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## Personal branding

Gorbatov, S.

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# Chapter 1



## Chapter 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

The emergence of novel work arrangements, exemplified by the gig economy, and alternative employment relationships, such as zero-hours contracts, has reshaped what has been traditionally considered a career. Only a decade ago, the literature was arguing that traditional careers are not dead (Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). Today, there is more and more evidence that very few careers unfold in what would be considered a traditional career, that is one which assumes a commitment to one employer and years of work in one organization (Guan, Arthur, Khapova, Hall, & Lord, 2019). As William Bridges (1996), the author of *Jobshift: How to prosper in a workplace without jobs* stated, “all jobs in today’s economy are temporary” (p. 55, original emphasis).

Not only has the nature of employment become fluid, but also the skills and competencies required to be successful in one’s job are becoming obsolete, with newly required skills appearing at an increasing speed (Quendler & Lamb, 2016). A mosaic of metaphors has emerged to characterize these trends, including the post-corporate (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997), portfolio (Gold & Fraser, 2002), protean (Hall, 2004), kaleidoscope (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), boundaryless (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005), and intelligent (Arthur, Khapova, & Richardson, 2017) career. The notion uniting these metaphors (under the umbrella term of a contemporary career theory) is that the ownership of career management has shifted from the organization to the individual. Such novel contexts call for new approaches to achieving career success in an increasingly turbulent environment, including personal branding.

Although some authors claim that the roots of personal branding go as far back as to the 1920s (Whitmer, 2019), it is one of the tools that has only recently become increasingly utilized

to present one's self, in this new world of work. The origins of the term are contested by Peters (1997) and Montoya and Vandehey (2002), but what is certain is that it quickly made its way into popular literature (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005), corporate courses (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016), and even academic curricula (see, e.g., Edmiston, 2014; McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012; Wetsch, 2012). The terms *personal branding* or *personal brand* have become part of our vernacular. But what do we know about these concepts theoretically?

This question was the impetus for this Ph.D. dissertation. Driven by the goal of shedding light on these novel concepts, I conducted several empirical studies, reported in the four subsequent dissertation chapters. First, in Chapter 2, through a rigorous review of the extant literature, I define the key theoretical constructs and propose a comprehensive model to understand the drivers, processes, and outcomes of personal branding. Next, in Chapter 3, I test the model using samples from Western and Asian cultures. In Chapter 4, I develop a reliable and valid measurement instrument to measure personal brand equity. Finally, in Chapter 5, I examine how signaling one's value related to career outcomes. These studies employed various research and statistical methods, which are described in detail in each chapter. To conclude, I review the key findings in the final chapter (Chapter 6) and discuss their significance in the broader theoretical context of contemporary careers.

## **1.2 Conceptual Background**

Personal branding is concerned with how individuals create, promote, and maintain the desired professional self, placing it in the same nomological field as concepts like self-promotion, image, identity, and fame. These concepts are similar in the way that they can be understood through the lens of Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical theory that views human interaction as a series of dramaturgical acts, designed with the objective to improve one's self-

image. This theory views the self as a social construct that is situation dependent. It means that the sense of who one “is” varies as a function of time, place, and audience. Goffman posited that self-presentation is a continuous process happening both “on stage” and “off stage,” or when the audience is present or absent. The on-stage performance requires a “mask” that allows the actor to present a specific facet (real or non-existent) to the target audience with the objective of forming the desired opinion in their minds. Since Goffman (1956) published *The presentation of self in everyday life*, his dramaturgical approach spurred a vast amount of research in fields concerned with understanding social interactions (Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016; Kowalski & Leary, 1990). Multiple studies have established that those who are more skilled in presenting their desired professional self to others enjoy greater career benefits such as access to important people, greater numbers and speed of promotions, and are overall more satisfied with their careers (Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009; Bourdage, Wiltshire, & Lee, 2015; Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003).

