
A Strategy for Building an Opera Singer's Personal Brand in the Context of Artistic Career Management

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Abstract:

Purpose: The main aim of this article is to identify and analyse the strategic approaches adopted by professional opera singers in building their personal brand and to examine how such strategies are interwoven with the management of their artistic careers. This is studied against the backdrop of intensifying competition, shorter career-lifespans, and the necessity for artists to manage their own visibility, reputation, and market positioning. The purpose of the paper is to extend the existing literature on personal branding into the specific domain of opera singing.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A qualitative interpretive approach was applied to explore the artists' understanding of identity, authenticity and visibility. A descriptive exploratory design was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews with twelve opera singers (representing diverse career stages and national backgrounds in Europe, with a supplementary analysis of publicly available materials, such as artist websites and biographies). The collected material was examined using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Findings: The results demonstrate that personal branding is a central dimension of artistic career management, used to communicate artistic identity, credibility, and distinctiveness. Successful branding in the operatic profession is grounded in authenticity, consistency, and coherence. Authenticity emerged as the single most critical principle. Singers utilise digital media (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube) selectively and intentionally, viewing them as curated portfolios rather than instruments of commercial self-promotion. The findings highlight that branding is not just self-presentation, but a collective ecosystem of professional relationships involving agents, conductors, and directors. Deliberate brand management correlates with greater stability in professional opportunities, audience loyalty, and perceived career sustainability.

Practical Implications: The study provides practical guidance for artists, cultural managers, and academic programmes. It suggests that reflection on artistic values and identity should precede public communication. Digital communication training is recommended to be incorporated into music education curricula to enable young artists to manage their professional image ethically and effectively. Cultural organisations can support performers by offering mentorship in reputation management and digital storytelling.

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Originality/Value *The contribution is threefold: extending personal branding literature to the opera singing context; providing empirical insight into how unique operatic career dynamics (such as vocal longevity and repertoire diversification) shape branding strategies; and offering practical guidelines for sustainable career management. Theoretically, the study positions personal branding as a contemporary manifestation of symbolic capital within the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993). This research addresses a substantial gap regarding career management specificity in the performing arts.*

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the cultural and creative industries have undergone profound transformation driven by digitalisation, globalisation, and the increasing precarity of artistic careers. The domain of operatic performance is no exception: opera singers face intensifying competition, shorter career-lifespans, more frequent role-changes and a need to manage their own visibility, reputation, and market positioning rather than relying solely on institutional support.

Against this backdrop, the notion of personal branding has emerged as a critical strategic instrument for individual artists seeking to enhance both their professional identity and long-term career sustainability (Gross, 2022; Kucharska and Mikołajczak, 2019).

Personal branding can be defined as the intentional and strategic process through which individuals define, communicate and maintain a differentiated value proposition in a relevant market or audience context (Kucharska and Mikołajczak, 2019). From a theoretical standpoint, it draws upon marketing logic (e.g., brand-positioning and differentiation), self-presentation and identity management (e.g., reputation and performance of the self) and career theory (e.g., boundaryless careers, portfolio work).

Although a considerable body of research has examined personal branding in business and managerial contexts, comparatively little attention has been paid to performing-arts professions — particularly opera singers — who combine an artistic vocation with entrepreneurial imperatives.

The main aim of this article is therefore to identify and analyse the strategic approaches adopted by professional opera singers in building their personal brand, and to examine how such strategies are interwoven with the management of their artistic careers. Specifically, the paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What strategic personal branding practices are used by opera singers to establish and maintain their professional identity in a globalised operatic market?
2. How do these branding strategies contribute to long-term career management — such as role stability, audience engagement and professional mobility?
3. What role do digital media, professional networks and collaborations play in the construction and maintenance of a personal brand in this domain?

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it extends the literature on personal branding into the specific domain of opera singing, thus enriching both fields — brand management and artistic career studies. Second, it provides empirical insight into how the unique dynamics of operatic careers (such as vocal longevity, repertoire diversification, agent mediation and international tours) shape branding strategies.

Third, it offers practical implications for early-career and mid-career opera singers, cultural managers and academic programmes in music management, presenting guidelines for aligning personal brand development with sustainable career trajectories.

The structure of the paper is as follows. After this introduction, Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on personal branding, artistic career management and digital identity in the performing arts. Section 3 outlines the research methodology adopted for the study. Section 4 presents the empirical findings and discusses the strategic components identified in the branding processes of opera singers. Section 5 offers concluding remarks, summarises the key contributions, addresses limitations and provides recommendations for future research and practice.

