



Clout's Inferno and Self-Promoting Personal Brand for Impression Through Reality TV

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ABSTRACT

Personal branding has become a common strategy for individuals seeking to strengthen their reputation, visibility, and influence within digital media environments. The entertainment industry, particularly reality television, increasingly functions as a platform for self-promotion where participants transform media exposure into personal and professional opportunities. Despite the growing popularity of reality-based programs, studies examining how contestants strategically construct personal branding through entertainment media remain limited. This study addresses this gap by investigating how female cast members from all seasons of Single's Inferno utilize the program as a stepping stone for image-building and reputation management. The contribution of this study lies in expanding discussions on reality television as a mechanism for influencer culture formation and identity commodification within contemporary media ecosystems. This research employs a qualitative approach using thematic analysis. Data were collected through observation of Netflix's Single's Inferno across four seasons, focusing on selected female contestants and their representation within the program. The analysis was guided by Impression Management Theory to identify patterns of self-presentation, identity construction, and promotional practices. Findings reveal three dominant impression management strategies. First, contestants consistently curate physical appearance and fashion to establish aspirational and commercially attractive identities. Second, they strategically regulate emotional expression and interpersonal interactions to project authenticity, confidence, and relational desirability. Third, contestants utilize narrative visibility within the program as a mechanism for increasing social media recognition and subsequent commercial opportunities. The results also demonstrate that reality television increasingly serves as an integrated platform connecting entertainment media, influencer culture, and economic opportunities. This study concludes that contemporary reality television has evolved into a hybrid communication platform where entertainment, self-presentation, and digital entrepreneurship converge. Rather than simply seeking romantic relationships, contestants strategically convert televised visibility into personal branding assets, influencer credibility, and long-term economic opportunities across digital media platforms.

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1. Introduction

In a world that is becoming more digitally and media-oriented, personal branding has become a vital strategy for anyone trying to build their public image and enhance their reputation. For professionals in the creative and media-driven industries, this strategy which is described as the process of selling oneself and one's career as a brand [Montoya & Vandehey \(2008\)](#) as become essential. Personal branding requires a deliberate approach to audience contact, individuality, and authenticity. Authenticity is important because viewers are more inclined to relate to people who look sincere ([Bonsu & Anim-Wright, 2024](#); [Vandehey, 2019](#)). There have been research on fan account behavior further suggests that digital actors consciously manage audience perceptions through curated performances and identity negotiations ([Noerman et al., 2022](#)).

Additionally, the strategy emphasizes the integration of psychology, marketing, and media studies into personal branding ([Gorbatov et al., 2018](#)). The difficulty of developing a brand that appeals to a broad spectrum of consumer demographics is hypothesized by this synthesis. This synthesis is often demonstrated by reality TV participants, who combine narrative storytelling, emotional storytelling, and strategic image management. Online discourse surrounding *Single's Inferno 3* indicate that audiences actively scrutinize participants' behaviors and identities, creating a digital environment where public image construction becomes increasingly important ([Cholifah et al., 2024](#); [Suh, 2024](#); [Yodovich et al., 2025](#)).

Reality TVs shifted television away from fictional characters toward real individuals whose lives become media content. This transformation created opportunities for participants to gain public visibility, celebrity status, and professional opportunities beyond the program itself ([Roberts, 2011](#)). As media channels expand and grow, reality TV has become a breeding ground for ambitious influencers seeking fame and power ([Khamis et al., 2017](#)). Shows like Netflix's *Single's Inferno* demonstrate this trend, providing cast members with a significant platform to promote their image and build social capital ([Mercier, 2023](#)). Reality TV also highlights how participants continuously negotiate frontstage and backstage performances while navigating tensions between authentic identity and mediated representation ([Beames et al., 2021](#)).

On and off screen, reality TV stars serve as prime examples of how these factors come together to form their brand narratives. Netflix's *Single's Inferno* is a Korean-made dating reality TV that portrays several single women and men to co-live on an island (infernno) and fight their way for trips to luxurious hotel (paradise) with their chosen soulmate ([Azim et al., 2025](#); [IMDb, 2021](#); [Shaukat et al., 2020](#)). The show is very popular that before its fourth season's premiere on Valentine's Day 2025, Netflix has confirmed for its fifth season renewal ([Netflix, 2025](#)). Most reality TV participants, including casts of *Single's Inferno*, retain social networks as audiences, sharing content that expresses their authentic personal brands ([Duffy & Pooley, 2019](#)). Reality TV acts as a modern incubator for personal brands, allowing contestants to achieve awareness [Boateng \(2023\)](#) and influence by creating captivating tales and personas ([Scheidt et al., 2020](#); [Schrader & Scheidt, 2020](#)). While authenticity is a key component of successful personal brands, reality TV frequently blurs the distinction between genuine self-expression and deliberate self-promotion ([Arbieto et al., 2024](#)).

