

Algorithmic identities and cross-cultural personal branding: Analyzing the global visibility of Vietnamese independent artists on social media

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Abstract: *In the global digital media landscape, independent artists face the challenge of building a cross-cultural personal brand in an algorithm-driven social media environment. Understanding and adapting to algorithmic identity becomes key to increasing international visibility and engagement. However, research in this area to identify the components involved in algorithmic identity and their impact on audience engagement remains significant gaps. The study aimed to explore how customized content format, characterized personal theme and personal interaction frequency through algorithmic identity influence audience engagement and cross-cultural branding effectiveness, and to clarify the mediating role of engagement in an algorithmic platform environment in the context of independent artists in Vietnam. Based on the Folk Theories of Algorithms and Engagement Theory, the authors used the quantitative research method through a survey of 321 audience across various demographic characteristics. The findings reveal that all three factors including customized content format, characterized personal theme and personal interaction frequency positively influenced audience engagement, but only the first two had an indirect impact on cross-cultural branding effectiveness through audience engagement. The research shows that independent artists need to design algorithm-friendly content, maintain consistent personal themes, and engage strategically to increase cross-cultural brand engagement and effectiveness, as success in the digital environment requires a combination of artistic creativity and understanding of platform behavior.*

Keywords: Algorithmic identity; audience engagement; cross-culture; independent artists; personal branding.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalized digital communication, social media platforms have emerged not only as powerful tools for self-expression and content distribution but also as algorithmically structured environments that shape how identities are constructed, perceived, and disseminated. For independent artists, particularly those from non-Western contexts such as Vietnam, this presents both unprecedented opportunities and complex challenges in building personal brands that can transcend cultural boundaries. The process of gaining global visibility is no longer governed solely by artistic talent or cultural authenticity but increasingly by how well artists can navigate the algorithmic logic of platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (Olaussen, 2024; Srinivasan, 2024).

At the heart of this new digital ecology lies the concept of algorithmic identity, which is a dynamic, data-driven representation of the self, shaped by users' behaviors and interpreted by platform algorithms for the purposes of visibility and categorization (Cheney-Lippold, 2011; 2017). For independent artists, algorithmic identity is not merely a by-product of online interaction but a strategic construct that determines their discoverability, recommendation potential, and engagement across diverse audiences. Unlike traditional celebrities managed by agencies, independent artists must personally curate and adapt their content format, storytelling

themes, and engagement styles to align with both platform norms and audience expectations (Lo & Peng, 2022).

Simultaneously, the pressure to be globally recognizable compels artists to engage in cross-cultural personal branding, which is the process of crafting an identity that is locally rooted yet globally resonant (Khedher, 2014; Saddour & Leclercq, 2023). This involves delicate negotiations between cultural specificity and algorithmic legibility, between individuality and trend alignment. For Vietnamese indie artists, who operate in a linguistically and culturally distinct space, standing out on global platforms requires mastering not only creative production but also platform-native behaviors and engagement strategies (Tsai & Men, 2017). While artistic identity remains central, it must now be "optimized" through algorithmic signals such as consistency, interaction frequency, and content adaptability (Bishop, 2020; Kant, 2020).

Recent studies have explored how social media influencers and creators use strategic content design, platform-specific features, and interpersonal engagement to cultivate transnational audiences (Levesque & Pons, 2023). However, there remains a lack of empirical research examining how these practices form measurable dimensions of algorithmic identity and how such identities, in turn, affect the effectiveness of cross-cultural branding. Moreover, few studies have focused specifically on Southeast Asian independent artists, whose visibility on global platforms often

relies on grassroots content strategies rather than institutional support.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between algorithmic identity and cross-cultural branding effectiveness, focusing on three key determinants as customized content format, characterized personal theme, and personal interaction frequency. The research also investigates the mediating role of audience engagement, a pivotal factor in sustaining global visibility and cultivating transnational fan communities. Drawing on data collected from active social media users familiar with Vietnamese independent artists, this study aims to contribute to the growing literature on algorithmic culture, personal branding, and global digital identity formation. By focusing on the Vietnamese creative scene, the study not only illuminates the challenges of cultural translation in algorithmic systems but also offers insights into how creative individuals from emerging markets can leverage platform-specific strategies to build sustainable, cross-cultural visibility. The research paper is structured into 5 parts including introduction; conceptual framework and research model; methodology; results and discussion; and implications and conclusion.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH MODEL

2.1 Algorithmic identity

The concept of algorithmic identity is an evolving term that refers to the way digital platforms use algorithms to identify and categorize users based on their behavior, interests, and interactions (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). In the context of social media, independent artists not only build personal brands for the public, but also optimize their presence to fit content distribution algorithms (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube...). This strongly influences how they shape their content, personal style, and engagement strategies to optimize global visibility.