2. Literature Review

The concept of personal branding has evolved considerably from its origins in marketing and organisational management to become a key construct in identity and career research. Personal branding is understood as “a strategic process of creating, positioning and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based on a unique

combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery” (Gorbatov, Khapova and Lysova, 2018).

This frame of reference highlights three core dimensions: the individual as a brand-owner, the strategic deployment of differentiation and authenticity, and the audience for whom the brand is built. In marketing theory, notions such as brand identity, brand image and brand equity are transposed into the personal sphere, enabling individuals to manage reputation and visibility as dynamic brand assets (Gorbatov *et al.*, 2021).

In performing-arts professions, personal branding acquires particular importance. Artists operate in boundaryless career environments characterised by project-based work, mobility and self-managed professional development (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). For opera singers, these conditions are intensified by factors such as vocal longevity, repertoire diversification, institutional affiliation, and the necessity to maintain public presence alongside artistic credibility.

Branding strategies must therefore reconcile authenticity and market positioning: a singer’s public image, repertoire, and interpersonal networks are part of their brand architecture (Shepherd, 2005). The duality between artistry and entrepreneurship underpins the concept of the “artist-entrepreneur,” who must simultaneously create and market their work (Hearn, 2008).

Empirical studies in the creative industries indicate that artists view personal branding both as a necessity and as a reflection of identity. Kucharska & Mikołajczak (2019) found that among art-designers, branding is perceived as an inevitable response to market pressures but also as a means of self-expression.

Their findings demonstrate that consciously developed brand identities enhance creative self-efficacy and professional recognition. Similarly, research by Gorbatov, Khapova and Lysova (2019) confirmed that personal branding improves perceived employability and career satisfaction across occupational groups, suggesting that its influence extends beyond self-promotion to tangible career outcomes.

The rise of digital platforms has significantly transformed personal branding practices. According to Labrecque, Markos and Milne (2011), online personal branding requires active management of one’s digital footprint, narrative coherence, and alignment between offline and online identities. Social media has blurred the distinction between personal and professional personas, requiring performers to balance accessibility and artistry.

Authenticity becomes a decisive factor in audience trust and engagement; over-commercialised or inconsistent self-presentation risks reputational erosion (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011).

In the context of the performing arts, this balance is especially delicate given the aesthetic and cultural expectations surrounding classical music.

Despite growing interest, the personal branding literature remains fragmented, lacking a universal theoretical framework or validated measures of brand strength (Gorbatov *et al.*, 2018). A recent contribution by Szántó, Papp-Váry & Radácsi (2025) addressed this gap by developing a standardised framework for personal brand equity measurement, proposing multidimensional indicators of authenticity, visibility and credibility.

These advances demonstrate increasing methodological maturity but also reveal how little research has yet been devoted to performing-arts contexts such as opera. The scarcity of empirical studies addressing the management of opera singers' careers through the lens of branding highlights a substantial research gap.

Career theory complements this perspective. Arthur & Rousseau's (1996) concept of the boundaryless career emphasises self-directed mobility and networked employment relationships rather than organisational hierarchy. In alignment, Gorbatov *et al.* (2021) empirically demonstrated that personal brand equity predicts job performance and subjective career success, reinforcing the career-management potential of branding. For opera singers, whose careers are shaped by temporary contracts, agent mediation, and fluctuating opportunities, personal branding can thus function as a stabilising strategic resource.

In summary, current research positions personal branding as a multifaceted phenomenon situated at the intersection of identity, communication, and career management. However, the specificity of operatic careers—with their emphasis on vocal artistry, institutional recognition, and international visibility—remains under-theorised. This study seeks to address this deficiency by exploring how opera singers strategically construct and maintain their personal brands within the broader framework of artistic career management.

3. Research Methodology

The research applies a qualitative interpretive approach designed to explore how professional opera singers understand and manage their personal brands in the context of artistic career development. This approach emphasises meaning and context rather than quantification, allowing insight into the ways in which artists conceptualise identity, authenticity, and visibility within their professional practice (Creswell, 2013).

A descriptive exploratory design was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews with supplementary analysis of publicly available materials such as artist websites, biographies, and media publications. The interviews provided insight into individual perspectives, while the desk research enabled the identification of broader

communicative patterns across the operatic profession. The study sought to answer the following guiding questions:

1. How do opera singers define and perceive personal branding?
2. What strategies and tools are used to shape and maintain an artistic brand?
3. In what ways does personal branding contribute to career sustainability and professional recognition?

