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Becoming the Brand: The Influence of Social Media-Driven Personal Brand Equity on Digital Entrepreneurial Intention of China's Generation Z

SIEW-PHAIK LOKE*
CHAOLEI ZHANG
Quest International University

ABSTRACT

Brand building is key to both business organizations and individual entrepreneurs. In the digital age, a person can leverage social media platforms to establish a distinctive brand identity for income generation. This study aims to examine the influence of Douyin content creators' personal brand equity, comprising brand appeal, brand differentiation, and brand recognition, on their digital entrepreneurial intention among China's Generation Z (Gen Z). This study adopted a quantitative approach. Using a simple random sampling technique, a total of 384 responses were collected via the Wenjuanxing survey agency. These Gen Z respondents who are Douyin content creators were drawn from various provinces across China, with ages ranging from 16 to 26 years old. The Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was utilised to analyse and interpret the research findings. First, the validity and reliability of measures were tested through the measurement model. The constructs of brand appeal, brand differentiation, and brand recognition are conceptualized as reflective sub-dimensions of personal brand equity. The significant factor loadings of these dimensions onto the second-order construct suggest that personal brand equity is well-represented through this multi-dimensional framework, reinforcing its theoretical coherence and empirical validity. Next, the path coefficient result was used to test the hypothesis. The results revealed that when Gen Z Douyin content creators perceived themselves to have a high level of personal brand equity, they were more likely to be digital entrepreneurs. In this study, it means to use the Douyin platform as a means to generate income.

Keywords: *Digital entrepreneurship, Douyin, personal branding, personal brand equity, Gen-Z.*

INTRODUCTION

Digital entrepreneurship plays a key role in national economic development and growth (Liu et al., 2025). It is more attractive than traditional entrepreneurship because it requires less resource investment. The widespread use of the Internet with the Industrial Revolution 3.0 and 4.0 has made this possible. Digital entrepreneurship has now reshaped various industrial structures, entrepreneurial models, and lifestyles (Zhai et al., 2023).

Today, more attention is dedicated to understanding the factors and processes that impact the early stages of entrepreneurship. According to Zhou and Che (2024), the emergence of digital ecosystems has significantly lowered barriers to entrepreneurship, offering new opportunities for Generation Z (Gen Z). Gen Z, born between 1998 and 2012, is an individual who has grown up in a technology-driven environment (Gentina, 2020). Being digital natives, Gen Z values transparency, authenticity, and accessibility of information as described by Yunus et al. (2024). Since they are growing up in an era of rapid technological advancement, Gen Z is characterized by their fluency in digital tools, where new digital tools are integrated into their daily life. They are known as avid adopters of technologies and active users on social media and online platforms. The constant connectivity to these platforms

*Corresponding author: siewphaik.loke@qiu.edu.my
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transforms how Gen Z learn and communicates; it also shapes their perception toward entrepreneurial opportunities in the digital economy.

Research by Xin and Ma (2023) highlighted that individuals with higher digital competence are more confident and more likely to engage in digital entrepreneurship, but Zhao et al. (2021) claimed that although youth in China are often regarded as drivers of innovation, their entrepreneurial engagement remains limited. This means that despite being highly immersed in digital technologies, they demonstrate relatively low interest in pursuing entrepreneurship. Therefore, addressing this is critical so that educators and policymakers can leverage the entrepreneurial potential of digitally competent Gen Z in China.

Horst et al. (2020) argued that digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter leverage entrepreneurs' competitiveness. The use of storytelling, content curation, and visuals is a powerful tool in promoting their identities (Aslam et al., 2024). In fact, it is common for individuals who engage on social media to create a public profile and spend time maintaining it. While some actively share their stories and post, others remain silent readers. The report by Deep Digital China (2025) showed that the total number of users on Douyin accounts exceeds seven hundred million, but only a relatively small number of them actively and consistently create content. TikTok and Douyin are similar short-video platforms developed by ByteDance, with TikTok serving international users and Douyin operating exclusively in China. While the literature reviewed includes sources referencing both platforms, this study focuses on content creators in China. Therefore, the term Douyin is used consistently when referring to the platform in the context of this study.

According to Marklen et al. (2025), parasocial interaction is a modern form of communication as it allows audiences to engage with public figures on social media. Since shared content by influencers can significantly impact brand awareness, recognition, and recall, Mei et al. (2024) claimed that people have become more thoughtful about their online presence and often try to present a positive image. This self-presentation was found to be useful not only to showcase achievements but also to manage how others perceive them throughout the digital landscape. Sawy and Bögenhold (2022) found that a strong personal brand equity promotes micro-entrepreneurs' reputation and enhances their financial gains. Digital entrepreneurs often strive to align with consumers' personal values to promote greater engagement.

Zhu and Ratasuk (2024) highlighted the difference between key opinion leaders (KOLs) and key opinion consumers (KOCs). They commented that KOLs are well-respected people with real experience and competence in a particular industry. They have the power to influence others' beliefs and behaviours, such as celebrities, supermodels, and well-known athletes. Meanwhile, KOCs mainly consist of customers who influence their family, friends, and followers in their purchase decisions based on their opinions and feelings about products or services (Zhou, 2023).