Independent artists on social media are no longer in complete control of their digital identities, but are forced to constantly adapt to the logic of the algorithm to maintain their visibility and reach a global audience (Olaussen, 2024). Personal branding at this time is not simply about expressing one's artistic self, but also a strategy to adapt to the hidden criteria in the platform's content distribution system such as consistency, video format, duration, posting frequency, retention rate, etc. (Lo & Peng, 2022).

A particularly important aspect is the dynamic and algorithmized nature of artist identity. According to Cheney-Lippold (2017), algorithmic identities are soft identities that are not fixed, shaped by the relationship between the individual and the system. This makes artists, especially independent artists, which do not have professional management system and have to adjust their personal image and artistic content to both maintain their own mark and be prioritized by the display algorithm. For example, a Vietnamese indie artist can use TikTok to introduce new music through short lyric videos, incorporating popular trends to take advantage of the

recommendation algorithm. However, if they purely follow trends, they can easily dissolve into the masses, blurring their identity. On the contrary, if they stick to their own artistic style without paying attention to how the algorithm works, they can be limited in their coverage. This creates a tug-of-war between the artist's personality and algorithmic strategic calculations, thereby forming a form of algorithmic curation, where the artist becomes the simultaneous manager of both artistic identity and performance (Srinivasan, 2024). From this perspective, algorithmic personal identity is no longer a passive element, but becomes a strategic tool in cross-cultural personal branding (Kant, 2020). Especially in a global digital environment where algorithms operate across borders, artists can leverage the automated recommendation structures of platforms to expand their international presence, provided they understand and operate flexibly within that structure.

2.2 Determinants of algorithmic identity

Algorithmic identity is made up of behavioral and content characteristics that social media algorithms can measure, classify, and prioritize in content distribution (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Three factors as customized content format, characterized personal theme and personal interaction frequency are clear and measurable expressions of users on digital platforms, thereby creating a unique algorithmic fingerprint.

Customized content format is the way individuals or organizations adjust the form, layout, and style of content on digital platforms to suit personal characteristics, target audience tastes, and the working mechanism of content distribution algorithms. According to Khedher (2014) and Labrecque et al. (2011), this is a core element in the process of building a personal brand online, expressed through the choice of color tone, content tempo, narrative style, use of visual icons, and flexibility in video, image or story formats to attract attention and retain followers. The content of customized content format is not simply beautifying or formatting eye-catching content, but is a strategic process to link the form of expression with the personal message or personal value proposition. According to Montoya & Vandehey (2008), individuals must adjust their content format to both clearly express their personal brand and adapt to the platform culture, for example, short videos on TikTok will be different in speed, captions, and visual cues compared to YouTube or Instagram.

The concept of a characterized personal theme can be understood as the consistency and uniqueness in the personal style, message, and visual symbols that an artist maintains across social media platforms. This is not just a random choice of style or content, but the process of building a narrative identity, an identity told through personal stories, life experiences, creative inspirations, and artistic perspectives (McAdams & McLean, 2013). These elements create a characteristic personal theme that helps the artist be easily recognized and remembered by the community of followers. In the digital environment, where artists compete for display space on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram, shaping a

characteristic personal theme also serves as a recurring visual or linguistic cue. For example, artists often use a consistent color scheme, unique fonts, emojis, or unique expressions as part of their own style. According to Goffman (1959), the performance of individuals in social spaces, whether real or virtual, always involves choosing the image they want to show, and artists on social networks are no exception to this logic. In addition, personal themes often reflect the artist's deep cultural characteristics, social class, or beliefs. According to Marwick & Boyd (2011), users, especially celebrities or "micro-celebrities", tend to build a carefully curated version of themselves that is both authentic and highly narrative. These themes not only help differentiate them from others, but also create a consistent storyline, thereby maintaining the interest of followers for a long time.

The concept of personal interaction frequency can be understood as the frequency with which an individual interacts with followers on social networks through behaviors such as replying to comments, responding to messages, participating in live streams, or using platform-specific engagement features such as Q&A, duet, stitch on TikTok... According to van Dijck (2013), these platform-native behaviors are not only social connection tools but also algorithmic shaping, because they contribute to improving the engagement index that platforms such as Instagram, YouTube or TikTok use to determine the visibility and distribution of content. Many studies have shown that the frequency of personal interactions is one of the main factors that make up algorithmically legible behavior, that is, behavior that the platform can collect, measure and rank (Bishop, 2020). Artists who maintain regular interactions make their accounts viewed by the system as active agents, which makes them more likely to be prioritized by the algorithm in feeds and recommendations. From a user experience perspective, Baym (2013) argues that direct responses from artists to followers create an imagined intimacy, allowing audiences to feel close to the artist, even though the interaction takes place in an indirect digital environment. This facilitates the formation and maintenance of sustainable fan communities, while reinforcing the two-way nature of social media communication that is characteristic of the new media model (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In short, personal interaction frequency is not only a manifestation of communication strategy but also an important component in building algorithmic identity, which is based on measurable performance indicators in the content distribution systems of digital platforms.