The success of reality TV can be attributed in large part to emotional engagement ([Gordon, 2011](#)). Strong reactions from the audience are triggered by the dramatic production of powerful moments of genuine human experiences and emotional punches ([Ulmanen & Fogelberg, 2024](#)). Reality TVs engagement emerges through interactions among producers, participants, and audiences. Contestants become active contributors in creating entertainment value while simultaneously building long-term relationships with audiences and fans ([Hill, 2017](#)). The show's

emotional component is co-produced by the producers, performers, and viewers. What guarantees that viewers receive what they want and keeps them returning for more is the collaborative aspect of the relationship (Ulmanen & Fogelberg, 2024). In order to establish a consistent presence that supports their TV character, they frequently expand their brand onto social media (Schrader & Scheidt, 2020). Engaging with a target audience is essential for effective personal branding. Reality TV gives a platform for its casts to establish a loyal following, which they might use for future initiatives (Schrader & Scheidt, 2020).

The combination of entertainment media and influencer culture is radically changing the entertainment sector and digital culture (Cempaka, 2025). Reality TV offers a unique environment in which individuals can participate in strategic self-presentation, frequently relying on Kilvington, (2021) Impression Management Theory to preserve ideal appearances for both co-participants and viewers. Individuals function as performers who strategically manage the impressions they present to audiences through appearance, language, behavior, and symbolic cues (Wijaya & Kurniadi, 2022). The distinction between front-stage and back-stage behavior allows individuals to selectively reveal aspects of themselves that support desired identities (Picone, 2015). Within this framework, self-promotion becomes an important method for contestants to control their clout and social placement. Clout, or usually known as clout chasing is a form of self-expression in which one asserts their presence creatively in digital venues that were not intended for them. Clout-chasing is a phenomena where young people post details of their daily lives online in an attempt to establish a reputation on social media (Evans & Baym, 2022).

Previous research has examined personal branding among reality TV participants and digital influencers. For example, Putri (2024) analyzed Choi Hye-seon's personal branding in Single's Inferno Season 3, demonstrating how she differentiated herself through academic and professional achievements rather than conventional beauty-centered representations. Other studies have explored authenticity, influencer culture, and audience engagement in reality television (Arbieto et al., 2024; Scheidt et al., 2020). However, these studies generally focus on individual contestants, specific seasons, or post-program social media activities. Limited attention has been given to how contestants strategically construct personal brands across multiple seasons of the same reality television franchise through impression management during the televised program itself. Furthermore, little is known about how recurring self-presentation strategies contribute to the transformation of reality television into a platform for influencer culture and identity commodification within contemporary digital media ecosystems.

Addressing these gaps is important because contemporary reality television no longer functions solely as entertainment but also as a communication platform where visibility, identity, and economic value are strategically negotiated. Examining contestants' impression management across multiple seasons provides broader insights into how media exposure is converted into personal branding assets and digital influence.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the self-promotion strategies employed by female contestants across the first four seasons of Netflix's Single's Inferno through the lens of Impression Management Theory. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the dominant impression management strategies used by contestants, analyze how these strategies contribute to personal brand construction, and explain how reality television facilitates the conversion of mediated visibility into influencer status and social capital. By doing so, this research contributes to communication and media studies by extending the application of Impression Management Theory to streaming reality television and by conceptualizing reality TV as a strategic communication environment where entertainment, personal branding, and digital platform economies converge.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design combining Impression Management Theory [Bolino et al. \(2008\)](#) with Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) [Breazu \(2020\)](#) to examine how female contestants in *Single's Inferno* strategically construct personal brands through reality television. Impression Management Theory provides the analytical framework for identifying self-presentation strategies, while MDA enables a systematic examination of how these strategies are communicated through multiple semiotic resources.

Data were collected through purposive sampling from Netflix's *Single's Inferno* Seasons 1–4. The primary data consisted of introduction sequences, key interaction scenes, confessionals, dates, and reunion segments in which contestants explicitly or implicitly presented their identities. These scenes were selected because they contained deliberate acts of self-presentation and received substantial screen time. To triangulate televised representations, secondary data were collected from contestants' publicly accessible Instagram accounts, YouTube channels, interviews, promotional appearances, and online media coverage published during and immediately after each season. These supplementary materials were used to compare contestants' televised personas with their post-program personal branding practices.