While building and managing personal brand equity is an emerging term in social media platforms (Waller, 2020), personal branding itself is not new. These platforms provide a space for young people to explore and express themselves. Sometimes, these platforms are also used to promote their skills and experiences (Aslam et al., 2024). When a person's personal brand equity grows stronger, it can attract monetization opportunities, as brands and companies often look for content creators with many followers to promote their offerings.

Since personal branding has become a critical success factor in the digital economy, particularly among social media content creators, there is limited empirical research examining how good self-presentation transform one's influence and branding within the context of China's Generation Z. Existing literature has yet to explore the connection between personal brand equity and digital entrepreneurial intention, particularly from the perspective of social content creators. To address this gap, our study was designed using quantitative approach to examine the Influence of social media-driven personal brand equity on digital entrepreneurial intention of China's Generation Z. The aim of paper is twofold: (1) to examine the impact of personal brand equity on the digital entrepreneurial intention among China's Generation Z, (2) to respond to the call for validating the scale developed in previous study with empirical evidence. Gorbatov et al. (2021) developed a scale to reconceptualize personal brand equity based on the work by Keller (1993). Their work mainly focused on career-related outcomes. Following the same concept used by Gorbatov et al. (2021), our study enriches existing literature and provides valuable practical insights for social content creators. Largely, we addressed our research questions by examining the extent to which personal brand equity affects the digital entrepreneurial intention in particularly becoming a Douyin content creator. This study offers a distinct theoretical contribution by extending and validating the personal brand equity with empirical data in a new domain. Our study demonstrates its robustness and generalizability beyond traditional career outcomes, as in Gorbatov et al.'s (2021) study. In this process, we also seek to validate brand appeal, brand differentiation, and brand recognition, as well as the reflective sub-dimensions of the second-order construct, reinforcing the multidimensional structure and theoretical coherence of personal brand equity. Meanwhile, findings from the study offer practical insights for Douyin content creators by demonstrating that strategically building and enhancing their personal brand equity over time can strengthen their visibility and influence over the social media platform.

In the remainder of this article, we first review previous works on the concepts of digital entrepreneurship and personal brand equity. Then, we provide a theoretical framework to support the relationship between these two. Next, we present the research methodology and our findings, followed by a discussion of the research implications. The paper concludes with the study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Entrepreneurship

Driven by factors such as technological advancements, the desire for autonomy, and exposure to digital role models, Rahayu et al. (2023) found that Gen Z is highly motivated to start their own businesses and pursue entrepreneurial careers. Using the theory of planned behaviour, they found that higher levels of entrepreneurial intention are positively associated with an increased likelihood of pursuing an entrepreneurial career. Cockrell (2022) found that Gen Z entrepreneurs are leveraging integrated marketing communication strategies to navigate the evolving business landscape. In fact, Gen Z has a strong understanding of changing media and market trends and a strong desire for professional freedom. The study also highlighted the high entrepreneurial spirit score indicated by Gen Z, surpassing that of the baby boomer and slightly below that of Generation X and Millennials.

Indeed, Gen Z – the digital natives – are known to be avid users of social media who have gradually taken on more of a content creators' role due to their unique preferences and behavioural patterns (Švelch, 2022). Lower barriers on social media platforms allow them to

creatively express themselves. This fuel the growth of short-lived, trend-driven content to be shared. Bellaaj (2023) found that young entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia primarily use Instagram and Snapchat as their digital marketing tools, with YouTube being less frequently used. WhatsApp was used to personalize their communication directly with customers. Bellaaj (2023) argued that integrating social media with traditional marketing channels greatly enhances customer experiences as seamless touchpoints are created throughout the customer journey.

In China, Gen Z is less interested in the traditional career paths (Yuwei & Jie, 2022). This trend is more prevalent with a constant flow of ideas and cultural exchange among Chinese Gen Z. This has profoundly changed the young people's lives and entertainment habits. They are now the content creators as well as promoters of social media content. For example, an increasing number of Chinese Gen Z content creators use the Douyin platform through various strategies such as "e-commerce livestream", "short-video showcase", and "paid knowledge content" to generate income. These are seen as part of digital entrepreneurship (Braune & Dana, 2022; Kolo, 2022; Törhönen et al., 2021). Integrating social media into entrepreneurial strategies has transformed the traditional approach, in which Aslam et al. (2024) noted that social media provides a versatile and expansive platform for them to build brand identity and to reach global audiences.

Brand Equity and Personal Brand Equity

High demand for a brand's products or services indicates strong brand value. Generally, brand equity is about the added value that a brand brings to a product. It is an important concept for measuring the brand of a company. Brand equity is well-represented by the Brand Equity Model (Aaker, 1991) and the Customer-Based Brand Equity Model (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1991) identified five important dimensions that create strong brand equity as shown in Figure 1:

Brand Awareness	Brand Loyalty	Brand Associations	Perceived Quality	Proprietary Brand Assets
How easily consumers recognize or recall the brand	How likely customers are to continue buying the brand	The thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes linked to a brand.	Customer's perception of overall quality of superiority of a product/ service.	Trademarks or patents, and other brand-specific advantages.