2.3 Cross-cultural personal branding

Personal branding is the process by which an individual positions himself or herself as a unique "brand" in order to stand out in the public eye, the labor market, or the digital community. According to Peters (1997), individuals also need to learn to market themselves in the same way that corporate brands build their image and values. Personal branding is not only the way individuals present their external image, but also a combination of their capabilities, core values, personal

stories, and the ability to communicate consistently across different platforms (Rampersad, 2009). With the development of social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, building personal brands has become more accessible but also more competitive. Independent artists must not only convey artistic image, but also strategically express "individuality" to attract audiences and develop a community of followers. According to Khedher (2014), effective personal branding requires three core elements: consistency, authenticity, and emotional connection.

Cross-cultural personal branding is a concept that describes the process by which an individual builds, maintains, and communicates his or her image, values, and artistic identity in a way that can be recognized, understood, and sympathized with by audiences from different cultures (Khedher, 2014; Rampersad, 2009). This is a form of global self-positioning ability (Saddour & Leclercq, 2023) that artists must develop in the context of a digital environment that blurs national boundaries, but also creates challenges in terms of cultural, linguistic, aesthetic, and artistic value differences.

According to Gensler et al. (2013), personal branding is no longer the absolute control of the creator but the result of the interaction between the creator, the audience and the algorithmic environment. This requires artists to adapt flexibly, expressing specific cultural messages through forms of expression that suit global tastes. For example, an artist can combine Vietnamese folk music elements with a modern visual style or tell a personal story in an accessible form such as vlogs, visual storytelling or trend-based content. The biggest challenge in building a cross-cultural personal brand is how to avoid over-localization, which makes it difficult for content to spread internationally, or over-globalization which causes the loss of a distinct identity (Tsai & Men, 2017). Therefore, the effectiveness of cross-cultural personal branding depends heavily on choosing the right content format, maintaining a distinctive personal theme, and enhancing the level of personalized engagement with the audience, thereby creating a sustainable bond that can easily be converted into a global brand identity.

Many studies also show that the ability to engage two-way, for example through comments, livestreams, direct responses, or using fan-generated content, acts as a catalyst to promote cross-cultural reach (Khamis et al., 2017). This engagement not only creates a loyal community but also helps artists better understand the perceptions, expectations, and cultural norms of international audiences, thereby adjusting their personal branding strategies accordingly.

2.4 Hypothesis development

This research is built on two foundational theories as Folk theories of algorithms (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2020) and Engagement Theory (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Folk theories of algorithms are semi-intuitive inferences, personal experiences, and observations from users of digital platforms that explain how algorithms work, despite the lack of formal technical

understanding. These theories are not necessarily precise, but have a significant practical impact on user behavior. Accordingly, it provides a theoretical foundation to explain how independent artists perceive and adjust their behavior on social media to adapt to algorithms. These informal but common perceptions influence factors such as content format, personal theme, and frequency of interaction, which contribute to the formation of algorithmic identity. Together with audience engagement, this identity is a determinant of cross-cultural personal brand effectiveness. Besides, the cognitive–affective–behavioral model through the Engagement Theory, which further explains the mediating role of Audience Engagement. When artists tailor content, they are activating all three dimensions of cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement. Recent studies such as Levesque & Pons (2023) also confirm that engagement can be measured by followers interacting, sharing, feeling close to, and responding to artists' content. This suggests that engagement is not only a consequence of content strategy but also an important mediating condition that promotes personal brand effectiveness.

In the social media environment, content format plays an important role in navigating interactions and exposure. According to Labrecque et al. (2011), content format customization, including the choice of visual style, color, sound, video speed, or language, not only helps express personal personality but also facilitates creators to better adapt to the content distribution mechanism of the algorithm. Khedher (2014) and Montoya & Vandehey (2008) also emphasized that content needs to be “formatted” to both reflect personal branding and fit the platform culture. In addition to brand recognition, Tafesse & Wood's (2023) experiment on Instagram shows that content format and presentation factors significantly influence the level of follower engagement, which is an important indicator in the platform's content distribution priority mechanism. Based on these findings, the authors proposed the following hypothesis:

H1: Customized content format has a positive impact on audience engagement.

