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# Chapter 3



### Chapter 3. Get Noticed to Get Ahead: The Impact of Personal Branding on Career Success<sup>2</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

With a growing attention to personal branding, as effective career behavior, little is known about the factors that predict personal branding behaviors and its outcomes. In two studies (N = 477) across two distinctly different cultural contexts (Western and Asian) based on a newly developed and validated scale of personal branding, we examine the antecedents and outcomes of personal branding. The findings confirm that personal branding leads to greater career satisfaction, fully mediated by perceived employability. Career achievement aspiration was the strongest predictor of engaging in personal branding, while career feedback negatively related to personal branding intention and 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.

*Keywords:* personal branding, self-presentation, career

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### 3.1 Introduction

The contemporary employment environment and more flexible work arrangements require from individuals to become much more market oriented (Lair et al., 2005; Manai & Holmlund, 2015). One concept that captures such personal marketing orientation is *personal branding*, which refers to “a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery” (Gorbatov, Khapova, & Lysova, 2018, p. 6). Research shows that personal branding helps individuals to attain positive career outcomes, among which are social capital (Gandini, 2016; Paivi & Back, 2017; Tarnovskaya, 2017), financial rewards (Close et al., 2011; Rangarajan et al., 2017), and career opportunities (Parmentier et al., 2013; Schlosser et al., 2017).

Increasingly, individuals today do their work through the Internet (e.g., gig-work), where “self-branding in the knowledge economy is a device for self-promotion for the pursuit of self-realization” (Gandini, 2016, p. 124). This global trend of digitalization for many career seekers means an opportunity to offer their skills and competencies globally and across boundaries of industries and organizations. This is done through personal branding, or in other words, through making one’s individual value proposition known to the target audience. As a concept, personal branding comes from the marketing literature (Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005). Although it is still considered to be a new concept, there are already more than 100 papers published on the topic of personal branding in the organizational behavior literature (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Yet, none of this research gives a clear answer to the question what the antecedents and outcomes of personal branding are in the career context. Addressing this research gap is urgent and relevant

given a growing number of individuals who engage in proactive personal branding behaviors on the Internet and, specifically, social media.

In this paper, we aim to fill this research gap by developing and testing a model of antecedents and outcomes of personal branding in the Western and Asian cultural contexts. First, we developed a personal branding scale and then, in Study 1, we cross-validated this measure and explored the relationship between personal branding and its outcomes (i.e. perceived employability and career satisfaction). In Study 2, building on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), we examined the antecedents of personal branding.

Thus, epistemologically, we extend the extant career theory to incorporate personal branding as an increasingly important career tool in the contemporary digitalized work environment. Second, we explore the ontology of the relationships between personal branding and other related concepts, such as career aspiration, employability, and career satisfaction. Finally, we make a methodological contribution by developing and validating a personal branding scale, enabling future research in the field.

## **3.2 Theoretical Background**

### **3.2.1 Personal Branding**

The concept of personal branding originated in marketing research (Keller, 1993; Keller & Lehmann, 2006) and since then entered the field of organizational and vocational studies as a type of proactive work behavior (Crant, 2000, p. 436). The definition of personal branding establishes it as a proactive work behavior that employs marketing strategies and tactics to achieve career benefits in three distinct ways: strategic, differentiated, and technology-based. First, while some other self-presentation behaviors from the same nomological field, such as impression management, may be both conscious and unconscious (Bolino et al., 2016), personal

branding is strategic, which means that the activities are coordinated and point in a defined direction, targeting a specific audience. Second, effective personal branding achieves differentiation of the marketed self, conveying valued and unique individual characteristics against the competition or the frame of reference. It signals benefits or communicates a promise to deliver an outcome valued by others, while fitting into the expectations of a field (Parmentier et al., 2013). In the studies of human behavior, this is known as “optimal distinctiveness”, or the competing needs for assimilation and inclusion and the need for differentiation from the in-group (Brewer, 1991; Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010). Finally, personal branding today heavily relies on technology as the primary vehicle to convey imagery (e.g., logo, photos, and work samples) and related storytelling to the target audience. Textual and visual performances make personal branding tangible and real (Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Pera et al., 2016), resulting in a stream of studies examining the use of technology for personal branding, such as LinkedIn profile photos (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018; van der Land et al., 2016), Facebook profiles (Labrecque et al., 2011), Instagram photos (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), YouTube channels (Chen, 2013), academic portals ResearchGate and Mendeley (Van Noorden, 2014), and Twitter activity (Brems et al., 2017; Hedman, 2017). Technology also allows career seekers estimate the effectiveness of personal branding activities, which is essential for sense-making and applying any corrective measures, when necessary.

