their own specific and individual intra-personal and inter-personal brand V.A.L.U.E. to establish an authentic career development plan. These five questions are: (1) What is your **V**ision?, (2) What is your **A**bility?, (3) What do you **L**ove?, (4) What is your **U**nderstanding?, and (5) What is your employment **E**cosystem?

Universities can support their students in understanding that a brand is an identity, branding is the communication of that identity, and marketing is the communication of the value of that identity. This contributes to discussions around innovative ways to enhance student employability via curriculum interventions (Padgett & Donald, 2023) to prepare students for

sustainable careers by navigating complex and volatile labour markets (Mouratidou & Donald, 2022).

Career professionals can introduce the tool to their students and encourage them to consider the five questions to develop a vision board that captures their dreams, goals, and aspirations. For example, ‘I want to work in these industries and for these companies’, ‘these are some of my dream jobs’, and ‘these are my dream locations’. Some students may prefer to do this activity in a group setting, others may prefer conducting it during a 1-2-1 session with a career professional, while other students might want to undertake the activity on their own.

When asked about the implications for university students during the interview, Ruby explained:

Sometimes, in college, people are scared to verbalise some of their dreams and aspirations because they can seem really big. So, having a physical vision board with specific things can be really helpful. Once you can verbalise and visualise some of those goals and aspirations, it makes it less daunting.

The individual can then consider what resources they have and what resources they require to develop their identity and achieve their aspirations. Specifically, how can they embrace and articulate the benefits of lifewide and lifelong learning (Cole & Donald, 2022), the experiences, and contacts, that ultimately enable them to fulfil their dreams and aspirations?

5.3. Implications for Workers and Organisations

Ruby also shared her thoughts on the implications for workers:

For the tool to be effective, the individual needs to put in a lot of work upfront during college. However, life is always going to be unpredictable, and there will be many moments that you just cannot plan for or predict in advance. Therefore, persistence is critical, especially when career shocks or setbacks inevitably occur, leading to unplanned career pivots along the way.

Workers can use the model independently to guide their career trajectory. For some individuals, their vision will evolve over time, and the tool can help them acknowledge this and update their vision board accordingly. For other workers, their initial vision might be so clear that the vision board can help them regularly visualise their dreams, goals, and aspirations.

Organisations may wish to introduce the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool to their employees on a 1-2-1 basis or in a group setting. The organisation might also like to share how their company answers the five questions concerning their **V**ision, **A**bility, **L**ove, **U**nderstanding, and **E**cosystem. The approach could also be used during the recruitment process to assess person-organisation fit or deployed in educational settings by organisations to prepare future talent for the university-to-work transition.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research Agenda

Our case study approach focused on one individual’s perspective of operationalising the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool during university (2018-2019) and early career stages (2019-2023). Such an approach achieves the purpose of this specific manuscript to conceptualise and operationalise the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool via a *proof-of-concept* approach. However, the next phase in the empirical validation of the tool

will need to involve a larger number of participants and consider the person, context, and time dimensions of a sustainable career (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). For example, understanding the operationalisation of the tool by people in diverse circumstances and geographical locations, including longitudinal studies across one's education and career span.

Another limitation of our study was that we only considered operationalisation from the individual's perspective. While the tool is designed to offer agency to an individual to develop their personal brand, it can also be used in a career coaching setup. Therefore, future research should consider capturing the views of career coaches and other professionals who use the tool to support their clients. Considering the use of the tool within group settings could also offer valuable insights. For example, a lecturer using the tool as part of a personal branding and employability module with a cohort of students to understand the benefits and challenges from an operationalisation perspective. Alternatively, an organisation provides group sessions to their employees to introduce them to the tool and support them regularly to operationalise it throughout their tenure with the organisation.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of our manuscript was to conceptualise and operationalise the Personal Brand V.A.L.U.E. Career Development Tool. The first part of the manuscript focused on the conceptualisation. The second part of the manuscript adopted a case study design based on the experience of an individual who had used the tool for five years. The findings provide insights into operationalisation for (i) preparing and navigating the university-to-work transition, (ii) navigating an unplanned career transition, and (iii) navigating a planned career transition. The final part of the manuscript offered theoretical implications from conceptualising the model and practical implications for (a) students and universities and (b) workers and organisations to operationalise the tool. The manuscript concluded with a future research agenda.

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