Four female contestants were selected using purposive sampling based on four criteria: (1) Representing one contestant from each season (Seasons 1–4), allowing cross-season comparison; (2) Receiving substantial narrative visibility and screen time, enabling sufficient multimodal analysis; (3) Having active public profiles as influencers, models, entrepreneurs, or public figures, indicating intentional personal branding beyond the program; (4) Generating significant public and media attention during and after the program, reflected in media coverage, audience discussions, and social media engagement. Based on these criteria, the selected participants were Song Ji-a (Season 1), Shin Seul-ki (Season 2), Choi Hye-seon (Season 3), and Lee Si-an (Season 4).

The analysis followed four stages. First, all selected episodes were repeatedly viewed to identify scenes involving explicit or implicit self-presentation. Relevant scenes were transcribed and documented together with screenshots and contextual production elements. Second, each scene was coded using the five multimodal dimensions proposed in MDA: linguistic, visual, audio, gesture, spatial. Third, observations from each modality were interpreted using the five Impression Management categories proposed by [Bolino et al. \(2008\)](#), self-promotion, ingratiation, exemplification, supplication, and intimidation. Rather than treating MDA and Impression Management as separate analytical frameworks, the multimodal elements functioned as observable evidence through which impression management strategies were identified. For example, confident verbal claims (linguistic), professional fashion choices (visual), assertive vocal delivery (audio), open body posture (gesture), and occupying central positions during interactions (spatial) were collectively interpreted as indicators of self-promotion. Finally, recurring patterns were compared across contestants and seasons through thematic analysis to identify similarities and differences in personal branding strategies and their relationship to influencer culture.

Operationalization of Impression Management Categories. The five impression management categories proposed by [Bolino et al. \(2008\)](#) were operationalized through five multimodal dimensions: linguistic, visual, audio, gesture, and spatial. Each category was identified by examining how verbal and non-verbal resources collectively communicated particular self-presentation strategies. Self-promotion was identified when contestants emphasized their abilities, achievements, competencies, or desirable qualities. Linguistically, this included statements highlighting educational background, professional accomplishments, or personal strengths. Visually, contestants reinforced these claims through clothing, styling, and appearance that

projected competence or attractiveness. Audio cues included confident tone, vocal emphasis, and fluent speech, while gestural indicators consisted of open posture, direct eye contact, and expressive hand movements. Spatially, self-promotion was reflected in occupying central positions during interactions or placing oneself in socially prestigious settings (Wuna & Fadillah, 2025).

Ingratiation referred to behaviors intended to gain approval and establish positive interpersonal relationships. Linguistic indicators included compliments, expressions of agreement, or supportive remarks directed toward other contestants. Visual cues involved friendly facial expressions, smiling, and approachable appearance. Audio characteristics were represented by warm vocal tone, laughter, and enthusiastic responses. Gesture analysis focused on nodding, leaning toward interaction partners, and other affiliative body language, whereas spatial indicators included close interpersonal distance and positioning alongside socially influential contestants.

Exemplification was identified when contestants attempted to project dedication, moral integrity, responsibility, or commitment. Linguistically, this appeared through statements emphasizing perseverance, sacrifice, or strong work ethics. Visual indicators included clothing or symbols associated with professionalism or diligence. Audio analysis examined serious, composed, and determined vocal delivery, while gestural cues included upright posture and controlled body movements reflecting discipline. Spatially, exemplification was reflected by contestants appearing in locations or situations associated with effort, responsibility, or achievement.

Supplication referred to self-presentations emphasizing vulnerability or dependence to elicit sympathy or assistance. Linguistic indicators included expressions of uncertainty, difficulty, or requests for support. Visually, contestants appeared fatigued, emotionally vulnerable, or less concerned with polished appearance. Audio characteristics included hesitant speech, softer vocal delivery, sighing, or pauses. Gestural indicators consisted of slouched posture, avoidance of eye contact, and slower body movements. Spatially, supplication was reflected in physical isolation, maintaining greater interpersonal distance, or occupying smaller personal spaces.

Intimidation involved strategies designed to communicate authority, dominance, or control. Linguistically, contestants employed commanding language, confrontational expressions, or warnings. Visual indicators included clothing and appearance associated with authority or power. Audio cues consisted of deeper or louder vocal delivery, controlled silence, and assertive intonation. Gesture analysis focused on forceful hand movements, pointing, crossed arms, and dominant body posture. Spatial indicators included occupying larger physical spaces, standing in front of others, or positioning oneself in ways that emphasized social dominance.

The Impression Management categories function as the conceptual coding framework, whereas the five multimodal dimensions serve as observable indicators through which those strategies are expressed. Each identified behavior was therefore analyzed simultaneously according to what impression management strategy it represented and how that strategy was communicated through verbal, visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial resources. This integrated approach enabled a richer interpretation of strategic self-presentation than relying solely on verbal discourse.