In sum, personal branding as an intentional individual career behavior emerged in response to the increasing emergence of new communication technologies in all parts of people’s lives and work, as well as the changes in the labor market and the employer-employee relationship (Vallas & Christin, 2018). In these new forms of employment, personal branding is an important factor of career success (Gioia et al., 2014; Parmentier et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2005)

as an adaptable career behavior aimed at packaging and presenting one's professional identity to meet the needs of the target audience.

### **3.2.2 Personal Branding and Career Outcomes**

Traditionally, career outcomes have been conceptualized as career success including largely objective and, to a lesser extent, subjective facets. As such, career success is defined as “the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person's work experiences over time” (Arthur et al., 2005, p. 179). This traditional conceptualization of career outcomes is relevant for employees who work in a single company during their whole employment (Wang & Wanberg, 2017). Today, however, individuals move from firm to firm and from job to a job frequently, as well as find themselves in novel employment relationships, such as freelancing (Kuhn, 2016; van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2013), temporary and contract working conditions (Davis-Blake & Uzzi, 1993), and *recareering*, or mid- and late-career changes (Rice, 2015; Robertson, 2017; Wöhrmann, Deller, & Wang, 2014). Therefore, career outcome criteria other than objective career success, are more important to contemporary workers.

Career satisfaction is an important subjective career outcome, shown to be the result of processes requiring agency in managing one's career, such as career self-management (King, 2004), impression management (Cheng, Chiu, Chang, & Johnstone, 2014), and career adaptability (Rudolph, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017). For example, studying 195 employee-supervisor dyads from various industries in Taiwan, Cheng et al. (2014) showed that self-promotion behaviors led to greater career satisfaction, compared to those who did not employ such behaviors. Since personal branding and self-promotion are self-presentation behaviors, we hypothesize that personal branding will also be positively related to career satisfaction.



*Hypothesis 1a:* Personal branding is positively related to career satisfaction.

Perceived employability, defined as “one’s ability to identify and realize career opportunities” (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004, p. 23), is also considered to be one of the leading career outcomes of contemporary employees. In line with the employability research, and with its focus on the individual positive assessment of his/her marketability on the external and internal job markets, we propose that efforts made in promoting oneself through personal branding will lead to higher perceived employability. One of the central processes in personal branding is constructing the desired professional image of self, and there is evidence that clarity of professional self positively impacts employability (Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, & Tims, 2018).

*Hypothesis 1b:* Personal branding is positively related to perceived employability.

Furthermore, perceived employability is expected to mediate the relationship between personal branding and higher career satisfaction. This is supported by recent findings that employability is positively related to career satisfaction. For example, studies have shown that career satisfaction is an outcome of both career adaptability (Rudolph et al., 2017) and a stronger sense of professional identity (McKevitt, Carbery, & Lyons, 2017). The mediating effect of employability of the relationship between emotional self-efficacy and career satisfaction was examined, for example, by Dacre Pool and Qualter (2013), who found that employability mediated the relationship between emotional self-efficacy and career satisfaction. Besides, personal branding has a signaling function. By communicating one’s professional value, individuals can reduce the information asymmetry problem in the labor market to their advantage (Zinko & Rubin, 2015) to achieve the desired differentiation, as signaling is positively related with career success (Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, & Wiethoff, 2010). Finally, people who engage

in personal branding have high social capital (Bourdieu, 1993), as they engage in such activities as communicating own value proposition or informing others of personal achievements. Social capital was found to be positively related to career success (Caro Castaño, 2017; Delisle & Parmentier, 2016; Parmentier et al., 2013). Seibert et al. (2001) demonstrated how greater social capital in the form of access to information, access to resources, and career sponsorship leads to increased career satisfaction.

*Hypothesis 1c:* Perceived employability mediates the relationship between personal branding and career satisfaction.

To test the hypotheses, we developed a measurement of personal branding and conducted two studies. The purpose of Study 1 was to explore the relationship between personal branding, perceived employability, and career satisfaction, while cross-validating the new measurement instrument; and we examined the antecedents of personal branding in Study 2.

