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The Future Lawyer is a Brand: Navigating the Tension Between Visibility and Professionalism



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 **Title of Article**

The Future Lawyer is a Brand: Navigating the Tension Between Visibility and Professionalism

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Abstract

This paper explores the emerging phenomenon of the “branded lawyer” in the digital age, focusing on the tension between increased visibility and traditional notions of legal professionalism. As lawyers harness social media, podcasts, and other online platforms to build personal brands, they challenge longstanding expectations of discretion, neutrality, and institutional loyalty. The paper examines how these shifts intersect with issues of gender, race, and class, highlighting the unique challenges faced by marginalized lawyers in navigating professional identity online. Ethical considerations around confidentiality, honesty, and influence are also discussed. The study concludes with practical recommendations for lawyers, firms, educators, and regulators to balance authenticity with integrity, fostering a legal culture that embraces both innovation and respect for core professional values.

Keywords

Legal Professionalism • Personal Branding • Digital Legal Identity • Legal Ethics • Lawyer Visibility • Branded Lawyer • Gender and Law • Race and Class in Legal Practice • SADC Legal Culture • Social Media and Law

1. Introduction

Once defined by discretion, formality, and institutional prestige, the legal profession is now being reshaped by a new kind of visibility one driven by digital platforms, personal storytelling, and individual branding. Lawyers today are no longer confined to courtrooms and boardrooms. They are podcast hosts, Instagram influencers, YouTube educators, and LinkedIn thought leaders. From global cities to emerging legal markets in Africa, a new archetype is emerging, the lawyer as a brand.

While personal branding offers new opportunities for connection, education, and career autonomy, it also challenges traditional notions of legal professionalism. For decades, lawyers were expected to maintain a certain detachment, avoiding self-promotion in favor of institutional reputation and confidentiality. In contrast, today's legal professionals especially younger generations are increasingly expected to be visible, authentic, and digitally literate.

This paper explores the growing tension between visibility and professionalism in the legal field. It examines how the rise of the branded lawyer disrupts conventional expectations of decorum, impartiality, and expertise. At the same time, it considers how personal branding can empower lawyers especially women, marginalized groups, and early-career professionals to reclaim narratives, build communities, and shape more inclusive versions of legal identity.

Drawing on interdisciplinary literature, digital trends, and legal ethics discourse, this paper argues that personal branding is not a threat to the profession but a catalyst for its evolution. However, it must be navigated carefully balancing transparency with credibility, creativity with accountability, and reach with responsibility.

2. Historical Expectations of Legal Professionalism

Professionalism in law has long been rooted in ideals of objectivity, restraint, and deference to institutional authority. Traditionally, the lawyer's role was defined not by personal expression but by adherence to codes of conduct, formal presentation, and loyalty to firm or court-based hierarchies. This professional identity was built on discretion the belief that credibility stems from neutrality, anonymity, and detachment from self-promotion.

2.1 The Classic Model: Authority Through Anonymity

In the classic conception, lawyers were expected to be behind-the-scenes advocates, with their public image carefully controlled through conservative dress, guarded language, and limited personal exposure. Marketing oneself was considered inappropriate, even unethical, in many jurisdictions. Instead, reputation was to be earned through referrals, institutional achievements, or years of silent dedication to the law.

This model elevated the image of the "learned, noble profession" serious, dignified, and above the noise of public discourse. Legal professionals were meant to let their work speak for itself, rather than courting attention or visibility.

2.2 The Professionalism–Visibility Divide

Professionalism in this sense became synonymous with invisibility. To maintain legitimacy, lawyers were expected to avoid overt displays of personality, politics, or emotion particularly in public or media spaces. This standard was both gendered and classed, it privileged white, male, upper-class norms of composure and "neutrality," often marginalizing those who could not or would not conform.

Even as legal marketing gradually became more accepted in certain jurisdictions, such as the U.S. and South Africa, strict ethical constraints remained. Concerns over misleading the public, compromising confidentiality, or eroding the profession's dignity shaped professional codes and institutional culture.