At the same time, personal branding is a concept directly borrowed from the marketing literature. To understand its mechanisms of action, it is critical that we consider literature on brand building together with the dramaturgical theory. Branding as a process requires, among others, defining the target audience, distilling the brand attributes and promises, crafting the message, and monitoring the effectiveness of such activities (Kotler, Armstrong, & Opresnik, 2018). The purpose of branding is to create a personal brand, the value of which is determined by how much brand equity it holds (Keller, 1993). Similar to people, brands have personalities and attributes (Aaker, 1997). All these terms, principles, and techniques are actively referenced and utilized in the personal branding literature, already proving itself as a multidisciplinary concept.

Still, given the eclectic nature of the personal branding construct, it is probable that other theoretical perspectives are likely to be applied to understand what drives such behaviors and what the potential outcomes are. For example, psychology could shed some light on the reasons why individuals engage in personal branding, or economics could be concerned with how personal branding performs a signaling function to address the information asymmetry in the labor market. Another sociological angle would be to consider personal branding as an accumulation of social and cultural capital, applying Bourdieu's (1993) field theory. Such a diversity of theoretical approaches makes this topic more interesting to study, but also introduces additional complexity related to reconciling the differences of views, often occurring in parallel conceptual domains.

In 2005, the first two academic papers on personal branding addressed the topic from two very distinct angles, setting the stage for the debates to come. Shepherd (2005) approached personal branding from a marketing standpoint, enthusiastically viewing this phenomenon as an extension of the discipline: "Self-marketing and personal branding represent one of the last frontiers at which marketing is poised" (p. 592). Indeed, most scholars followed that route, viewing personal branding and the personal brand as causal agents in explaining career success.

In the other paper, Lair et al. (2005) critiqued personal branding as "an extreme form of a market-appropriate response" (p. 308). They raised important social and ethical concerns around personal branding being a superficial activity, driven by a hypertrophied sense of individualism. This created a stream of literature on the other end of the spectrum (e.g., Vallas & Cummins, 2015; Vallas & Hill, 2018; Wee & Brooks, 2010) by those who view it as "one of the more cynical products of the era of the flexible personality: a form of self-presentation singularly

focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value” (Hearn, 2008a, p. 213).

Since that time, the academic literature on personal branding has grown in volume. Still, despite the diversity of views and the amount of existing research, most of those papers are of conceptual or qualitative nature, and even though there are more than a hundred academic papers on the topic, there is no established definition nor a validated measure. Reviewing the state of this subject field, I decided to focus my dissertation on aligning the diverse definition of the key concepts and operationalizing them, consolidating the disparate findings, and testing the main relationships with the antecedent and outcome variables. This problem statement defined a sharper focus for research and helped inform specific research questions.

### **1.3 Main Areas of This Research**

Against the backdrop of a profound change in the ways people work, this dissertation examines the topic of personal branding as it relates to career success in the context of contemporary careers and addresses important methodological issues in tackling this question. To determine the scope, I have established three distinct research areas: 1) establishing clarity of the main constructs (personal branding, personal brand, and personal brand equity); 2) operationalizing these constructs; and 3) examining their antecedents and outcomes. I proceed to explain these areas briefly, each followed by the related research question(s).

#### **1.3.1 Clarity of the Personal Branding, Personal Brand, and Personal Brand Equity Constructs**

One of the ways to address the debates around the nature of personal branding in career research is to establish clarity in respect of this construct. In the past few years we have witnessed a proliferation of definitions and approaches to studying personal branding. Some



papers on the topic do not provide any definition (e.g., Molyneux, Holton, & Lewis, 2018; Pérez Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019), while the definitions of others vary greatly in the degree of comprehensiveness, precision, and parsimony. For instance, in defining CEO brand equity as “an aggregation of stakeholder patterns of behavior and attitudes that enable the brand to benefit from competitive differences, higher profits, and reduced risks”, Cottan-Nir and Lehman-Wilzig (2018, p. 7) failed to explain what brand equity actually is. Overall, there is no definition of personal branding or personal brand that would satisfy the criteria of a “good definition” proposed by Suddaby (2010), regardless of the fact that from the very beginning of the academic research of this topic, Shepherd (2005) urged scholars to “reclaim self marketing and personal branding from the enthusiasts” (p. 602) by applying scientific methods to study this phenomenon.