### **3.3 Personal Branding Measurement Development**

#### **3.3.1 Method**

We constructed the scales to measure personal branding, using the Likert method as described by Dawis (1987). Drawing from the construct definition, we collected a pool of 39 items (15 for strategic, 11 for differentiated, and 13 for technologically savvy) that were reviewed for clarity and content validity by an industrial and organizational psychologist and a marketing professor (the full list can be obtained from the corresponding author). All items were answered using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

We recruited 1,001 participants on the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform, where they completed the survey for pay. Since Fokkema and Greiff (2017) advised against performing EFA and CFA on the same sample, we split the sample into two to perform the exploratory (EFA) and

confirmatory (CFA) factor analyses separately according to employment status to establish that the scale works well for both workers and job seekers. We split the sample by the employment status of the respondents to examine whether the EFA and CFA results would be consistent across these different groups.

### ***3.3.1.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis***

We conducted the EFA on the population of the sample who were not in full employment ( $N = 204$ ); female = 54,9%; average age = 33; US (97 cases, 47.5%), India (60 cases, 29.4%), with the rest of the countries not exceeding 5% of the total sample. The employment status of the respondents was as follows: employed, part time = 72.5%, not employed, looking for work = 14.7%, not employed, not looking for work = 7.4%, retired = 4.9%, disabled, not able to work = .5%. We used principal factor analysis with promax rotation (Osborne & Fitzpatrick, 2012) in SPSS to examine the potential factor structure of the scale. We iteratively removed the items with loadings  $< .35$ , as well as items that cross-loaded  $> .35$  two or more factors.

### ***3.3.1.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis***

CFA was performed on the employed population of the Mechanical Turk sample ( $N = 797$ ): female = 44.5%; average age = 33; US = 56.2%, India = 35.8%, other countries not exceeding 2%. In a conservative approach, we used seven indices to assess model fit (Noar, 2003; Schreiber, Nora, Stage, Barlow, & King, 2006): Chi-square/ $df$  ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ ); relative fit indices – normed fit index (NFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker Lewis index (TLI); comparative fit index (CFI); and parsimony-adjusted measures – root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and  $p$  of close fit ( $P_{close}$ ).

To demonstrate the equivalence of all items designed to measure personal branding across various samples, we performed invariance testing of the scale by analyzing the differences

across genders in the unconstrained, constrained measurement weights, constrained structural covariances, and fully constrained models.

### 3.3.2 Results

The EFA yielded a three-factor structure comprised of 18 items. The Cronbach’s alphas for the three factors were, respectively, .80, .83, and .90 – above the acceptable cut off point of .70 (J. C. Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Together, the three factors explained 58.7% of the variance, with correlations among them of .46, .53 and .61 ( $p < .001$ ), supporting their distinctiveness.

The initial CFA on the employed part of the sample confirmed the three-factor model, although the fit of the three-factor model was acceptable ( $\chi^2/df = 4.02$ ; NFI = .92; IFI = .94; TLI = .93; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .06;  $P_{close} < .001$ ). The standardized regression weights for all items were greater than .50. Table 3.1 summarizes the EFA and CFA outcomes.

Table 3.1

#### *Personal branding scale items and their factor loadings*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b><math>\lambda</math></b>	<b><math>\alpha_1</math></b>	<b><math>\alpha_2</math></b>
Strategic	1. I purposefully engage in experiences that can enhance my professional image.	.76	.80	.83
	2. I make an effort to expand my professional network.	.72		
	3. I have established routines to communicate my professional image to my network.	.68		
	4. I actively develop my professional image.	.66		
	5. I proactively adjust my professional image to manage expectations of the target audience.	.59		
	6. I am strategic in the type of information I communicate about myself.	.54		
Differentiated	7. I proactively seek the endorsement of others to promote the quality of my work.	.73	.83	.81
	8. I make an effort to have a distinct profile compared to others in my professional area.	.68		

	9. I make my successes known to my professional network.	.67		
	10. I make an effort to present myself differently from my peers.	.64		
	11. I consistently communicate that I deliver valuable work.	.58		
	12. I make sure that what I do is recognizable.	.58		
Technologically savvy	13. I use data to estimate my impact on my professional network.	.79	.90	.89
	14. I use online tools and metrics to evaluate how others see me professionally.	.77		
	15. I systematically analyze the effectiveness of my personal branding activities.	.76		
	16. I actively communicate about my professional activities on social media.	.75		
	17. I ensure that my online educational and/or professional profiles are complete (informative, engaging, have photos).	.74		
	18. I post online samples or descriptions of my work projects.	.66		

*Notes:*  $\lambda$  = standardized regression weight (all  $p$ 's < .001);  $\alpha_1$  = Cronbach's alpha for the factor in the EFA study;  $\alpha_2$  = Cronbach's alpha for the factor in the CFA study.