Figure 1: Brand Equity Model (Adapted from Aaker, 1991)

Aaker (1991) argued that brand awareness happens when customers are able to recognise and recall it easily. If the customers decide to keep buying the brand even when other options are available or cheaper, it reflects the loyalty of the customers toward the brand. Brand loyalty increases purchase decisions. Brand associations are "anything linked in memory to a brand" (Aaker 1991, p.109). Often, when customers see the image and connect it immediately to a brand, it shows a strong brand association. Poor quality of goods and services turns the customer away. From the perspective of quality of goods and services, Aaker stressed that how customers perceive the quality influences a brand value, which may not necessarily be based on actual quality. Proprietary brand assets provide competitive advantages, including trademarks and patents.

The customer-based brand equity model proposed by Keller (1993), structured as a pyramid with four levels and six building blocks, helps scholars and practitioners understand how to build strong brands from the customer's perspective. This model illustrates how brand development moves from foundational awareness toward deeper, more meaningful customer relationships, leading to long-lasting brand equity.

The concept of brand equity was later expanded to measure the brand of athletes, politicians, artists, and even ordinary individuals. As such, we can see that if an individual has a strong brand identity, he or she can be easily recognized and remembered. It fosters trust and credibility among their audience. Mei et al. (2024) added that when individuals are more cautious about their online presence, they tend to present a curated version of themselves, which aligns with their desired personal brand.

What is a personal brand, and how valuable is it? Gorbatov et al. (2021) defined personal branding as "an individual's perception of the value of one's personal brand derived from its appeal, differentiation, and recognition in a given professional field" (p.508), which comprises three fundamental dimensions: brand appeal, brand differentiation, and brand recognition. Szántó and Radácsi (2023, p.1) stated that "personal brand equity represents the value an individual contributes to their reputation through personal branding initiatives". Generally, personal brand equity refers to the value attributed to a personal brand by the target audience. The value is contingent upon the perceived quality, uniqueness, and credibility of the personal brand. Individuals should consistently communicate and demonstrate their values, skills, and achievements to their target audience in order to build a strong personal brand equity (Szántó & Radácsi, 2023).

Vaidya and Karnawat (2023) found that the use of social media influencers was known as one of the most effective strategies for brand building. Young consumers like Gen Z rely more on social media influencers when making purchase decisions (Marklen et al., 2025). Marklen added that influencers' source credibility model is an important factor in consumers' decisions through endorsements or reviews broadcast. Through various social media platforms, influencers curate personal narratives and images that reflect their lifestyles to engage with their audience and influence the purchase behaviour (Lim et al., 2023). Putro and Palupi (2022) highlighted that TikTok content creators often edit and refine their content before uploading it to their accounts so that they can build a positive self-presentation and appeal to the audience. Thus, it increases one's personal brand equity.

Personal Brand Equity and Digital Entrepreneurship

Personal branding functions as a strategic economic asset that an individual can use to enhance his or her marketability and subsequently derive financial benefits from it (Waller, 2020). Santos et al. (2023) found that deliberate self-presentation, good management of one's public persona, and encouraging stories increase an entrepreneur's integrity and trustworthiness. Thus, careful selection and presenting favourable content led to positive perceptions, shaped professional image, and built economic value. Gentina (2020) observed that Gen Z excels in producing original material by remixing existing resources due to their strong creativity and adaptability.

Männikus and Kuura (2022) noted that personal branding affects students' entrepreneurial intentions. It encourages entrepreneurial thinking as students view themselves as unique and increases their confidence and motivation to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. Since digital entrepreneurial intention has become a key variable

for digital entrepreneurial behaviour and was found to be one of the strongest predictors of entrepreneurial action, such intention reflects willingness and determination to engage in entrepreneurship (Mir et al., 2022).

Duong et al. (2024) added that digital entrepreneurship education is powerful in influencing an individual's digital entrepreneurial intention and use of social media. This indicates that when individuals are equipped with digital competency and have developed a personal brand, they are more inclined to embark on digital entrepreneurial activities. They curate content and tell interesting stories with visuals to present and promote their identities (Aslam et al. 2024). They are more likely to enhance their online presence in attracting more opportunities, such as speaking engagements and product showcasing, to generate income.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing from the marketing literature, Gorbatov et al. (2021) proposed three dimensions for measuring personal brand equity: (1) Brand appeal - the degree of positive consumer response to a brand (2) Brand differentiation - the degree to which a product stands out compared to others; and (3) Brand recognition, referring to the brand-related information stored in a person's memory. In this study, this dimension refers to a person's area of expertise. As highlighted by Vițelar (2019), Gen Z is aware of their personal brand and believes that developing an online personal brand can enhance their competitiveness in the marketplace. Figure 2 demonstrates the research model of this study. In this study, we examined whether personal brand equity increases their digital entrepreneurial intention, particularly in becoming a Douyin content creator to generate income. Thus, we hypothesized that:

Personal brand equity (brand appeal, differentiation, and brand recognition) has an effect on digital entrepreneurial intention.