However, in order to establish the clarity of a construct, it is imperative to consolidate disparate literatures on the topic. To my knowledge, no effort to review the literature on personal branding has been undertaken at the time of writing this dissertation. A systematic review of an interdisciplinary topic is more complex (Webster & Watson, 2002) but it is “an efficient and effective method of developing an understanding of what we know and what we do not know” (Briner & Denyer, 2012, p. 127) about personal branding.

Thus, the knowledge of personal branding is scattered, and consolidation is needed, together with achieving a clear construct of personal branding and its related concepts: the personal brand and personal brand equity. Hence, the research questions are:

1. *How do individuals engage in personal branding in the context of contemporary careers?*
2. *How are a) personal branding, b) personal brand, and c) personal brand equity defined?*

These questions are addressed in Chapters 2 and 4 of this dissertation. Specifically, in Chapter 2, through the process of a systematic literature review, I organize the extant research literature by proposing a comprehensive model. Analyzing the existing definitions in all the reviewed papers, I propose the definitions of personal branding and the personal brand. In Chapter 4, I define the construct of personal brand equity, offering a critical basis before developing its measurement.

### **1.3.2 Operationalization of Personal Branding and Personal Brand Equity**

A lack of an established definition leads to the consequent absence of a reliable and valid measurement instrument for the constructs in question. There have been some attempts to measure personal branding, such as the study by Kucharska and Mikołajczak (2018), looking into the personal branding of artists and art-designers. However, the scale used to measure personal branding was created for that study only and did not undergo a full methodological scale development process.

Similarly, conceptualization and measurement of personal brand equity, as the outcome of the personal branding process, has received little attention. Although several attempts have been made to come up with a measure of personal brand equity (Jillapalli & Jillapalli, 2014; Shafaei, Nejati, & Maadad, 2019), their measures, analyzed for methodological rigor and generalizability, were found wanting.

The legitimacy of findings in management studies is questionable if concerns remain about measurements of its key constructs (Schriesheim, Powers, Scandura, Gardiner, & Lankau, 1993). This methodological gap leads to the next research question:

*3. How can a) personal branding and b) personal brand equity be measured?*

The work on developing the measures of personal branding and personal brand equity is reported in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively. Since the focus of Chapter 3 is on examining the antecedents and outcomes of personal branding, its scale development was one of the studies. Only the essential scale development procedures were performed. In contrast, Chapter 4 is fully dedicated to developing a reliable and valid measure of personal brand equity, reporting on the complete set of the required psychometric procedures to do so.

### **1.3.3 Antecedents and Outcomes of Personal Branding and Personal Brand Equity**

I have already mentioned that, to date, there have mostly been conceptual or qualitative papers on personal branding. Regarding the antecedents, several authors have pointed out that those workers who are most affected by technological advances or who work in an industry where building a strong personal brand is a requirement or an expectation are more likely to engage in behaviors to promote their professional self (see, as examples, Hodge & Walker, 2015; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017; Phua & Caras, 2008; Sheikh & Lim, 2011). Faster job changes and greater labor market dynamism overall could also lead to the need to self-brand, as well as chance events, as evidenced by the research by Schlosser et al. (2017) on executive career rebranding. At the individual level, certain personality characteristics and psychological motives, such as the desire for self-esteem (Zinko & Rubin, 2015) or conflicting motivations of getting along and getting ahead (Hogan, 1982), could influence the intensity and modality of personal branding behaviors.

There are also compelling propositions and qualitative findings regarding the outcomes of personal branding. Many studies point towards the obvious benefits of having a strong personal brand – career opportunities, employability, and the resulting financial benefits – common outcomes which are most often mentioned in the popular literature on the subject (Vallas & Hill,

2018). There are also other, less explored outcomes. For example, Hanusch and Bruns (2017) claimed that, in addition to building their economic capital, personal branding helps journalists accumulate social capital as well by growing their ability to influence others. Tussyadiah (2016) suggested that personal branding could result in positive outcomes for establishing friendships and dating opportunities, as well as being a creative way to express oneself.