Several procedures were employed to enhance analytical credibility through data triangulation was achieved by comparing televised content with contestants' publicly available social media accounts, interviews, and media reports; investigator reliability was strengthened through repeated viewing and iterative coding to ensure consistency across episodes; and theory triangulation was applied by integrating Impression Management Theory with Multimodal Discourse Analysis, allowing findings to be interpreted from complementary theoretical perspectives.

3. Result and Discussion

Self-Promotion and Personal Branding Strategies through Reality TV

The analysis of four cast members from *Single's Inferno*, Song Ji-a, Shin Seul-ki, Choi Hye-seon, and Lee Si-an, shows how reality television may be used to effectively promote personal brands. Their post-show trajectories reveal a common pattern of using media exposure to increase influence, acquire brand collaborations, and broaden professional options. Participants in *Single's Inferno* receive extensive publicity, which frequently instantly makes them famous or influential. Due to the show's worldwide distribution, particularly via Netflix, competitors are exposed to viewers outside of South Korea, growing their fan networks. Following their appearance on the show, all four of these cast members had a significant increase in their social media followings. For personal branding, having a sizable social media following is essential since it creates opportunities for partnerships and sponsorships.

All four casts utilized their appearance on *Single's Inferno* to reinforce or establish themselves in the modelling industry. Song Ji-a leveraged her profile as a beauty influencer to match her brand with luxury fashion and cosmetic sponsorships. Prior to the event, Ji-a was already a well-known influencer in the fields of fashion and beauty. She became a fashion icon due to her elegant, luxury-inspired look, which landed her brand deals with big businesses. Her brand image was momentarily impacted by the scandal surrounding her use of fake luxury goods. Shin Seul-ki, who was already well-known in the entertainment industry, became more visible as a model and musician. She is recognized for her sophisticated and attractive appearance; she took use of her post-show fame to increase her visibility in the entertainment industry and land modelling offers. She marketed herself as a sophisticated and gifted individual by utilizing her classical piano training.

Compared to Song Ji-a, Choi Hye-seon and Lee Si-an are relatively new to the influencer scene. They both made strategic use of their celebrity from reality TV to get endorsements, partnerships, and a wider following in the fashion and beauty sectors. Choi Hye-seon received a lot of attention after her appearance in Season 3, and she signed agreements with top fashion and cosmetics firms. Lee Si-an, who specializes in athleisure modelling, has increased her crossover appeal in the fashion sector and idol culture. Their combined experience in modelling and influencer culture exemplifies the show's role as a branding accelerator, placing participants in high-profile businesses.

A noteworthy post-show trend identified among all four cast members was an exponential surge in social media involvement, with their Instagram followings skyrocketing following the series' premiere. Song Ji-a's followers surged to over 3 million and Choi Hye-seon benefited her rising internet visibility to over 1 million followers, resulting in high-profile collaborations with brands like Yves Saint Laurent, Olay, and New Balance in [Fig. 1](#) and [Fig. 2](#).

The growth in social media following also indicates that the visibility gained from *Single's Inferno* was transformed into sustained digital influence rather than remaining limited to the period of the program. Increased engagement provided the cast members with a direct platform to communicate their identities, lifestyles, and professional interests to a broader audience. Their Instagram activities, including fashion-related content, beauty promotions, and collaborations with established brands, contributed to the construction of recognizable personal identities. In this context, social media functioned not only as a channel for maintaining popularity but also as a strategic branding tool that connected entertainment exposure with commercial opportunities. The ability of these cast members to convert audience attention into long-term collaborations suggests that reality television can serve as an important starting point for developing and extending personal brands across different industries.