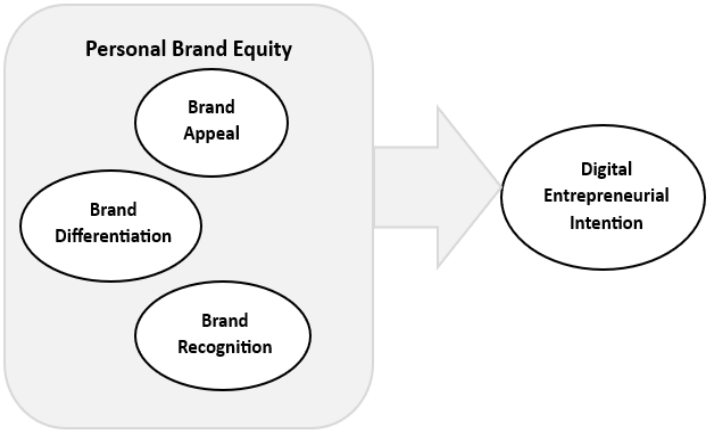


Figure 2: Research model

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Our study is situated within the positivist paradigm. We adopted a quantitative approach. Bakhtiyarovna (2024) noted that quantitative research allows for hypothesis testing and the confirmation of cause-and-effect relationships. Thus, this approach is deemed to be appropriate so that the developed hypothesis can be tested. The purpose of the study is explanatory because the research was designed to explain the effect of personal brand equity

on digital entrepreneurial intention among China's Generation Z. The Unit of analysis is individual, as it focuses on how each person's personal brand equity influences their own digital entrepreneurial intention.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study was Douyin content creators. Douyin is a video-sharing social platform that was launched in 2016. TikTok is different from Douyin in terms of its functionality, products, and global positioning. Douyin is only available in China and is said to have greater e-commerce integration than TikTok (Verot, 2024). Given that Douyin has over 700 million monthly active users as reported in February 2024 (Statista, 2024), it is reasonable to assume that the number of users who identify as content creators easily exceeds one million (1 out of 700 is approximately 0.14%). Although the exact figure is unavailable, this assumption supports our decision on sampling design. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, for any population greater than one million, a sample size of 384 respondents is considered sufficient at the 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. This study's sample size is, therefore, methodologically justified.

Measures

Gorbatov et al. (2021) defined personal brand equity as "the worth and impact of a personal brand" (p.507). It represents the cumulative assessment of a personal brand's competitive advantages as perceived by the target audience from three dimensions: brand appeal, differentiation, and recognition. This personal brand equity construct, although not explicitly framed as *self-perceived*, the wording of the measurement items typically reflects respondents' own subjective evaluations. As such, we measured self-perceived personal brand equity because this can be assessed through self-report rather than relying on social media analytics. We maintain this position throughout the analysis in this study to capture the nuanced, self-reflective nature of personal brand development. Meanwhile, digital entrepreneurial intention is defined as the cognitive inclination of an individual to choose and pursue a digital entrepreneurial career, e.g., starting a new digital business facilitated using digital technologies (Elnadi & Gheith, 2023). In this study, digital entrepreneurial intention refers to the cognitive inclination of an individual to become a Douyin content creator to earn money or pursue it as a career.

We designed the questionnaire items based on previous studies: personal brand equity (Gorbatov et al., 2021) and digital entrepreneurial intention (Xin & Ma, 2023). The measurement items were adapted from Gorbatov et al. (2021) to better align with the Douyin platform and user context. For example, the original item for brand appeal, "I have a positive professional image among others," was adapted to *"On my Douyin account, I have a positive image among others."*; the original item for brand differentiation, "I have a reputation for producing high value results," was adapted to *"I have a reputation for producing high value content on my Douyin account."*; and the original item for brand recognition "My name is well known in my professional field" was adapted to *"My Douyin account is known in social media platforms."*.

The questionnaire was initially developed in English and subsequently translated into Chinese for distribution by Wenjuanxing in China. Two experienced management professors in Malaysia thoroughly evaluated its content validity. A Malaysian PhD candidate in management with a strong background in Chinese and English translation translated the

English version into the Chinese version. A professional translator in Beijing, China, then translated the Chinese version back into English, ensuring the two versions were identical.

In the questionnaire, the first section was dedicated to collecting information on the demographic profile of the respondents, such as gender, age, educational level, posting frequency on Douyin, number of followers, and income generated from the Douyin platform. The other section was about data collection for measuring the studied variables. A 5-point Likert scale (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') was used to measure the personal brand equity and digital entrepreneurial intention.

Data Collection Method

In this study, Wenjuanxing, China's largest survey agency, was used as the data collection platform due to its strong reputation for widespread and rigorous academic and professional research. Its credibility and authority in survey distribution make it a trusted tool for collecting data in China (Xie et al., 2024). Targeting the Gen Z Douyin content creators, we asked Wenjuanxing to perform simple random sampling across all provinces in China to reduce selection bias and enhance generalizability within the defined population. This is because Douyin content creators vary in experience, motivation, and engagement level, representing a heterogeneous population. By sampling randomly from a pool of Douyin content creators, we ensured that diverse subgroups had an equal chance of inclusion.

Ethical Concerns

This study received approval from the Joint Research Ethics Committee of Quest International University on 9 July 2024 to proceed with data collection. Anonymity was maintained to protect respondents' identity and privacy. Next section focuses on data analysis and findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we collected 384 responses from Gen Z Douyin content creators in China. Descriptive analysis was performed using SPSS software to provide an overview of respondents' backgrounds, whereas PLS-SEM software was used to evaluate the measurement and structural models of the study. The measurement model was used to confirm the reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity, while the structural model was used to test the hypothesis formulated in the research.