Thus, there are many relationships predicting and following from personal branding that need to be examined using quantitative methods to confirm or refute the earlier theoretical propositions and qualitative findings. I hope to contribute to this research with the following questions:

4. *What are the a) antecedents and b) outcomes of personal branding in the career context?*

In today's fast-changing and increasingly more complex work environment, individuals face challenges of staying employable and communicating their value to potential employers. The latter challenge is specifically the objective of personal branding. The former challenge can be solved with novel training solutions, many of which are technology-enabled, such as massive online open courses (MOOCs), mobile learning applications, and gamified learning solutions. However, while traditional educational institutions can certify that specific knowledge and skills have been obtained, most of the novel solutions do not have this ability. As a result, job seekers struggle to signal their competence to prospective employers when it has been acquired via non-traditional educational channels.

Recently, many reputable academic institutions started offering certificates for completing MOOCs. Consequently, thousands of learners around the world received the opportunity to earn a credential from a prestigious university for a fraction of the cost of a face-to-face course and with the convenience of online learning. Such opportunities may also appeal

to many job seekers because of the ease of associating their names with the brand of a famous university, a process known as personal co-branding (Evans, 2017; Kucharska, 2017; Shepherd, 2005). These new possibilities to self-promote and signal competence by obtaining credentials from novel learning tools, such as MOOCs, has led me to formulate the following research question:

5. *Why do people invest effort in doing MOOCs and how does this investment relate to job search outcomes?*

I propose the conceptual model of the antecedents and the outcomes of personal branding in Chapter 2 based on the literature review of the previous research. In Chapter 3, I test some elements of the model empirically on a Western and an Asian sample. I address the issue of signaling one's value to obtain career benefits in Chapter 5 of this dissertation by testing the relationships between key motivations to invest effort in MOOCs examining how it relates to positive career outcomes.

#### **1.4 Research Design and Chapter Overview**

In this dissertation I use a multi-source and multi-method research design to answer the posed research questions. The choice of multiple methods was predicated by the multidisciplinary nature of personal branding. As the value of research is shown to increase with employment of multiple methods (Gibson, 2017), I use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Since personal branding is a career tool available to anyone, it is important to conduct research on several samples representing distinct groups of contemporary career seekers. Thus, in order to ensure greater generalizability of the findings, I endeavored to collect data from a wide spectrum of respondents, varying in age, gender, geography, and employment status. In collecting and transforming the data I was guided by the best practices as outlined by

Aguinis et al. (2019) to ensure research quality. In developing the measurements for personal branding and the personal brand I followed the established processes for scale development (DeVellis, 2012; Hinkin, 1998; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2011).

To provide a brief roadmap to this dissertation, I will now briefly outline the research methods, data sources, and key empirical findings of each chapter below. Chapters 2 - 4 conceptualize and operationalize the concepts of personal branding, the personal brand, and personal brand equity, while Chapter 5 contains the findings of a study on the impact of signaling on career outcomes.

Chapter 2 commences the empirical part of the dissertation with a literature review of the extant scholarly literature on the topic of personal branding. To ensure rigor in analyzing such a fragmented area of studies, I following the established procedures for conducting systematic literature reviews (Daniels, 2018; Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009). My goals were to: 1) propose definitions of personal branding and the personal brand, following the procedures of establishing construct clarity (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016; Suddaby, 2010), 2) develop a framework that explains how the personal brand relates to other career-related constructs, and 3) propose the future research agenda. I achieved these objectives by analyzing and synthesizing 100 articles published on the topic of personal branding in the period from 2005 to 2018, as 2005 was the year when the first two academic papers on personal branding were published.

Chapter 3 extends the findings of the previous chapter and operationalizes the definition of personal branding by developing a measurement scale through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses on the overall sample of 1,001 participants recruited on Mechanical Turk. Furthermore, it examines the antecedents and outcomes of personal branding in two cultural

contexts – Western and Chinese – on two different samples ( $N = 263$  and  $N = 214$ ) through the lens of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The findings indicate that personal branding leads to greater career satisfaction, and this relationship is fully mediated by perceived employability. Career achievement aspiration was the strongest predictor of engagement in personal branding, while career feedback negatively related to personal branding intention. Career self-efficacy positively related to personal branding but not to personal branding intention. These findings highlight the importance of personal branding as a contemporary career technique in promoting one's personal brand identity to achieve beneficial career outcomes.