The scalar invariance testing returned  $p$  values greater than .05 in all instances when the measurement weights, structural covariances and measurement residuals were constrained (Table 3.2). This allowed us to reject the null hypothesis that there are statistically significant variances in the measurement model across genders.

Table 3.2

*Invariance testing*

<b>Model</b>	<b>df</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>p</b>	<b>CFI</b>	<b>NFI</b>	<b>IFI</b>	<b>TLI</b>
1. Unconstrained model				.95	.92	.95	.94
Measurement weights	15	14.86	.46				
Structural covariances	21	26.36	.19				
Measurement residuals	44	46.80	.36				
2. Constrained measurement weights				.95	.92	.95	.95
Structural covariances	6	11.51	.07				
Measurement residuals	29	31.94	.32				
3. Constrained structural covariances				.95	.91	.95	.95
Measurement residuals	23	20.43	.62				

*Note.*  $N = 797$ . CFI = comparative fit index; NFI = normed fit index, IFI = incremental fit index, TLI = Tucker Lewis index.

Throughout the subsequent studies, we continue to establish the predictive validity of the personal branding scale.

### 3.4 Study 1

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between the outcome measures of personal branding, while testing the newly developed personal branding scale to establish its external validity.

### **3.4.1 Study 1 Method**

#### ***3.4.1.1 Participants***

We collected 306 responses via an online survey that was distributed by two master students at a large public university in the Netherlands to people in their networks (e.g., classmates, friends, professional contacts, etc.). After the initial data analysis, 43 responses were removed because of inconsistent or acquiescing responding, or missing values, which resulted in an analyzable sample of 263 cases (female = 58.6%; Mean Age = 27 (SD = 9.5); the Netherlands = 71.9%, China = 23.2%; Employed part-time = 45.6%, full-time = 30%, not employed, not looking for work = 14.8%, not employed, looking for work = 8.4%; Sixty-five percent had five years of work experience or less).

#### ***3.4.1.2 Measures***

Answers to all variables were given on a 5-point scale with answers ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

*Personal branding* was measured by the 18-item scale developed in this paper. Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was .87. The alphas for the three factors of the scale (strategic, differentiated, and technologically savvy) were .77, .73, and .83, respectively. As we are interested in overall personal branding behavior rather than its subfactors, we chose to stay at the higher scale level.

*Perceived employability* was measured with the 5-item scale developed by Berntson and Marklund (2007). An example item is "My experience is in demand on the labor market". Cronbach's alpha is .76.

*Career satisfaction* was measured with a 4-item scale by Turban and Dougherty (1994). An example item is “Given my age, my career is on or ahead of schedule”. Cronbach’s alpha is .83.

We used gender and age as control variables, given earlier findings that men and women approach personal branding differently (Lobpries, Bennett, & Brison, 2018; Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018) and an assumption that there will be variance across generations in the abilities to strategically differentiate self in the labor market and the technological savvy to do so effectively online (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009).

#### ***3.4.1.3 Analytical Strategy***

The analyses were performed in two steps using the AMOS software (Arbuckle, 2017). In the first step, the measurement model was tested. We performed a series of CFAs to establish the discriminant validity of the constructs in the model. In the second step, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the theoretical model, using the maximum likelihood method of estimation. To assess the fit of the models, we used the following measures:  $\chi^2/df$ , CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). To estimate the indirect effects, accounting for multivariate non-normality of the data, we used bootstrapping technique with 5,000 bootstrapping samples and 95% confidence intervals (Kline, 2016; Preacher, Zyphur, & Zhang, 2010). Bootstrapping does not assume the sampling distribution as normal and performs iterative resampling analyses, resulting in more accurate confidence intervals of indirect effects, deriving the estimates of the parameters of the model strictly from the sample (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).