Demographic Profile

Table 1 shows the background of 384 Gen Z Douyin content creators for this study. As shown, a slightly higher proportion of males (53.9%) than females (46.1%), and most of the respondents were aged 20 (15.1%), followed by 25 (14.1%), and 23 (11.5%). In terms of the distribution of educational level, most respondents have a university degree or professional qualification, accounting for 49.7% of the total, or 191 respondents. One hundred and thirty-three respondents (34.6%) have a secondary school qualification. In relation to posting frequency, most users are active on Douyin multiple times a week: 40.1% posted 3 to 4 times weekly, while 17.7% posted daily. We also witnessed that the majority of these Douyin content creators do not have many followers. Only 90 respondents, or 23.4%, had between 10,000 and 99,999 followers, while 9.4% had over 100,000 followers. In addition, when asked about monthly earnings from their Douyin accounts, only 38 or around 23.2% reported earning RMB 1,000 or more (MYR650 and above), whereas a small portion (1.8%) earned

nothing. Those reporting earnings more are active Douyin content creators who post or share often.

Table 1: Demographic profile of Respondents

Variables (Measurement Items)		Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	177	46.1%
	Male	207	53.9%
Age	16	31	8.1%
	17	32	8.3%
	18	39	10.2%
	19	36	9.4%
	20	58	15.1%
	21	23	6.0%
	22	22	5.7%
	23	44	11.5%
	24	15	3.9%
	25	54	14.1%
	26	30	7.8%
Educational Level	Secondary school	133	34.6
	Bachelor degree/ professional qualification	191	49.7
	Postgraduate degree	60	15.6
Posting Frequency on Douyin Platform	Everyday	68	17.7%
	3–4 times a week	154	40.1%
	Once a week	71	18.5%
	Every month	20	5.2%
	Randomly	71	18.5%
Number of Followers	0–999	102	26.6%
	1,000–9,999	156	40.6%
	10,000–99,999	90	23.4%
	100,000 and more	36	9.4%
Income generated from Douyin Platform	RMB/MYR 0	7	1.8%
	RMB 1–99 (MYR 0.65–65)	144	37.5%
	RMB 100–999 (MYR 65–650)	144	37.5%
	RMB 1,000 & more (MYR 650 & more)	89	23.2%

Descriptive Analysis

Based on 384 survey responses, the distribution of personal brand equity construct across 12 survey items categorized under three dimensions: brand appeal (BA), brand differentiation (BD), and brand recognition (BR) is shown in Table 2. Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The majority of the respondents provided answers between 3 and 4, indicating moderate to strong agreement. This shows that these Douyin content creators agreed that they have a strong personal brand equity. Among the findings, it was observed that items BD1 “I have a reputation for producing high value content on my Douyin account”, and BD4 “I am a preferred candidate for projects and tasks when comes to Douyin content creation” show especially strong agreement, with 38.8% and 37.8% of responses at level 4 respectively. Analysis of the findings revealed that brand appeal had a slightly higher mean score as compared to brand differentiation and brand recognition. However, all three dimensions were rated closer to 3.5, showing a tendency toward agreement. This means that these respondents, the Douyin content creators, perceived themselves as having a somewhat high level of personal brand equity.

Table 2: Personal brand equity as reported by respondents

Items	Strong Disagree (1) → Strongly Agree (5)	N	%	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Brand Appeal						3.50	0.959
BA1	1	15	3.9	3.51	1.112		
On my Douyin account, I	2	68	17.7				
have a positive image	3	82	21.4				
among others.	4	143	37.2				
	5	76	19.8				
BA2	1	16	4.2	3.52	1.133		
I have a positive	2	69	18.0				
professional reputation	3	81	21.1				
on my Douyin account.	4	137	35.7				
	5	81	21.1				
BA3	1	17	4.4	3.50	1.108		
I am seeking for	2	61	15.9				
opportunity/approval	3	94	24.5				
with my Douyin account.	4	137	35.7				
	5	75	19.5				
BA4	1	15	3.9	3.46	1.126		
My professional	2	75	19.5				
strengths are clear on	3	87	22.7				
my Douyin account.	4	132	34.4				
	5	75	19.5				
Brand Differentiation						3.43	0.896
BD1	1	10	2.6	3.44	1.038		
I have a reputation for	2	73	19.0				
producing high value	3	96	25.0				
content on my Douyin	4	149	38.8				
account.	5	56	14.6				
BD2	1	10	2.6	3.39	1.071		
I am considered a better	2	80	20.8				
professional compared	3	108	28.1				
to others.	4	122	31.8				
	5	64	16.7				
BD3	1	10	2.6	3.43	1.032		
I am regarded as	2	68	17.7				
delivering higher content	3	112	29.2				
value compared to others	4	135	35.2				
	5	59	15.4				
BD4	1	12	3.1	3.46	1.121		
I am a preferred	2	86	22.4				
candidate for projects	3	70	18.2				
and tasks when comes to	4	145	37.8				
Douyin content creation.	5	71	18.5				
Brand Recognition						3.43	0.948
BR1	1	14	3.6	3.47	1.133		
My Douyin account is	2	78	20.3				
known in social media	3	85	22.1				
platforms.	4	129	33.6				
	5	78	20.3				
BR2	1	14	3.6	3.38	1.150		
My Douyin content is	2	90	23.4				
well known in social	3	91	23.7				
media platforms.	4	113	29.4				

	5	76	19.8		
BR3	1	12	3.1	3.45	1.090
My Douyin account is known outside of my immediate network.	2	74	19.3		
	3	97	25.3		
	4	131	34.1		
	5	70	18.2		
BR4	1	9	2.3	3.43	1.084
My Douyin account is often recommended by others for viewing.	2	85	22.1		
	3	86	22.4		
	4	138	35.9		
	5	66	17.2		

When we performed a crosstab analysis on posting frequency and income generated from the Douyin platform (see Table 3), we found that Douyin content creators who post every day or 3 to 4 times a week have a relatively high income generated from their account. They earn RMB1,000/ RYM650 or more per month, indicating that consistency and frequency of content creation are likely to lead to better financial gains from their Douyin account. Infrequent posting, such as once a week, or posts randomly aligned with low income generated. Such findings are not surprising because low post frequency or inconsistent posting affect visibility, earnings opportunity, and income generation.