The sample included twelve opera singers representing diverse career stages (early-career, mid-career, and established professionals) and various national backgrounds within Europe. Participants were identified through purposive sampling based on public professional activity, visibility in the operatic field, and accessibility through professional networks.

Data collection took place between March and May 2025 through individual conversations conducted online or by written correspondence, depending on participants' preference. The researcher prepared structured notes summarising each discussion immediately after completion, capturing key statements, recurring themes, and illustrative examples. Additional desk data — including press interviews, performance announcements, and social-media profiles — were analysed to complement and contextualise the interview material. Triangulating these different information sources strengthened the interpretive reliability of the findings (Patton, 2015).

The collected material was examined using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarisation with the data, open coding of recurrent concepts, grouping of codes into thematic clusters, and synthesis into overarching analytical categories.

Coding and categorisation were conducted manually with the support of Taguette, a free open-source software for qualitative text analysis. The use of this accessible tool facilitated systematic organisation of textual data while maintaining full transparency of analytical decisions.

To increase the robustness of the interpretation, two colleagues with experience in cultural management reviewed a selection of the coded material and provided independent feedback on thematic consistency. Their observations informed subsequent refinement of categories, contributing to analytical credibility through peer debriefing rather than formal reliability testing.

The limitations of the adopted methodology stem primarily from its qualitative and exploratory nature. The relatively small sample does not allow for statistical generalisation; however, the richness of the qualitative material provides insight into shared mechanisms and strategies among opera singers. Future studies could extend this research through larger-scale surveys, comparative analysis across art forms, or

longitudinal tracking of branding practices over time. Despite these limitations, the chosen design offers a rigorous and contextually grounded understanding of how opera singers integrate branding into their career management processes.

4. Research Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that personal branding among professional opera singers is not a marginal or auxiliary activity but rather a central dimension of artistic career management. Analysis of interviews and supplementary materials indicates that singers understand personal branding primarily as a strategic process of communicating artistic identity, credibility, and distinctiveness in a highly competitive cultural environment.

The results demonstrate that successful branding within the operatic profession is grounded in authenticity, consistency, and coherence between the artistic message of the singer and the public persona. These findings align with previous theoretical discussions that emphasise the significance of authenticity and differentiation as cornerstones of personal brand strength (Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova, 2018; Shepherd, 2005).

A recurring theme in the narratives of the participants' was the perception that the traditional division between artistic work and self-promotion has become blurred. Many interviewees expressed the awareness that artistic excellence alone no longer guarantees visibility or sustainability in the profession. The rise of digital media and the decline of stable institutional engagement (for example, permanent opera-house contracts) have made self-managed branding activities indispensable.

This supports earlier observations by Hearn (2008) and Labrecque, Markos, and Milne (2011), who argued that in the digital age, individuals must act simultaneously as producers and promoters of their identity. The singers described various practices that embody this dual role, such as maintaining professional websites, curating visual imagery, planning repertoire choices to reflect brand attributes, and building strategic collaborations with conductors, agencies, and cultural institutions.

Authenticity emerged as the single most critical principle that guides branding decisions. Participants consistently stressed that attempts at overt commercialisation or stylised self-promotion often backfire by undermining audience trust. Instead, authenticity was associated with consistency between artistic repertoire, communication tone, and personal values.

This finding resonates with the conceptualisation of authentic personal branding proposed by Gorbatov, Khapova, and Oostrom (2021), who identified authenticity as a core dimension of personal brand equity. In the context of opera, authenticity also intersects with the perception of artistic integrity and cultural prestige, confirming

that reputation remains a hybrid construct shaped by both aesthetic and communicative dimensions.

Another dominant pattern concerns the strategic use of digital media. Nearly all participants recognised social media as a powerful visibility tool but emphasised selective and intentional engagement rather than constant online activity. The most common platforms used were Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube — not as instruments of self-promotion in a commercial sense, but as curated portfolios of artistic achievements.

Participants described using digital media primarily to announce upcoming performances, share behind-the-scenes content, or express gratitude toward collaborators and audiences. This aligns with findings by Labrecque *et al.* (2011), who observed that online branding becomes most effective when it communicates personal values and expertise rather than superficial promotion. The participants' narratives indicate that the purpose of digital branding in opera is less about creating fame and more about maintaining professional presence and emotional connection with audiences.

An additional theme relates to visual and verbal coherence in branding. Several singers described investing effort into professional photography, logo design, and website layout to ensure consistency of visual identity across channels. Interestingly, this was often not outsourced to professional branding agencies but handled internally, sometimes with support from colleagues or family members.