Characterized personal theme refers to the consistency and uniqueness in personal style, message, and visual symbolism that an artist maintains across social media platforms. According to McAdams & McLean (2013), constructing a narrative identity through life stories, creative inspirations, and artistic perspectives is a way to create a distinctive personal theme that helps the artist be easily recognized and remembered by followers. Goffman (1959) also emphasized that the image that an individual presents on social media is not just a random expression but a strategic choice to position oneself in social space. Empirical studies such as that of Marwick & Boyd (2011) show that celebrities or micro-celebrities often construct a carefully crafted version of themselves that is both authentic and highly narrative, which not only differentiates them but also maintains the long-term

interest of their fan communities. Based on these findings, the authors proposed the following hypothesis:

H2: Characterized personal theme has a positive impact on audience engagement.

Personal interaction frequency refers to the frequency with which artists interact directly with their followers on social media platforms through actions such as replying to comments, responding to messages, livestreaming, or using platform-specific features such as Q&A, duet, and stitch on TikTok. Van Dijck (2013) points out that these interactive behaviors are not only tools for social connection but also play an important role in shaping and strengthening content distribution algorithms, as they improve engagement metrics, a factor that determines visibility on Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, etc. Bishop (2020) also emphasizes that frequent personal interaction behavior is one of the typical manifestations of “algorithmically legible behavior” (behavior that is recorded, measured, and ranked by algorithms). Baym's (2013) research shows that direct feedback from artists creates a sense of imagined intimacy, helping audiences feel closer even though the interaction takes place in an indirect digital environment, thereby strengthening a sustainable fan community. In addition, research by Khamis et al. (2017) also demonstrates that two-way interaction is a factor that promotes the expansion of cultural influence, while helping artists adjust their personal branding strategies based on diverse feedback from international audiences. Thus, the frequency of personal interaction is not only a communication strategy but also a core component of algorithmic identity, thereby indirectly affecting the effectiveness of cross-cultural personal branding. Based on these findings, the authors proposed the following hypothesis:

H3: Personal interaction frequency has a positive impact on audience engagement.

Audience engagement is not only a quantitative indicator (number of likes, comments, shares), but also reflects the depth of emotional connection, active participation and empathy of the audience with the artist on the digital platform. In a cross-cultural environment, engagement is the basis for forming cultural resonance, which is the ability of the artist's content to resonate with many different cultures (Khamis et al., 2017). Katz & Crocker (2015) argue that high engagement is a sign of cultural accessibility, which helps personal brands overcome language barriers and aesthetic differences. In particular, research by Jin et al. (2019) demonstrates that highly engaged followers often develop a personal attachment to the artist, leading to sharing of content and expanding reach through their own social networks, which is a form of organic reach beyond the local scope. In the context of globalization, high levels of engagement also help artists adjust their personal messages based on feedback from different cultural groups, thereby building a personal image that is more suitable for international tastes (Tsai & Men, 2017). In addition, empirical evidence from Lim et al. (2023) shows that active audience participation plays a mediating role in transforming social media presence into a valuable and recognizable personal

brand across cultures. From the above analysis, it can be concluded that engagement is not only an expression of interest, but also a factor that promotes the process of building an effective personal brand in a multicultural environment. Recent empirical studies (Fan et al., 2023; Mohamed, 2025) have also shown that when content has culturally significant elements or culturally appropriate storytelling, audience engagement increases, viewers feel more connected to the content, thereby enhancing brand trust and recognition across different cultures. Based on these findings, the authors proposed the following hypothesis:

H4: Audience engagement has a positive impact on cross-cultural branding effectiveness.

Customizing content formats is not only a tool to express personal identity but also plays an essential role in activating audience engagement. According to Tafesse & Wood (2023), the effectiveness of content campaigns on Instagram depends heavily on technical factors such as image composition, video pacing, and visual information arrangement. These factors create a compelling visual experience, contributing to increased viewer attention and engagement. Similarly, Casaló et al. (2020) found that format factors such as creativity and visualization of content are closely related to engagement, which in turn creates personal brand loyalty. In a global digital environment, engaging viewers becomes the starting point for developing personal brands across borders, as engagement is a prerequisite for cultural diffusion, sharing, and empathy (Lim et al., 2023).

A distinctive and consistent personal theme helps audiences easily identify and create an emotional connection with the artist. According to McAdams & McLean (2013), retelling personal experiences in the form of stories helps build narrative identity, which in turn drives public response and interaction. Marwick & Boyd (2011) also pointed out that micro-celebrities use carefully curated personal images to maintain engagement and increase audience association. Meanwhile, empirical research from Gvili & Levy (2019) shows that consistency in content themes leads to higher levels of engagement, especially when creators tell personal stories that are tied to cultural values or heritage. It is the engagement that is evoked from these unique personal themes that acts as an important bridge to effectively convey personal brand messages to cross-cultural communities.