Table 3: Crosstab analysis for Posting Frequency vs Income Generated from Douyin Platform

Posting Frequency	**Income generated from Douyin Platform**				
	RMB 0	RMB 1–99 (MYR 0.65–64.35)	RMB 100–999 (MYR 65–650)	RMB 1,000 & more (MYR 650 & more)	Total
Everyday	0	29	25	14	68
3–4 times a week	0	29	50	75	154
Once a week	0	44	27	0	71
Every month	0	7	13	0	20
Randomly	0	35	29	0	71
Total	7	144	144	89	384

PLS-SEM: Assessment of Measurement Model

In this study, we tested the convergent validity and reliability of the measures using Smart PLS software. Convergent validity was examined using factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR) as suggested by Hair et al. (2017). From Figure 2, it can be seen that we have conceptualized personal brand equity as a second-order construct. We followed the repeated indicator approach suggested by Hair et al. (2022), where all indicators of the first-order constructs are assigned to the higher-order construct.

Table 2 displays the results for the measurement model. It was found that values for all loadings were > 0.7, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs was > 0.5, and the Composite Reliability (CR) was > 0.7, confirming the validity and reliability of the measures used. Except for the second-order construct, personal brand equity has a lower AVE compared to other constructs. Hair et al. (2022) explained that the repeated indicator approach often resulted in slightly lower AVE values, especially when the underlying dimensions are conceptually distinct, which is typical in the reflective-reflective models.

Sobaih and Elshaer (2022) noted that an HTMT value < 0.90 signifies that the constructs are separate and not connected closely to each other. The results of the HTMT value in this study are presented in Table 3. The HTMT values are within the acceptable range, confirming the discriminant validity of measures.

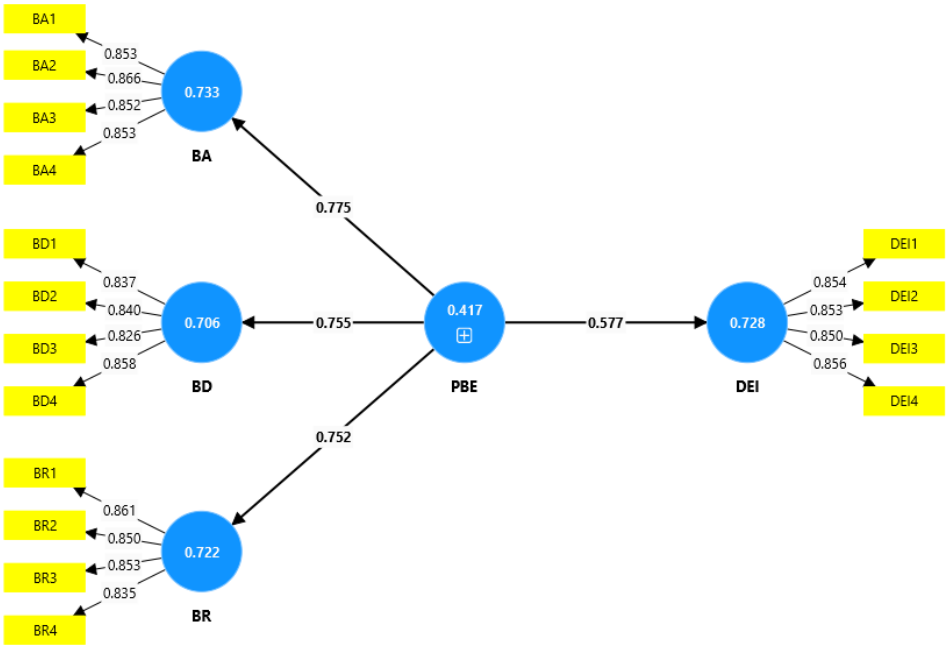


Figure 2: Measurement model (Personal brand equity as second order construct)

Table 2: Measurement model

Constructs	Items	Descriptions	Loadings	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability
Brand Appeal	BA1	On my Douyin account, I have a positive image among others.	0.853	0.733	0.916
	BA2	I have a positive professional reputation on my Douyin account.	0.866		
	BA3	I am seeking for opportunity/approval with my Douyin account.	0.852		
	BA4	My professional strengths are clear on my Douyin account.	0.853		
Brand Differentiation	BD1	I have a reputation for producing high value content on my Douyin account.	0.837	0.706	0.906
	BD2	I am considered a better professional compared to others.	0.840		
	BD3	I am regarded as delivering higher content value compared to others.	0.826		
	BD4	I am a preferred candidate for projects and tasks when comes to Douyin content creation.	0.858		