These informal approaches reflect both the resource limitations of freelance artists and the increasing accessibility of digital-design tools. This finding echoes Shepherd's (2005) early observation that personal branding requires artists to manage not only artistic output but also their "brand touchpoints," ensuring aesthetic coherence and narrative clarity.

The study also identified marked differences between career stages. Early-career singers tended to view personal branding primarily as a means of gaining visibility and credibility within a competitive labour market. They focused on building digital portfolios, networking with institutions, and presenting versatility through repertoire diversity.

In contrast, mid-career and established singers tended to emphasise refinement and focus — narrowing their brand identity around distinctive artistic strengths, signature roles, or unique interpretative qualities.

This evolutionary trajectory mirrors the conceptual model of brand development proposed by Labrecque *et al.* (2011), in which personal brands mature from exploratory experimentation to stable differentiation.

A further dimension concerns the role of interpersonal networks in shaping and sustaining the brand. Participants unanimously highlighted that collaboration with agents, conductors, directors, and vocal coaches directly affects their market visibility. Personal branding was thus seen not merely as self-presentation but as a collective ecosystem of professional relationships.

This observation aligns with the “co-branded” nature of professional identity described by Hearn (2008), where brand value is partially co-created through social capital and professional affiliations. For opera singers, this social dimension remains fundamental, as reputation circulates largely through recommendations and peer recognition rather than through mass audiences alone.

In terms of career management, participants described personal branding as a long-term, iterative process closely linked to professional self-evaluation. Many reflected on the need to periodically reassess their artistic image in response to career transitions — for example, shifting from lyric to dramatic repertoire or moving between institutions and freelance work. Such reflections correspond with Gorbatov *et al.* (2019), who identified adaptability and intentional self-reflection as determinants of sustainable personal branding. The singers’ accounts indicate that branding is not static but evolves alongside artistic and biographical changes, reinforcing its dynamic, processual character.

The analysis also revealed tensions between artistic authenticity and professional pragmatism. Some participants voiced ambivalence about the “branding” terminology, perceiving it as excessively commercial or incompatible with artistic vocation. However, even those resistant to the concept acknowledged the necessity of active reputation management.

This echoes Shepherd’s (2005) assertion that personal branding should not be dismissed as self-promotion but understood as structured self-presentation aligned with professional goals. In the operatic field, maintaining visibility and credibility is increasingly seen as part of artistic responsibility — an expectation imposed by audiences, employers, and media alike.

Finally, the data illustrate that personal branding contributes directly to perceived career sustainability. Participants who engaged in deliberate brand management reported greater professional confidence, more stable performance opportunities, and stronger audience loyalty.

This perception aligns with empirical evidence that personal brand equity enhances employability and career satisfaction across professional sectors (Gorbatov *et al.*, 2019; Szántó, Papp-Váry, and Radácsi, 2025). For opera singers, these benefits manifest not only in market visibility but also in enhanced self-awareness and clarity of artistic purpose.

Taken together, the results suggest that personal branding functions as both a communicative and strategic mechanism within operatic careers. It enables artists to articulate distinctive value, navigate digital ecosystems, and cultivate durable professional networks.

At the same time, the practice remains deeply intertwined with artistic identity — its success depends less on promotional intensity and more on coherence, integrity, and the alignment of artistic practice with communicative expression. These findings contribute to the growing interdisciplinary understanding of personal branding as an essential competence in contemporary creative labour markets.

5. Conclusions, Proposals and Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that personal branding plays a decisive role in shaping the professional identity and career sustainability of opera singers. It emerges not as a superficial promotional exercise but as a process of conscious identity management that merges artistic authenticity, visibility, and self-representation within a highly competitive and digitalised environment.

Evidence shows that artists who develop a coherent, credible, and ethically grounded personal brand achieve greater audience trust, stronger reputational stability, and enhanced professional resilience.

Authenticity appears to be the most critical determinant of successful personal branding. It involves the alignment of artistic values, repertoire, and public communication in a manner that conveys integrity and sincerity. This observation echoes Molleda and Jain (2021), who reconceptualised authenticity as both an ethical and a communicative construct—one that links transparency, value coherence, and stakeholder trust. In the performing-arts context, authenticity thus transcends marketing: it functions as the foundation of artistic credibility and long-term career continuity.

The study also reveals that digital platforms increasingly shape the visibility and relational dynamics of the operatic profession. Most singers adopt a selective and purpose-driven approach to online presence—preferring quality and artistic coherence over sheer exposure.