The frequency of personal interactions is one of the key factors that creates a sense of closeness between artists and followers. Baym (2013) calls this “intimacy at a distance,” a state of imagined intimacy that audiences feel through behaviors such as replying to comments, live streaming, or sharing fan-generated content. Recent studies (Bishop, 2020; Jin et al., 2019) demonstrate that higher levels of two-way interactions lead to higher levels of engagement, which in turn increases loyalty and the likelihood of sharing content. In the context of cross-cultural personal branding, engagement is not just about increasing interactions, but also about creating a dialogue environment that helps artists better understand the

expectations, norms, and responses of international audiences (Khamis et al., 2017). Therefore, frequent personal interaction can indirectly promote cross-cultural personal branding effectiveness through the mediation of engagement. Based on these findings, the authors proposed the following hypotheses:

H5a: Audience engagement mediates the relationship between customized content format and cross-cultural branding effectiveness.

H5b: Audience engagement mediates the relationship between characterized personal theme and cross-cultural branding effectiveness.

H5c: Audience engagement mediates the relationship between personal interaction frequency and cross-cultural branding effectiveness.

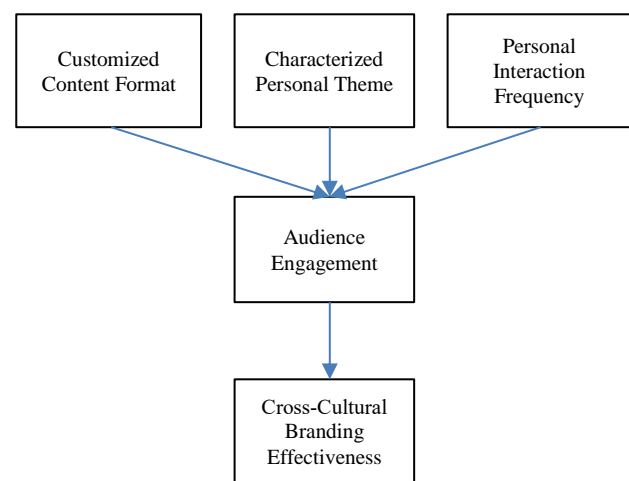


Figure 1: Proposed research model

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design and measurement

To examine the hypotheses related to Customized Content Format (CCF), Characterized Personal Theme (CPT), Personal Interaction Frequency (PIF), Audience Engagement (AUE), and Cross-Cultural Branding Effectiveness (CBE), this study used a quantitative survey method through a questionnaire based on scales that have been tested in previous studies. The questionnaire consists of the following parts: (1) screening questions to ensure appropriate subjects; (2) items measuring research variables; (3) demographic information. All items in the scale content section are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = “Strongly disagree” to 5 = “Strongly agree”.

To ensure content validity and theoretical consistency, all constructs in this study were measured using established multi-item scales adapted from previous empirical research. Customized Content Format (CCF) was measured with 5 items adapted from Bazi et al. (2023), focusing on visual design, layout quality, and platform-specific content formatting (image/video effects, post structure...). Characterized Personal Theme (CPT) was assessed using 5 items drawn from

Lee & Eastin (2021), which evaluated dimensions of uniqueness, sincerity, and consistent self-expression across digital platforms. Personal Interaction Frequency (PIF) included 4 items based on Levesque & Pons (2023), measuring two-way behavioral interactions such as replies, live sessions, and use of platform-native engagement tools (Q&A, duet, stitch...).

The mediating variable, Audience Engagement (AUE), was evaluated through a comprehensive 5-item scale capturing cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement dimensions, also based on Levesque & Pons (2023). For example, “I usually respond/comment when the influencer asks”, “I feel attached/affectionate towards the influencer”, “I share the influencer’s content with other friends/followers”, “I watch the video/post in full or in part”... Lastly, Cross-Cultural Branding Effectiveness (CBE) was measured using 4 items adapted from Pontinha & do Vale (2020), assessing aspects such as global recognition, cultural relatability, international content sharing, and perceived brand coherence across audiences from different cultural backgrounds. This scale addresses the positive, emotional, loyal, and connected components of a brand across different cultures. For example: “I feel attached to the brand/content”; “I will continue to follow/speak well of this artist”; “I share the artist’s content because I like it”.

3.2 Sample and data collection

To examine the relationships between customized content strategies, audience engagement, and cross-cultural branding effectiveness among independent artists on social media, this study employed a structured online survey targeting Vietnamese digital audiences. Data were collected over a three-week period during the third quarter of 2025. A total of 326 responses were received, of which 321 valid responses were retained after data screening and cleaning procedures. To enhance the representativeness of the sample, a stratified sampling method was adopted. Respondents were stratified by gender (male, female, other), age group (under 25, 25–35, above 35), and social media usage intensity (light users: less than 2 hour/day; moderate users: 2–5 hours/day; heavy users: more than 5 hours/day). This ensured the inclusion of participants with diverse social media behavior and demographic backgrounds relevant to the research context.