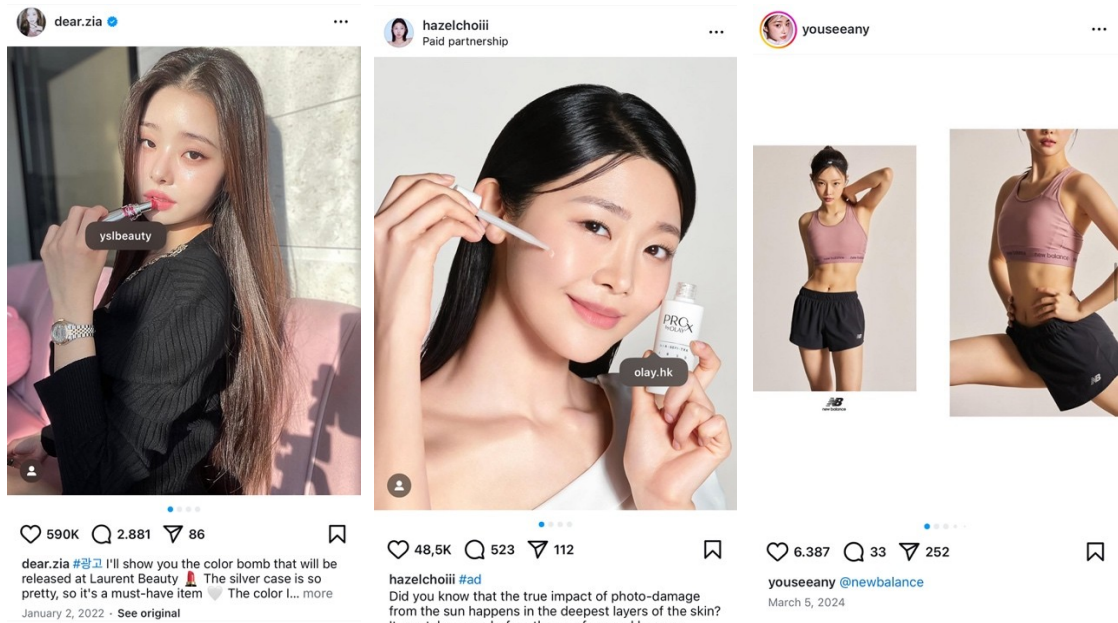


Fig. 1. Song Ji-a, Choi Hye-seon, and Lee Si-an's Partnerships with High-End Brands
(Source: Instagram Accounts of @/dear.zia, @/hazelchoiii, and @/youseeany)



Fig. 2. Shin Seul-ki's first K-Drama Contract
(Source: Instagram Account of @/shinseulkee)

This job diversification demonstrates how reality TV exposure promotes multi-industry brand extension, allowing cast members to create enduring success in competitive areas in Fig. 2.

Mapping of Single's Inferno Casts' IM and MDA into their Personal Branding Elements

Song Ji-a The Luxury Beauty Influencer

Song Ji-a predominantly demonstrates the self-promotion strategy of Impression Management [Bolino et al. \(2008\)](#), whereby individuals intentionally highlight their competencies, attractiveness, and desirable qualities to influence audience perceptions. Across the five multimodal dimensions, Ji-a consistently projected an aspirational identity. Linguistically, she subtly emphasized her lifestyle preferences, confidence, and refined tastes through conversations that implied social status without overt self-aggrandizement. Visually, she maintained polished styling, luxury-inspired fashion, and meticulous grooming, reinforcing an image of exclusivity and sophistication. Her confident vocal delivery (audio mode), composed gestures including direct eye contact and open posture (gesture mode), and frequent occupation of central positions within group interactions (spatial mode) collectively communicated authority and desirability in [Fig. 3](#).



Fig. 3. Song Ji-a's Entry of Her YouTube Channel: Shopping/Spendong 100M Won in a Day
(Source: YouTube Channel of THE FREEZIA)

Rather than functioning independently, these multimodal resources worked together to create a coherent luxury-oriented personal brand. From the perspective of Impression Management Theory, Ji-a strategically controlled the impressions presented to both fellow contestants and television audiences, allowing her televised identity to evolve into a commercially valuable brand beyond the program in [Fig. 3](#).

This finding supports previous research suggesting that reality television functions as an incubator for influencer culture and personal branding ([Khamis et al., 2017](#); [Scheidt et al., 2020](#)). However, while earlier studies primarily emphasize post-program influencer activities, the present analysis demonstrates that brand construction begins during the televised interactions themselves through coordinated multimodal self-presentation. Ji-a's subsequent collaborations with luxury brands and rapid growth in social media followers illustrate how strategic self-promotion facilitates the conversion of media visibility into economic and symbolic capital.

Her branding strategy combines authenticity, storytelling, and audience engagement. Authenticity was conveyed through sharing personal preferences and lifestyle narratives that appeared natural despite their aspirational nature. Storytelling emerged through recurring narratives of confidence, independence, and elegance, while audience engagement developed because viewers perceived her as simultaneously glamorous and approachable. These branding elements collectively strengthened her marketability within the luxury fashion and beauty industries.

Shin Seul-ki The Elegant and Disciplined Artist

Shin Seul-ki primarily employed exemplification, an Impression Management strategy through which individuals present themselves as disciplined, dedicated, and morally committed (Bolino et al., 2008). Unlike contestants who emphasized popularity or glamour, Seul-ki consistently constructed an identity centered on professionalism and artistic excellence. Her linguistic communication frequently highlighted commitment to piano performance, acting, and personal growth. Visually, she adopted minimalist styling and elegant fashion that reinforced a refined and disciplined persona rather than conspicuous luxury. Her calm and measured vocal delivery (audio mode), controlled body language (gesture mode), and frequent appearance in educational or professional environments (spatial mode) consistently communicated perseverance and responsibility in Fig. 4.