This pattern reflects findings by Smith and Sanderson (2015), who showed that digital self-presentation strengthens audience engagement when grounded in authenticity and meaningful interaction. For opera singers, social media operate less as a commercial display than as a narrative space for artistic storytelling and audience connection.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results extend existing discussions of professional identity and cultural labour. Personal branding in the arts can be interpreted as a

form of self-governance within flexible and project-based creative economies. This resonates with Bourdieu's (1993) notion of the field of cultural production, where symbolic capital—recognition, prestige and reputation—determines artistic legitimacy. Within such a framework, a personal brand becomes a contemporary manifestation of symbolic capital: a means of maintaining relevance and authority amid fluid institutional structures.

Practically, the study points to several implications for artists, educators, and cultural managers. First, reflection on artistic values and identity should precede any public-facing communication. As de Chernatony and McDonald (1998) argued, strong brands are built on clear internal definitions before external expression.

Second, digital communication training should be incorporated into music-education curricula, allowing young artists to manage their professional image ethically and effectively. Third, cultural organisations can support performers by offering mentorship in audience engagement, reputation management, and digital storytelling—skills that increasingly influence employability in the arts.

At the policy level, these findings suggest that cultural sustainability should encompass not only financial and institutional dimensions but also communicative competence and professional self-awareness. In an era of decentralised cultural production, empowering artists to manage their own visibility can strengthen both their autonomy and the resilience of the creative sector.

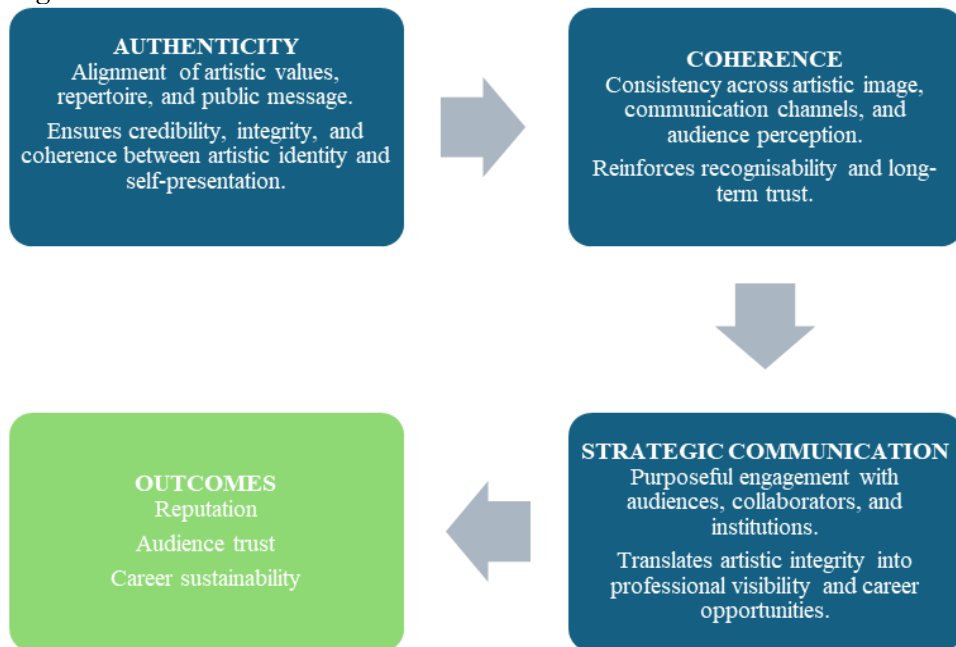
The limitations of this study lie in its qualitative scope and relatively small sample. Nevertheless, its insights provide a basis for future research exploring how personal branding evolves across different artistic disciplines or career stages. Longitudinal and comparative designs could further clarify the relationship between authenticity, reputation, and professional mobility.

In conclusion, personal branding—when approached reflectively and ethically—enables opera singers to articulate their identity with clarity, maintain integrity in public representation, and sustain long-term careers in an increasingly dynamic artistic landscape. Far from diluting artistic value, a well-managed personal brand reinforces it by fostering audience trust, cultural relevance, and professional independence.

The structure of relationships between the key dimensions of personal branding identified in this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

The model presented in Figure 1 synthesises the main conceptual outcomes of the study. It positions authenticity as the foundation of an effective personal brand, ensuring that artistic identity and values remain credible and consistent. Coherence acts as the connective layer, maintaining alignment between the artist's image, the repertoire, and the modes of communication.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of personal branding in operatic career management



Source: Own elaboration.

Strategic communication translates these qualities into active audience engagement and professional recognition. Together, these three dimensions lead to tangible results — enhanced reputation, trust, and long-term career sustainability — forming an integrated framework for managing personal branding in the operatic profession.

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