The questionnaire consisted of three main sections: (1) screening questions to confirm prior exposure to independent artists on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube; (2) measurement scales for key constructs; and (3) demographic information. In addition to gender and age, respondents provided information about their educational level, occupation, and preferred content formats (e.g., short videos, livestreams, storytelling-based posts). The sample's demographic diversity and varying degrees of digital media engagement provided a robust basis for exploring the determinants of algorithmic identity and their impact on cross-cultural personal branding strategies in the Vietnamese independent creative industry. The analysis method will use PLS-SEM to test the reliability, convergent validity,

discriminant validity and significance of the hypotheses, especially testing the mediating effect of audience engagement.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Descriptive statistic results

The sample consisted of 321 valid responses, representing a diverse population of social media users relevant to the context of personal branding and audience engagement. Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with female respondents accounting for 52.0% and male respondents making up 45.8%, while 2.2% chose not to disclose or identified as other genders. This balanced distribution ensures representativeness in gendered perspectives on social media interaction.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

Demographics		Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	147	45.8
	Female	167	52.0
	Prefer not to say	7	2.2
Age	Under 25	102	31.8
	25–35	143	44.5
	Above 35	76	23.7
Educational Level	High school	41	12.8
	College/ University	211	65.7
	Postgraduate	69	21.5
Occupation	Student	87	27.1
	Employee/ Office worker	154	48.0
	Freelancer/Artist/ Content Creator	41	12.8
	Other	39	12.1
Social Media Usage	Light (< 2 hour/day)	46	14.3
	Moderate (2–5 hours/day)	163	50.8
	Heavy (> 5 hours/day)	112	34.9
Preferred Content Format	Short videos	201	62.6
	Livestreams	49	15.3
	Photo-based posts	33	10.3
	Long-form video	38	11.8
Total		321	100

In terms of age, the largest group of participants fell within the 25–35 age bracket (44.5%), followed by respondents under 25 (31.8%), and above 35 (23.7%). This suggests a young to mid-adult demographic dominates the dataset, consistent with

typical active social media user profiles (Statista, 2024). For educational background, a significant portion held college or university degrees (65.7%), while 21.5% had postgraduate qualifications, and 12.8% completed high school education. This indicates a relatively educated sample, potentially with high media literacy and awareness of branding strategies. In terms of occupation, nearly half of the respondents (48.0%) were employees or office workers, with students (27.1%) and freelancers/content creators (12.8%) also prominently represented. The presence of individuals directly involved in digital content creation provides contextual richness for the study of personal branding dynamics.

Regarding social media usage, the majority reported moderate daily usage (2–5 hours/day, 50.8%), followed by heavy users (>5 hours/day, 34.9%), and light users (<2 hour/day, 14.3%). These figures support the selection of social media as a central context for the study.

Regarding preferred content format, short videos were the most popular, favored by 62.6% of respondents. This was followed by livestreams (15.3%), long-form videos (11.8%), and photo-based content (10.3%). The overwhelming preference for short-form content highlights the significance of algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok and Instagram in shaping user interaction and identity performance.

4.2 Reliability and validity assessment

To examine the reliability and the validity of the measurement scales, the authors used the outer loadings with above 0.7 standard. The results point out that all outer loadings of items were in the range of 0.718 to 0.898, which shows the quality of the observed variables.

Table 2: Reliability and convergent validity of constructs

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
AUE	0,886	0,886	0,917	0,690
CBE	0,898	0,921	0,929	0,765
CCF	0,836	0,853	0,882	0,599
CPT	0,865	0,880	0,902	0,648
PIF	0,883	0,885	0,920	0,741

Table 2 then presents the reliability and convergent validity results of the measurement model. All constructs exhibited strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 2019). For example, Audience Engagement ($\alpha = 0.886$, CR = 0.917), Cross-Cultural Branding Effectiveness ($\alpha = 0.898$, CR = 0.929) all demonstrated high reliability. In terms of

convergent validity, all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above 0.5, indicating that the constructs explained a sufficient proportion of variance in their indicators. These findings confirm that the measurement scales used in the study are both reliable and valid.

To assess the discriminant validity between the constructs in the model, two methods are used: the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) scaling coefficient and the Fornell–Larcker criterion. As proposed by Henseler et al. (2015), the conservative acceptance threshold for the HTMT index is 0.85. The results from Table 3 show that all HTMT values between pairs of variables are lower than this threshold, demonstrating that the discriminant validity is satisfactory. Specifically, the highest HTMT value is between the two variables CBE and PIF with a coefficient of 0.748, still within the allowable limit. The remaining pairs such as between CPT and CCF have low values (0.154), indicating a clear separation between the concepts in the model.