### 3.4.2 Study 1 Results

#### 3.4.2.1 Measurement Model

The measurement model, including three latent variables (i.e. personal branding, perceived employability, and career satisfaction), showed an acceptable fit to the data:  $\chi^2 = 529.40$ ,  $df = 315$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.68$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .05 ( $P_{close} = .41$ ), SRMR = .06. This model's fit was better than the fit of the model, where all the variables loaded on one latent factor ( $\chi^2 = 773.32$ ,  $df = 318$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.43$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .81, TLI = .78, RMSEA = .07 ( $P_{close} < .001$ ), SRMR = .11;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 243.92$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .001$ ). All the items had significant loadings on the intended factors (range  $\lambda = .41 - .86$ ,  $p$ 's  $< 0.001$ ).

#### 3.4.2.2 Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among all the study variables are shown in Table 3.3. Contrary to our expectations, neither age nor gender had significant correlations with any of the dependent variables, therefore we continued with the analyses without these measures. Personal branding was moderately correlated with perceived employability ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and weakly correlated with career satisfaction ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating a more distal relationship with the latter. As expected, perceived employability was significantly correlated with career satisfaction ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Table 3.3

*Study 1 variables means, standard deviations (SD), and correlations.*

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	1.59	.49	-				
2. Age	27.25	9.49	-.16*	-			
3. Personal branding	3.22	0.53	-.07	.07	<b>.87</b>		

4. Perceived employability	3.50	0.60	-.05	.06	.48**	<b>.76</b>	
5. Career satisfaction	3.52	0.74	.01	.04	.28**	.48**	<b>.83</b>

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ ,  $N = 263$ . Cronbach's alphas in bold on the diagonal.

### 3.4.2.3 Hypotheses Testing

The mediation model where personal branding influences career satisfaction via perceived employability showed an acceptable fit to the data:  $\chi^2 = 529.40$ ,  $df = 315$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.68$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .05 ( $P_{close} = .41$ ), SRMR = .06. We tested two alternative models: A full mediation model, and a model, where perceived employability impacts career satisfaction via personal branding (i.e. personal branding is a mediator). The full mediation model was not significantly different from the baseline partial mediation one:  $\chi^2 = 530.70$ ,  $df = 316$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.68$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .05 ( $P_{close} = .41$ ), SRMR = .06;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 1.3$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .254$ . The model with personal branding as a mediator showed a poorer fit:  $\chi^2 = 575.82$ ,  $df = 316$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.82$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .89, TLI = .88, RMSEA = .06 ( $P_{close} = .08$ ), SRMR = .07;  $\Delta\chi^2 = 46.42$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ . Therefore, we proceeded with the analyses on the baseline model.

We proposed that personal branding is positively related to perceived employability and career satisfaction via perceived employability. In line with these hypotheses, the SEM results indicated that personal branding positively and significantly related to perceived employability ( $\gamma = .61$ ,  $p < .001$ ), perceived employability positively and significantly related to career satisfaction ( $\beta = .70$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the relationship between personal branding and career satisfaction, when accounted for perceived employability, was non-significant ( $\gamma = -.11$ ,  $p = .34$ ). The model indicated a significant indirect effect of personal branding on career satisfaction

through perceived employability (*indirect effect* = .63, 95% BCa CI [.36; 1.16],  $p < .001$ ), as graphically represented in Figure 3.1. Thus, Hypotheses 1 a-c were supported.

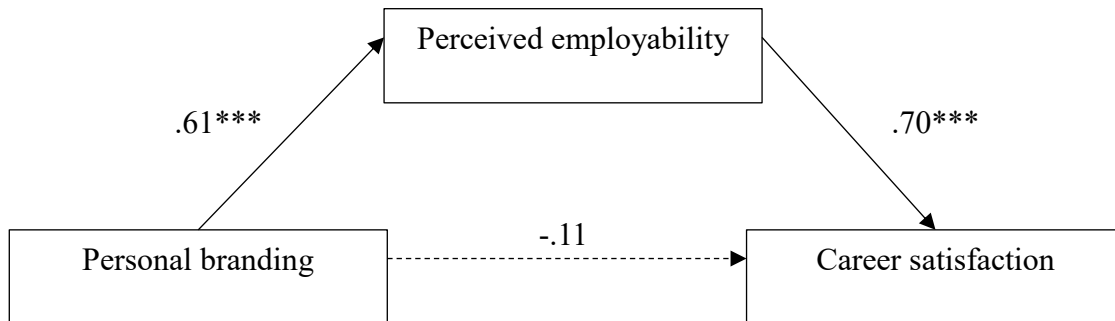


Figure 3.1. Final mediation model showing the positive casual effect of personal branding on career satisfaction is mediated by one’s perceived employability (Study 1). Regression results are reported as standardized betas. \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ . Nonsignificant relationships shown as dotted lines. This model explains 43% of the variance ( $R^2 = .43$ , 95% CI [.24; .61]).