Brand Recognition	BR1	My Douyin account is known in social media platforms.	0.861	0.722	0.912
	BR2	My Douyin content is well known in social media platforms.	0.860		
	BR3	My Douyin account is known outside of my immediate network.	0.853		
	BR4	My Douyin account is often recommended by others for viewing.	0.835		
Personal Brand Equity (PBE) [Second-Order]	BA → PBE		0.775	0.417	0.895
	BD → PBE		0.755		
	BR → PBE		0.752		
Digital Entrepreneurial Intention	DEI1	If I have the opportunity or make decisions freely, I will choose to create content in Douyin to earn money.	0.854	0.728	0.915
	DEI2	Despite the constraints (e.g. financial constraints, constraints in my field of study, etc.), I would still choose to become a Douyin content creator to earn money.	0.853		
	DEI3	I am likely to pursue my career as a Douyin content creator in the next 6 months.	0.850		
	DEI4	I am motivated to explore opportunities like influencer marketing to earn money	0.856		

Table 2: Discriminant validity using HTMT value

	Brand Appeal	**Brand Differentiation**	**Brand Recognition**	**Digital Entrepreneurial Intention**	**Personal Brand Equity**
Brand Appeal					
Brand Differentiation	0.437				
Brand Recognition	0.416	0.411			
Digital Entrepreneurial Intention	0.515	0.488	0.500		
Digital Entrepreneurial Intention	0.876	0.876	0.875	0.865	0.658

PLS-SEM: Assessment of Structural Model

The structural model was estimated using a bootstrapping technique with resampling of 5000 using Smart PLS software. We first addressed the collinearity issue and found that VIF values for all constructs ranged from 1.914 to 2.376. This shows multicollinearity was not a concern in this study. Previous studies, such as Marklen et al. (2024) and Sobaih and Elshaer (2022), have used a VIF threshold of < 5 to assess multicollinearity.

Figure 3 displays the structural model of this study, with an R^2 value for digital entrepreneurial intention of 0.332. This means personal brand equity has three dimensions: brand appeal, brand differentiation, and brand recognition, which explain 33.2% of the variance. In PLS-SEM, an R^2 of 0.25 to 0.50 is considered moderate (Hair et al., 2022). Since our model yields an R^2 of 0.332, it is deemed to be within the acceptable range for behavioural

research. A study by Duah et al. (2025) reported an R^2 of 0.17 for firm performance in the retail industry. More complex model or models with mediation seems to have higher R^2 values, such as Araujo et al. (2022). They examined the impact of emotional, entertaining, and informative aspects of TikTok video advertisements on consumer behaviour. They have reported an R^2 of 0.544 and claimed that such a value is acceptable for the emerging model.

From the analysis results, we found that personal brand equity significantly affects the Gen Z Douyin content creators' digital entrepreneurial intention in China ($\beta = .577$, $p < 0.001$). The hypothesis was supported. Our findings show that the three dimensions of personal brand equity, that is, brand appeal, brand differentiation, and brand recognition, have a strong influence on Gen Z Douyin content creators' digital entrepreneurial activities.

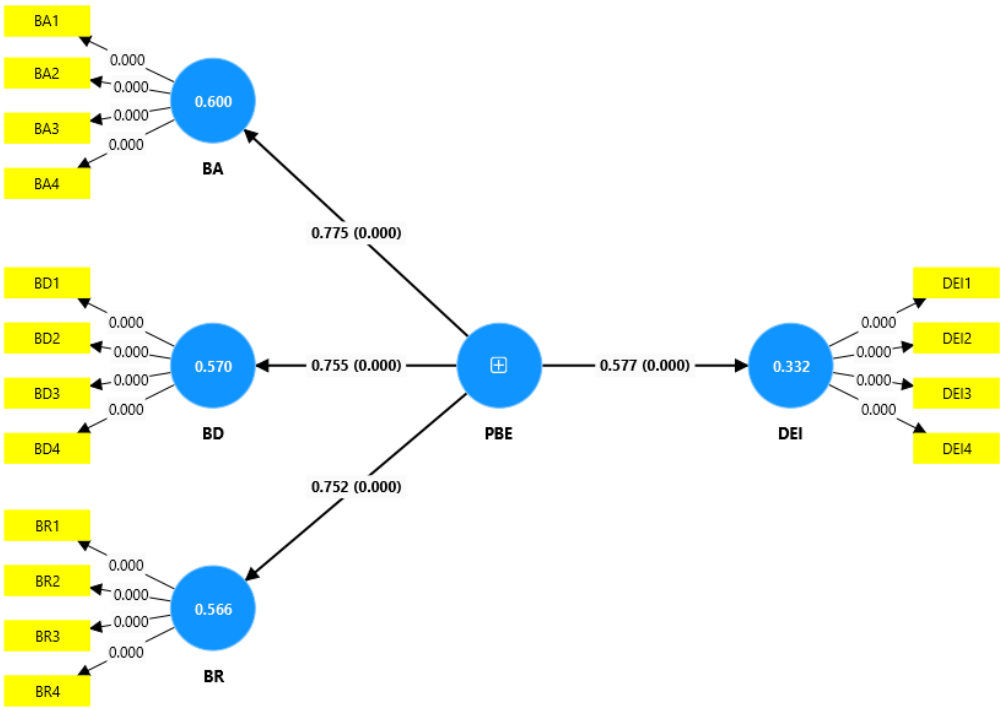


Figure 3: Structural model

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper achieved its first research goal by examining the relationship between personal brand equity and digital entrepreneurial intention. Our study showed that Gen Z Douyin content creators who perceive themselves to have a high level of personal brand are more likely to use this platform as a means for revenue generation. This aligns with findings from previous researchers (Adetunji et al., 2018) demonstrating that social media marketing communications in terms of user-generated content and firm-created content significantly contribute to the development of customer-based brand equity in the context of automotive brands. In our study, personal branding strategies that mirror user-generated content dynamics on social media platforms like Douyin can enhance an individual's brand equity, thereby enabling them to translate their online presence into entrepreneurial pursuits.