Fig. 4. Seul-ki's during Piano Recital and Graduated from Piano Study Program
(Source: Instagram Account of @/shinseulkee)

According to Impression Management Theory, exemplification allows individuals to gain social approval by demonstrating integrity rather than dominance or popularity. Seul-ki's multimodal performance therefore positioned her as a credible and trustworthy public figure whose value derived from competence and dedication rather than entertainment alone. This finding extends previous research on personal branding in reality television Putri (2024), which identified Seul-ki's intellectual image but paid limited attention to the communicative mechanisms through which that image was constructed. The present study demonstrates that professionalism is actively performed through coordinated verbal and non-verbal communication rather than simply reflecting personal background. Her branding elements revolve around authenticity, storytelling, and audience engagement. Authenticity emerged through candid discussions of her educational journey and artistic struggles. Storytelling emphasized persistence and continuous self-development, while audience engagement was cultivated through behind-the-scenes content documenting rehearsals and professional preparation. Collectively, these strategies positioned Seul-ki as an aspirational role model grounded in achievement rather than celebrity culture.

Choi Hye-seon: The Empathetic Connector

Choi Hye-seon predominantly demonstrates ingratiation, an Impression Management strategy whereby individuals seek approval through friendliness, empathy, and interpersonal warmth (Bolino et al., 2008). Rather than emphasizing status or professional accomplishments, Hye-seon strategically cultivated emotional closeness with both fellow contestants and audiences.

Across the multimodal dimensions, her linguistic communication frequently included compliments, encouragement, and supportive responses during conversations. Visually, she consistently displayed warm facial expressions and approachable styling that reinforced perceptions of sincerity. Friendly vocal intonation accompanied by frequent laughter (audio mode), empathetic gestures such as nodding and leaning toward others (gesture mode), and inclusive spatial positioning within group interactions (spatial mode) collectively communicated openness and emotional accessibility. From an Impression Management perspective, these behaviors represent deliberate strategies for building interpersonal trust and social acceptance. Instead of maximizing prestige, Hye-seon prioritized relational credibility, illustrating that emotional authenticity can function as a powerful branding resource within reality television in Fig. 5.

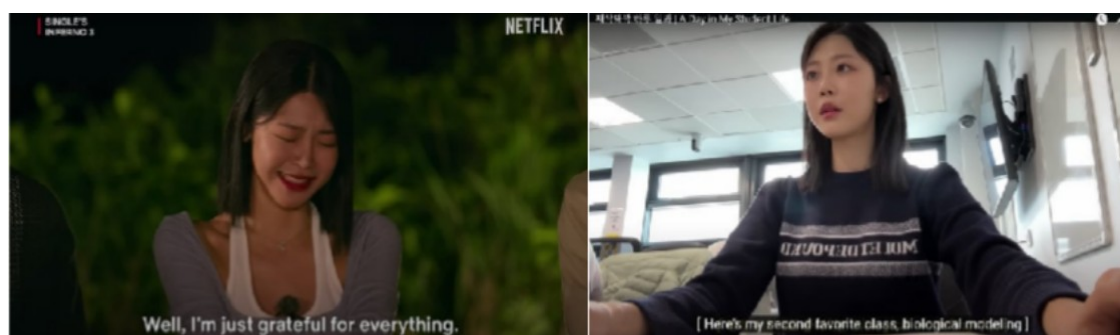


Fig. 5. Hye-seon's Emotional Reaction Regarding Her Experience during Single's Inferno Season 3; Hye-seon's Activity as A Student

(Source: YouTube Channel of Netflix K-Content and Hazelight)

These findings complement previous studies emphasizing authenticity as a central component of successful personal branding (Bonsu & Anim-Wright, 2024). However, this study further demonstrates that authenticity is not merely an intrinsic characteristic but is strategically communicated through coordinated multimodal performances. The findings also extend influencer literature by suggesting that audience engagement can emerge through empathy and relational communication rather than overt self-promotion.

Hye-seon's branding strategy integrates authenticity, storytelling, and audience engagement through emotionally grounded communication. Her stories often highlighted vulnerability, friendship, and personal reflection, enabling viewers to perceive her as genuine and relatable. Consequently, her personal brand developed around emotional connection rather than aspirational luxury, strengthening long-term audience loyalty.

Lee Si-an: The Charismatic Athlete Model

Lee Si-an primarily employed self-promotion, emphasizing athletic ability, modelling experience, and personal versatility as central components of her public identity in Fig. 6. Unlike Song Ji-a, whose self-promotion centered on luxury and lifestyle, Si-an constructed her brand around achievement, resilience, and physical competence. Linguistically, she frequently discussed her experiences as a swimmer, model, and former idol trainee, reinforcing a multidimensional professional identity.