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	AUE	CBE	CCF	CPT	PIF
AUE					
CBE	0,170				
CCF	0,324	0,101			
CPT	0,396	0,097	0,154		
PIF	0,353	0,748	0,093	0,225	

Table 4: Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	AUE	CBE	CCF	CPT	PIF
AUE	0,830				
CBE	0,155	0,874			
CCF	0,293	-0,058	0,774		
CPT	0,359	0,090	0,145	0,805	
PIF	0,313	0,666	0,086	0,202	0,861

In addition, the Fornell–Larcker criterion is also used as an additional method to confirm the discriminant validity. This criterion requires that the square root of the average variance extracted ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$) of each variable (diagonal value) must be larger than all the correlation coefficients between that variable and other variables (off-diagonal values). The results in Table 4 confirm that all the values on the diagonal

are larger than the corresponding off-diagonal values. For example, the variable AUE has a $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ of 0.830, which is higher than all the remaining correlation coefficients in the row and column. Similarly, the remaining variables such as CBE (0.874), CCF (0.774), CPT (0.805) and PIF (0.861) all meet the comparison requirements.

4.3 Structural measurement assessment and PLS-SEM result

To evaluate the proposed hypotheses concerning the influence of content personalization and audience dynamics on cross-cultural branding effectiveness (CBE), this study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 3, based on 321 valid responses. A bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples was used to assess the significance of the path coefficients, with results summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: Structural equation modelling results

	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	P Values	Hypothesis conclusion
CCF -> AUE	0,232	0,239	0,058	4,007	0,000	Accepted
CPT -> AUE	0,278	0,278	0,048	5,848	0,000	Accepted
PIF - > AUE	0,237	0,242	0,060	3,944	0,000	Accepted
AUE -> CBE	0,155	0,164	0,067	2,320	0,021	Accepted
CCF -> AUE -> CBE	0,036	0,038	0,016	2,251	0,025	Accepted
CPT -> AUE -> CBE	0,043	0,045	0,018	2,365	0,018	Accepted
PIF - > AUE -> CBE	0,037	0,043	0,025	1,468	0,143	Rejected

The analysis revealed that Customized Content Format (CCF) has a statistically significant and positive effect on Audience Engagement (AUE) ($\beta = 0.232$, $t = 4.007$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting Hypothesis H1. This suggests that tailoring content formats to suit audience preferences plays an important role in capturing attention and promoting deeper interaction. Similarly, Characterized Personal Theme (CPT) demonstrated a strong positive influence on AUE ($\beta = 0.278$, $t = 5.848$, $p < 0.001$), validating Hypothesis H2. The result highlights how consistency in personal branding and thematic identity enhances relatability and emotional connection with the audience. Additionally, Personal Interaction Frequency (PIF) was found to significantly affect AUE ($\beta = 0.237$, $t = 3.944$, $p < 0.001$), confirming Hypothesis H3, and underscoring the importance of regular, meaningful interaction in fostering audience loyalty and engagement.

In terms of outcomes, Audience Engagement (AUE) positively influenced Cross-Cultural Branding Effectiveness (CBE) ($\beta = 0.155$, $t = 2.320$, $p = 0.021$), thereby supporting Hypothesis H4. This indicates that when audiences are actively engaged through personalized content and interaction, they are more likely to respond favorably to cross-cultural brand communication, especially in diverse and dynamic digital spaces.

Regarding the mediating role of AUE, the analysis found that AUE mediates the relationship between CCF and CBE (indirect effect: $\beta = 0.036$, $t = 2.251$, $p = 0.025$), and between CPT and CBE ($\beta = 0.043$, $t = 2.365$, $p = 0.018$), supporting Hypotheses H5a and H5b, respectively. These findings indicate that the positive effects of content customization and thematic consistency on branding effectiveness are partly channeled through audience engagement. However, the mediating effect of AUE between PIF and CBE was not significant ($\beta = 0.037$, $t = 1.468$, $p = 0.143$), leading to the rejection of Hypothesis H5c. This suggests that while personal interaction frequency enhances engagement, it may not directly contribute to improved cross-cultural branding outcomes through engagement alone.

Collectively, these findings provide empirical support for the importance of content personalization strategies and audience engagement mechanisms in enhancing branding effectiveness in multicultural contexts. They also underline the nuanced role of mediation, where not all forms of engagement necessarily translate into branding success.