Our study supports the perspective of key opinion consumers, suggesting that content creators who possess strong personal brand equity are more likely to engage with the Douyin platform as a means for income generation. Zhu and Ratasuk (2024) highlighted that content

released by KOCs is often based on life and personal experience, which resonates more strongly with their audience and fosters greater engagement. A high level of brand appeal tends to capture the viewer's attention and attract followers to the Douyin content creators. As brand differentiation strengthens, this Douyin content creator becomes more visible and sets herself or himself apart from others. Ultimately, this distinctiveness fosters stronger brand recognition. The followers tend to trust this Douyin content creator and act accordingly, for example, to buy a new product or try out a hotel or restaurant. This Douyin content creator will then be rewarded financially through e-commerce affiliate commissions.

While the number of followers contributes to creators' visibility on Douyin, we urge the content creators to consistently produce high-quality, engaging content in order to develop their own unique personal brand. This will directly contribute to visibility and lead to greater commercial opportunities. In addition, our study offers insights for Asian marketers who utilize social media marketing on how to manage customer–brand relationships, build brand trust, and ultimately drive purchase intention.

This paper achieved its second research goal by answering Gorbatov et al. (2021) call to validate the scale developed with empirical evidence. They have re-conceptualized personal brand equity to examine career behaviours by considering individuals' personal brand positioning. Our study contributes theoretically by extending the application of the brand equity theory to digital entrepreneurship in emerging economies. As such, we applied the personal brand equity (brand appeal, brand differentiation, and brand recognition) for social media branding and found that this concept is important in developing a personal brand in the social media environment, such as the Douyin platform. This represents a meaningful contribution to the theoretical understanding of brand equity. We demonstrate that improvements in personal brand equity can significantly enhance entrepreneurial aspirations.

In addition, through crosstab analysis, we found that Douyin content creators who post every day or 3 to 4 times a week generate relatively higher income from their accounts. Such observation is similar to what was found by Mufadhol et al. (2024). Posting frequency on social media platforms is key to content creators for maintaining strong brand visibility and enhancing customer loyalty. This suggests that regular content updates lead to better audience engagement and opportunities for income generation, such as e-commerce livestream and short-video showcase.

In this study, we adopted Hair et al. (2022) approach and modelled personal brand equity as a second-order reflective-reflective construct, composed of three first-order dimensions: brand appeal, brand differentiation, and brand recognition. This approach aligns with the theoretical conceptualization of personal brand equity as a multifaceted construct. Our analysis was supported by 384 responses. Based on the results, we found that most of the Gen Z Douyin users in this study consume and create content at the same time, and they are active users. They are strong KOCs who produce authentic content reflecting their daily experience (Zhu & Ratasuk, 2024). When we tested the impact of personal brand equity on digital entrepreneurial intention, our findings reveal that these Gen Z Douyin content creators are inclined to use this platform as a means to generate income.

CONCLUSION

This study is based on a single hypothesis, which posits that personal brand equity (brand appeal, differentiation, and brand recognition) has an effect on digital entrepreneurial intention. The research findings confirm this hypothesis and effectively address the research

problem. However, this study has a few limitations that must be acknowledged. First, some researchers have pointed out that developing greater visibility on social media platforms enhances an individual's self-efficacy in navigating digital platforms. It will reinforce one's perceived capability to pursue digital entrepreneurial intention, which is an important psychological antecedent of entrepreneurial intention. Therefore, future research should try to examine factors such as self-efficacy and need for achievement in motivating their intention to pursue digital entrepreneurship. This can be tested as a mediation effect. Second, our research sample in this study is limited to users on the Douyin platform, which is the most popular social media platform in China. We thus suggest future research to investigate the relationship between personal brand equity and digital entrepreneurial intention from platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo in China, or expand to wider geographical areas on platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. Finally, this study only sampled Gen Z content creators in China, which restricts the generalizability of its findings in the context of diversity or other demographic aspects. Future researchers should consider inviting respondents with diverse demographics (e.g., different age groups/ generations) to participate in the study.

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BIODATA

Siew-Phaik Loke (PhD) is a Professor at Faculty of Business and Management, Quest International University, 30250 Ipoh Perak. She also holds a position as Head of the School of Postgraduate Studies, Faculty of Business and Management, Quest International University. Email: siewphaik.loke@qiu.edu.my

Zhang Chaolei is a PhD Candidate at Faculty of Business and Management, Quest International University. He is also a teacher at Xi'An Translation University, Xi'An, Shanxi Province, 710000 China. Email: chaolei.zhang@qiu.edu.my

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