Visually, athletic styling and fashionable appearance simultaneously projected fitness and commercial appeal. Her confident vocal delivery (audio mode), assertive body language and direct eye contact (gesture mode), together with her central role during competitions and group interactions (spatial mode), consistently reinforced perceptions of confidence and capability. According to Impression Management Theory, self-promotion involves highlighting competencies to enhance social evaluation. Si-an's multimodal performance demonstrates how competitive success within the program becomes symbolic capital that extends beyond entertainment into influencer branding. Her victory in athletic competitions strengthened perceptions of authenticity because her achievements were directly observable rather than merely claimed in Fig. 6.



Fig. 6. (Wears pink top) Defeating all Women Contestant and Winning a Date to Paradise
(Source: YouTube Channel of Netflix Philippines)

This finding supports research suggesting that reality television increasingly functions as a platform for entrepreneurial self-branding (Boateng, 2023). However, the present study expands this perspective by demonstrating that contestants strategically combine athletic performance, visual identity, and narrative storytelling to create commercially attractive personal brands before transitioning into broader influencer careers. Her branding strategy integrates authenticity, storytelling, and audience engagement. Authenticity was reinforced by consistently presenting achievements that audiences directly witnessed during the competition. Storytelling connected her athletic history with her modelling career, while audience engagement emerged from viewers identifying with her perseverance and ambition. Together, these branding elements transformed competitive success into a recognizable and marketable public identity.

Comparative Analysis: IM Strategies and Their Branding Effectiveness

According to the findings, self-promotion and exemplification produce higher commercial marketability, whereas ingratiation generates stronger emotional engagement with audiences. Song Ji-a and Lee Si-an positioned themselves as aspirational characters, exploiting their exposure to secure sponsorship deals. Meanwhile, Shin Seul-ki and Choi Hye-seon established narrower yet legitimate personal brands, emphasizing authenticity and relatability over rapid commercial success. The comparative analysis demonstrates that different Impression Management (IM) strategies produce distinct branding outcomes, indicating that there is no single pathway to successful personal branding in reality television. Rather, contestants strategically selected self-presentation approaches that aligned with their existing identities, professional aspirations, and target audiences. Across the four cases, self-promotion generated the greatest commercial visibility, whereas exemplification and ingratiation fostered stronger perceptions of authenticity, credibility, and emotional connection.

Among the participants, Song Ji-a and Lee Si-an primarily relied on self-promotion, emphasizing competence, attractiveness, and lifestyle to construct aspirational identities. According to [Bolino et al. \(2008\)](#), self-promotion enables individuals to enhance social evaluations by highlighting desirable personal qualities. In both cases, this strategy proved highly effective for increasing commercial marketability. Ji-a transformed her luxurious and fashion-oriented image into collaborations with global beauty and luxury brands, while Si-an capitalized on her athletic achievements and modelling background to establish a multifaceted personal brand appealing to both fashion and sports-related industries. These findings support previous studies suggesting that reality television functions as a launching pad for influencer careers and brand partnerships ([Boateng, 2023](#); [Khamis et al., 2017](#)). However, the two contestants also illustrate that self-promotion carries different risks. Ji-a's carefully curated luxury identity attracted criticism during the counterfeit luxury goods controversy, demonstrating that highly aspirational branding may raise questions regarding authenticity ([Lee et al., 2022](#)). In contrast, Si-an's challenge lies in maintaining a coherent identity while simultaneously navigating multiple professional domains, including modelling, athletics, and entertainment.

A different branding trajectory emerged in the case of Shin Seul-ki, whose dominant strategy was exemplification. Rather than emphasizing glamour or popularity, Seul-ki consistently projected discipline, professionalism, and artistic dedication through her educational background, piano performances, and subsequent acting career. Within Impression Management Theory, exemplification reflects deliberate efforts to gain admiration by demonstrating commitment and moral integrity ([Bolino et al., 2008](#); [Williams et al., 2022](#)). This strategy positioned Seul-ki as a credible public figure whose brand identity was built on competence rather than celebrity appeal. Although her approach generated fewer immediately visible commercial endorsements than those of Ji-a or Si-an, it strengthened her legitimacy within the entertainment industry by establishing a reputation associated with professionalism and long-term career development. This finding extends previous research by demonstrating that reality television can facilitate professional reputation building beyond conventional influencer branding.

In contrast, Choi Hye-seon primarily employed ingratiation, strategically cultivating warmth, empathy, and interpersonal closeness throughout the program. Through friendly communication, supportive interactions, and emotionally expressive behavior, she developed a highly relatable public persona. According to Impression Management Theory, ingratiation seeks social approval by fostering interpersonal attraction rather than emphasizing superiority ([Bolino et al., 2008](#)). Hye-seon's branding illustrates that emotional authenticity can be as influential as aspirational self-presentation in developing audience loyalty. While this strategy may generate fewer luxury sponsorships or commercial endorsements compared with self-promotion, it produces stronger parasocial relationships and long-term audience engagement. This finding complements [Bonsu & Anim-Wright \(2024\)](#) argument that authenticity is central to successful personal branding, while further suggesting that emotional accessibility itself can function as a valuable branding asset within digital media ecosystems.