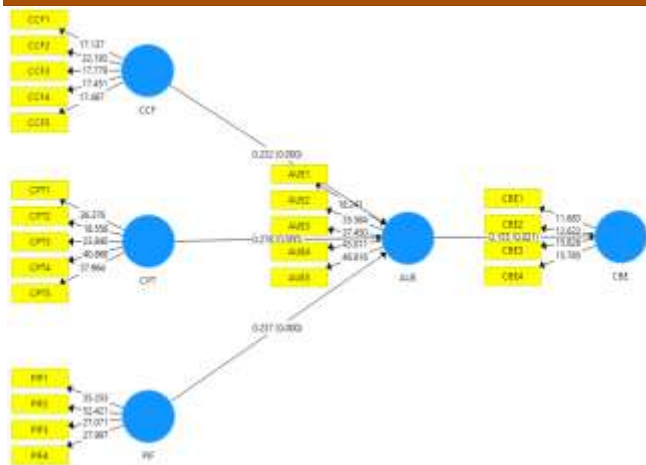


Figure 2: PLS Bootstrapping model

5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The research makes a valuable contribution to the Folk Theories of Algorithms (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2020) by clarifying how Vietnamese independent artists on social media form and apply informal beliefs about algorithmic mechanisms to regulate their content behavior. Three content strategy factors as customized content format, characterized personal theme and personal interaction frequency were shown to significantly influence audience engagement, suggesting the presence of algorithmic consciousness in content creation. This aligns with Ytre-Arne & Moe's argument that users, despite lacking formal technical knowledge, still develop the folk theories to navigate content visibility. Notably, these folk theories appear not only as interpretative frameworks but also as intentional behavior patterns aimed at optimizing for algorithmic visibility, thus contributing to the notion of algorithmic identity, which is a digital self constructed to be favored by algorithms.

Moreover, this study extends Engagement Theory (Hollebeek et al., 2014) into the context of cross-cultural personal branding in algorithmically mediated environments. The findings confirm that audience engagement in turn mediates the relationships between customized content format as well as characterized personal theme and cross-cultural branding effectiveness, which indicates that engagement is not merely an outcome of strategic content creation but a key mechanism through which self-positioning is converted into cross-cultural brand effectiveness. However, the absence of a mediating effect from audience engagement in the relationship between personal interaction frequency and cross-cultural branding effectiveness suggests that while frequent interactions enhance engagement, they may not directly strengthen international branding outcomes through this path. This nuance highlights the asymmetric role of engagement in translating various types of content strategies into brand value and suggests that not all engagement mechanisms equally contribute to global brand recognition.

In terms of practical implications, the findings offer meaningful and actionable guidance for independent artists and personal content creators operating within the highly competitive and algorithm-driven environment of social media. Firstly, the results emphasize the importance of strategically designing content that aligns with platform algorithm preferences, such as leveraging short-form videos, utilizing high-quality visuals, experimenting with diverse media formats, and participating in trending topics or viral challenges. These practices not only improve content visibility but also foster stronger audience engagement by meeting both algorithmic priorities and user expectations. Creators who are able to speak the language of the platform increase their chances of algorithmic amplification and discoverability, especially in crowded digital spaces.

Secondly, maintaining a distinctive and consistent personal theme emerges as a key factor in strengthening personal brand identity. A coherent narrative or aesthetic across posts not only enhances audience recognition and loyalty but also increases the likelihood of being consistently categorized and promoted by recommendation systems. This consistency helps foster emotional connections with audiences and builds long-term brand equity, particularly when creators position themselves clearly within niche interests or cultural expressions. It also allows for greater authenticity, which has become a critical currency in the digital branding ecosystem.

Thirdly, while frequent interaction with audiences such as replying to comments, hosting livestreams, conducting Q&A sessions, or participating in user-generated content, is positively associated with increased engagement, the findings suggest that such interactions alone may not directly translate into improved cross-cultural branding effectiveness. This implies that personal interaction must be embedded within a broader, strategic content framework that prioritizes not just connectivity but purposeful positioning and storytelling. Simply being responsive or active is not sufficient; interaction must be aligned with an overarching brand strategy to yield meaningful branding outcomes, especially when targeting diverse or international audiences.

Overall, the success of personal branding in an algorithm-dominated environment requires a dual mastery of artistic authenticity and algorithmic literacy. Independent artists must move beyond the notion that content quality alone determines success, recognizing instead that visibility and engagement are co-shaped by platform mechanisms and user behavior. This calls for a more intentional approach to content creation, where creators act as both storytellers and strategists. In turn, social media platforms can draw on these findings to refine their recommendation systems and creator tools, encouraging creators to build clear, compelling digital identities while facilitating more authentic and meaningful engagement with audiences across cultural and geographic boundaries.

Although the study makes many contributions, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the data were

collected from a group of users and independent artists mainly in Vietnam, so the ability to generalize to other cultural contexts or platforms is still limited. Second, the study used a self-reported survey method, so it may be affected by cognitive bias or social desirability bias. In the future, studies should expand to artists or influencers from many countries, or many different groups of artists to test the universality of the model. In addition, the use of actual behavioral data from social media platforms, such as actual interactions, video viewing time, or algorithmic responses would provide more in-depth and objective insights. Qualitative studies can also delve into the process of building folk theories, directly exploring how artists and users read algorithms in their daily creative lives.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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7. REFERENCES

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