Chapter 4 conceptualizes and operationalizes the construct of personal brand equity. It provides a definition of personal brand equity, reports on the development and validation of the PBE scale in four different samples (total  $N = 1,558$ ) and explores the mediating role of personal brand equity in the relationship between self-promotion, career achievement aspiration, and perceived employability. First, exploratory ( $N = 311$ ) and confirmatory factor analyses ( $N = 706$ ) supported a three-dimensional structure of personal brand equity (brand appeal, brand value, and brand awareness). In two samples ( $N = 263$  and  $N = 278$ ), the convergent and discriminant validity of the personal brand equity scale was established. Finally, the results of a two-wave study ( $N = 249$ ) demonstrated that personal brand equity fully mediates the relationship between career achievement aspiration and perceived employability, with career self-efficacy weakening the relationship between personal brand equity and perceived employability. The new personal brand equity scale offers new opportunities to understand and measure the career behaviors of contemporary employees by considering their personal brand positioning and their career-related outcomes.

Finally, Chapter 5 reports on the results of a study that relates signaling to career outcomes through obtaining certification of completion of massive online open courses (MOOCs); one of the learning alternatives that have become available to millions of people. This chapter examines the role of MOOCs for career outcomes, linking the invested effort in obtaining a certification or completing several courses from the same specialization with perceived employability. In a study among marketing MOOC learners ( $N = 278$ ), the antecedents and outcomes of such invested effort in MOOCs were scrutinized largely drawing on the signaling theory (Spence, 1973). The results indicated that school brand importance and self-promotion were important predictors of invested effort in MOOCs, while learning goal orientation towards MOOCs was not. The invested effort was positively related to signaling of MOOC-related competencies and perceived employability, which, in turn, were positively related to the perceived usefulness of MOOCs in getting a job. The quantitative findings were complemented with 19 semi-structured interviews to provide additional nuances on how the learners pursued MOOC certifications to use the brand of the academic institution in their job search activities.

The last chapter, Chapter 6, comprehensively aggregates the main findings, positioning them amongst a wider theoretical context and highlighting the key contributions to the field. It also discusses the limitation of this dissertation, potential avenues of future research, and relevant implications.

### **1.5 Thesis Research Output**

An overview of the research output of this dissertation is presented in Table 1.1. For each empirical chapter, the table contains the research questions, method, sample, and related journal articles, either published or submitted. Chapters 2-5 were written with the support of my



supervisors. Therefore, I use the first-person plural “we” throughout those chapters to reference the collaborative effort.

Table 1.1

*Thesis Research Output*

Chapter	Title	Method	Sample	Journal publication status
1	Introduction			
2	Personal Branding: Interdisciplinary Systematic Review and Research Agenda	Systematic literature review	Articles on the topic of personal branding ( $N = 100$ )	<b>Published in</b> <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> in 2018
3	Get Noticed to Get Ahead: The Impact of Personal Branding on Career Success	Cross-sectional surveys	MTurk sample ( $N = 1001$ )  Convenience sample, Netherlands ( $N = 263$ )  Convenience sample, China ( $N = 214$ )	<b>Under review at</b> <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>
4	Personal Brand Equity: Scale Development and Validation	Cross-sectional surveys  A time-lagged two-wave survey	MTurk sample ( $N = 1081$ )  Convenience sample ( $N = 263$ )  Students of a large Dutch public university ( $N = 278$ at T1 and $N = 249$ at T2)	<b>Revise and resubmit</b> request from <i>Personnel Psychology</i>

5	More Than a Course: Participation in MOOCs to Signal Professional Value	A cross-sectional survey  Interviews	Marketing MOOC learners at a European business school ( $N = 278$ )  Marketing MOOC learners at a European business school ( $N = 19$ )	<b>Under review at</b> <i>Journal of Business and Psychology</i>
6	Discussion and Conclusions			