Comparing the four contestants reveals that the effectiveness of Impression Management strategies should not be evaluated solely by commercial outcomes. Self-promotion produced broader market visibility and immediate sponsorship opportunities, whereas exemplification strengthened professional credibility and ingratiation cultivated sustainable audience trust. These differences suggest that successful personal branding depends on the alignment between self-presentation strategies and the identity that contestants seek to establish rather than on the adoption of a single dominant strategy. Consequently, reality television functions not merely as a

platform for entertainment but as a strategic communication environment where participants negotiate different forms of symbolic, social, and economic capital through carefully orchestrated multimodal impression management.

These findings also extend previous communication and media research in two important ways. First, whereas earlier studies have primarily examined personal branding after contestants' transition into influencer careers [Khamis et al. \(2017\)](#), this study demonstrates that branding strategies originate during the televised program itself through coordinated linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial performances. Second, by comparing contestants across four seasons of *Single's Inferno*, this research identifies recurring patterns showing that different Impression Management strategies produce distinct branding trajectories, from luxury influencer and athlete-celebrity branding to professional artist and relational influencer branding. This comparative perspective advances understanding of reality television as a multimodal communication platform where entertainment, identity construction, and digital entrepreneurship increasingly converge.

The findings also have practical implications for media practitioners, reality television producers, and aspiring influencers. Contestants and content creators may benefit from adopting impression management strategies that are consistent with their long-term professional identities rather than focusing solely on short-term popularity. Likewise, producers may recognize that contestants' multimodal self-presentation contributes not only to audience engagement but also to the development of sustainable personal brands beyond the program itself. Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study focuses exclusively on four female contestants from a single Korean reality television franchise, limiting the generalizability of the findings across different cultural contexts, television formats, and gender groups. In addition, the analysis primarily examines televised performances and publicly available digital content without incorporating audience reception or interviews with the contestants themselves. Consequently, the findings represent observable self-presentation practices rather than contestants' intended branding strategies.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Single's Inferno* functions not only as a dating reality television program but also as a strategic communication platform through which contestants actively construct, negotiate, and commercialize their personal brands. By integrating Impression Management Theory with Multimodal Discourse Analysis, this research shows that personal branding in reality television is communicated through the coordinated use of linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial resources rather than through verbal communication alone. The findings reveal that different impression management strategies produce distinct branding trajectories: self-promotion primarily facilitates commercial visibility and brand partnerships, exemplification strengthens professional credibility and long-term career legitimacy, and ingratiation cultivates audience trust and emotional engagement. These outcomes suggest that the effectiveness of personal branding depends not on a single self-presentation strategy but on the consistency between contestants' projected identities, authenticity, and audience expectations.

This study contributes to communication and media studies in three important ways. First, it extends Impression Management Theory by demonstrating that impression management in streaming reality television is inherently multimodal, requiring the simultaneous orchestration of verbal and non-verbal communication to construct desirable public identities. Second, it reconceptualizes reality television as a strategic communication environment where identity construction, entertainment, and digital entrepreneurship converge, expanding existing

understandings of reality television beyond its traditional entertainment function. Third, by comparing contestants across four seasons of *Single's Inferno*, this study identifies recurring patterns of personal branding that previous single-case or single-season studies have been unable to capture, thereby providing a broader explanation of how reality television facilitates the transformation of media exposure into social, symbolic, and economic capital.

Future research could expand this work by comparing impression management strategies across different reality television formats, such as *Love Is Blind*, *Too Hot to Handle*, or *Terrace House*, to examine how cultural and production contexts influence personal branding practices. Comparative studies involving male contestants or mixed-gender analyses would further clarify potential differences in branding strategies. Moreover, combining multimodal discourse analysis with audience studies, social media analytics, or interviews with contestants would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how strategic self-presentation is interpreted by audiences and translated into long-term influencer success within evolving digital platform ecosystems.

Ultimately, the notion of "Clout's Inferno" encapsulates the central argument of this study. While *Single's Inferno* is presented as a dating reality program, the findings suggest that it simultaneously operates as a competitive arena where contestants strategically pursue clout, understood as visibility, influence, and symbolic capital, through multimodal impression management. Romantic relationships remain part of the program's narrative, yet they coexist with equally important efforts to establish recognizable personal brands capable of generating long-term opportunities within influencer culture and the digital platform economy. In this sense, the "inferno" extends beyond the island setting to symbolize the competitive environment in which media exposure is transformed into reputation, commercial value, and sustained public relevance.

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