2.3 The Global Shift: Cracks in the Traditional Mold

The traditional model of professionalism has, however, begun to show cracks. Legal education now includes courses on legal entrepreneurship, law firm branding, and digital reputation. Clients increasingly value approachability and online presence, while firms seek lawyers who can bring both legal expertise and a public platform. As society embraces transparency and digital engagement, the legal profession finds itself negotiating a new identity one where visibility is no longer a threat, but a potential asset. This shift sets the stage for what many see as a generational turning point, the rise of the branded lawyer.

As society increasingly prioritizes openness, immediacy, and digital engagement, the traditional ideal of legal professionalism rooted in anonymity has begun to erode. Today, credibility is not solely derived from institutional prestige it is also shaped by transparency, approachability, and presence. In this evolving terrain, a new archetype has emerged, the branded lawyer.

3. The Rise of the Branded Lawyer: Visibility in the Digital Age

The traditional barriers between law and public life have eroded dramatically with the rise of digital platforms. Today, lawyers are not only allowed to be visible they are often expected to be. In an age where credibility is increasingly tied to online presence, lawyers are navigating new terrain, where professionalism and personal branding intersect.

3.1 From Anonymous Advocate to Public Persona

Social media, blogs, podcasts, and online publications have enabled lawyers to cultivate public personas outside of traditional firm structures. The lawyer is no longer just a quiet technician but also a storyteller, educator, entrepreneur, and cultural commentator. Platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter (X), YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok allow legal professionals to break down complex legal issues for public consumption. Share thought leadership on law reform, access to justice, and social issues. Promote their services and attract niche clientele. Humanize the profession by showing the person behind the title. This transformation reflects a wider cultural shift one where trust and influence are often built through transparency, relatability, and consistency, not just credentials.

3.2 New Metrics of Credibility

In this new paradigm, professional reputation isn't just shaped by institutional recognition (e.g. bar membership, publications, or firm affiliation), but also by metrics like, Follower count and digital engagement. Podcast listenership and video views. Guest appearances or collaborations. Brand partnerships or media features. For younger lawyers and law students, particularly women and those from underrepresented backgrounds, these platforms offer the ability to create alternative pathways to success and visibility bypassing exclusionary firm hierarchies and gatekeeping.

3.3 The Empowerment and the Risks

The branded lawyer movement is empowering, but not without tension. Lawyers face scrutiny from peers who question whether visibility undermines legal ethics or gravitas. Harassment or misogyny (especially toward women and racial minorities who are visible online). The risk of being dismissed as “unserious” or “unprofessional” for engaging in fashion, lifestyle, or influencer spaces, even if these are carefully curated to align with their professional identity. There is also a concern that visibility rewards performance over substance or encourages lawyers to simplify complex issues for clicks and shares blurring the line between advocacy and entertainment.

4. Navigating the Double Bind: Gender, Race, and Class in Legal Branding

While personal branding offers new opportunities for visibility, it does not operate on a level playing field. Women, particularly women of color and those from working-class backgrounds, face distinct pressures when curating their professional image. The legal field remains entrenched in Eurocentric, patriarchal norms of decorum, which often conflict with modern expressions of identity, voice, and visibility.

4.1 The Professionalism Trap

What is considered “professional” is not neutral it is historically rooted in white, male, and upper-class norms. Women lawyers who embrace visibility often encounter a “double bind” the more visible they become, the more they are judged for stepping outside conventional roles. For example, A white male lawyer with a podcast is seen as a thought leader; a Black woman lawyer with the same podcast may be labeled self-promotional or unserious. A woman who dresses stylishly and embraces lifestyle content may be dismissed, while her male counterparts are applauded for “relatability” or “authenticity.” A lawyer from a modest background who posts about success may be called arrogant, while elite peers are seen as inspirational. These dynamics are not accidental they reflect deeper anxieties about whose voice belongs in the public legal sphere.

4.2 Code-Switching for Survival

Women in law often engage in strategic code-switching adapting their language, appearance, or tone depending on the audience (courtroom vs. client vs. online). While this may be a form of resilience or survival, it can also create fragmentation in self-identity. For many, personal branding isn’t just marketing, it’s identity work a daily negotiation between ambition and acceptance.

4.3 The Power of Reclaiming Narrative

Despite these challenges, many women lawyers are actively reclaiming their stories, their image, and their voice. They are using visibility as a tool of resistance not just to promote their careers, but to, challenge stereotypes of what a lawyer looks or sounds like. Advocate for reform within the legal profession. Mentor others by sharing real, vulnerable, behind-the-scenes truths about legal life. Build

alternative communities of practice where law is more accessible, humane, and inclusive. The future lawyer is not just branding for fame she's branding to shift culture.

5. The Ethics of Branding: Balancing Integrity, Advocacy, and Influence

As lawyers embrace personal branding, they face a critical challenge, how to maintain ethical integrity while leveraging visibility for career growth and social impact. The tension between self-promotion and professional responsibility raises complex questions about the role of lawyers as trusted advisors, advocates, and public figures.

5.1 Upholding Confidentiality and Professionalism

Lawyers must carefully navigate the risks of sharing information online, ensuring client confidentiality is never compromised. Transparency and authenticity must be balanced with discretion. The informal nature of social media can blur these boundaries, requiring vigilance to avoid unintentional breaches or misrepresentations.

5.2 Avoiding Misleading Representation

Branding efforts must avoid exaggerating qualifications, capabilities, or outcomes. The legal profession's ethical codes often restrict advertising that could mislead or create unjustified expectations. Personal branding strategies should prioritize accuracy and honesty, building credibility through substance rather than hype.

5.3 Navigating Conflicts of Interest and Bias

Visible lawyers may face pressures to endorse products, causes, or political views. While advocacy can be a powerful tool for change, lawyers must be mindful of conflicts of interest and maintain impartiality where required. Transparency about affiliations and sponsorships is essential to preserving trust.

5.4 The Responsibility of Influence

With increased visibility comes increased responsibility. Lawyers with large platforms shape public understanding of law and justice. Ethical branding means committing to responsible communication, combating misinformation, and uplifting marginalized voices.

Across the Southern African Development Community (SADC), professional codes of conduct vary in their embrace of digital visibility. While jurisdictions like South Africa have begun to incorporate provisions for marketing and online engagement notably through the Legal Practitioner's Act and others, including Eswatini, retain more conservative approaches shaped by deeply rooted cultural expectations of decorum. These regulatory differences reveal an urgent need for regionally responsive frameworks, ethical guidelines that reflect shifting norms around digital presence, while safeguarding professional integrity in diverse legal traditions. For lawyers operating across borders or in emerging markets, this sensitivity to local regulatory and cultural values is essential to responsible branding.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The rise of the branded lawyer reflects profound shifts in how legal professionals navigate identity, career, and public engagement. Visibility and professionalism, once seen as opposing forces, are now intricately intertwined. This evolving landscape offers exciting opportunities for lawyers to shape their own narratives, connect with broader audiences, and advocate for meaningful change. Yet it also requires careful balancing of ethical standards, professional integrity, and personal authenticity.

6.1 Recommendations:

In an increasingly digital and reputationally driven legal landscape, personal branding has emerged as a strategic imperative not only for individual lawyers but for the institutions that shape and regulate the profession. Legal professionals must embrace personal branding as a tool to amplify expertise and impact, while rigorously upholding confidentiality, ethical standards, and reflective alignment with core professional values. Law firms and institutions should actively support this evolution by investing in training on digital literacy, ethics, and reputation management, recognizing that visible lawyers can enhance both credibility and client trust.

Legal educators have a critical role to play in preparing future lawyers for this reality. Integrating modules on personal branding, digital ethics, and professional communication into legal curricula will equip graduates to navigate a digital-first profession with confidence and responsibility. Regulators, too, must evolve updating professional codes to explicitly address digital visibility and personal branding, offering clear guidance that fosters innovation while safeguarding public trust.

Ultimately, the future lawyer is not just a practitioner but a brand one grounded in integrity, responsibility, and a deep commitment to justice. Thoughtful navigation of this tension will ensure the legal profession remains both relevant and respected in a rapidly changing world.

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