### 3.4.3 Study 1 Discussion

The findings of Study 1 show that, in line with our hypotheses, personal branding had a positive and significant indirect effect on career satisfaction via perceived employability. It means that, by itself, personal branding does not impact satisfaction with one’s career. However, personal branding implies taking proactive career-enhancing steps and clarifying the desired professional future self in the future (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012), which are positively related to perceived employability, which, in turn, is proven to lead to greater career satisfaction.

### 3.5 Study 2

Having established the positive relationship of personal branding and perceived employability, the aim of the second study was to focus on the antecedents of personal branding. Given that the relationship between perceived employability and career satisfaction is well-studied and described in many papers (Dacre Pool & Qualter, 2013; De Vos, De Hauw, & Van

der Heijden, 2011; Lo Presti, Pluviano, & Briscoe, 2018), we left only perceived employability as the outcome of personal branding for the sake of model simplicity.

To understand the reasons why individuals may engage in personal branding, we framed its antecedents in the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991). The TPB posits that in order for a behavior to be performed, three determinants of intention must be satisfied: attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). These determinants strengthen or weaken the *behavioral intention*, which, in turn, predicts the enactment of that behavior.

First, the attitude towards engaging in personal branding to achieve greater career success must be positive. Such attitude is encapsulated in the concept of *career achievement aspiration* (Gregor & O'Brien, 2016). While some authors allow a possibility of personal branding for other purposes, such as dating (Labrecque et al., 2011), the literature conclusively suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in personal branding when they perceive a career-related benefit. Those, who are motivated by advancing own career, are more likely to use personal branding as a career tool. Gregor and O'Brien (2016) suggest achievement, leadership, and educational factors of career aspiration, but given the diversity of career experiences where individuals may apply personal branding, we will focus only on career achievement aspiration.

Second, the subjective norm refers to the social pressure on the individuals to progress in their careers. Getting improvement feedback is known to lead to a variety of positive career outcomes, such as job performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, (Whitaker & Levy, 2012), and job satisfaction (Anseel & Lievens, 2007). Hence, getting feedback on how someone should go about positioning herself professionally should increase the intention to engage in personal branding.

Third, perceived behavioral control, as an individual's beliefs about the easy or difficulty of performing a particular behavior, is theorized in our research as *career self-efficacy* (Day & Allen, 2004). When an individual feels in charge of own career and feels able to execute the desired career behaviors well, the likelihood of engaging in personal branding increases. Ajzen (1991) posited that “perceived behavioral control, together with behavioral intention, can be used directly to predict behavioral achievement” (p. 184). This makes us conclude that career self-efficacy combined with the intention to engage in personal branding will lead to doing so, and career self-efficacy will also have a direct effect on personal branding.

While thinking about doing something is not the same as the action itself, Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) asserted that the best predictor of engaging in a behavior is the intention to do so. We, therefore, hypothesize that people will engage in personal branding if they have a strong intention to do so.

*Hypothesis 2:* (a) career achievement aspiration, (b) career feedback, and (c) career self-efficacy are positively related to personal branding intention.

*Hypothesis 3:* Career self-efficacy is positively related to personal branding.

*Hypothesis 4:* Personal branding intention is positively related to personal branding.

*Hypothesis 5:* Personal branding intention mediates the relationship between (a) career achievement aspiration, (b) career feedback, (c) career self-efficacy and personal branding.

The role of self-efficacy, proactive personality, personal initiative, and feedback seeking in driving proactive behaviors has been extensively discussed (Crant, 2000). We hypothesize that similar concepts, such as those studied in this paper, will have the same mechanisms of action when applied to proactive career behaviors, such as personal branding. And, as established in

Study 1, personal branding is strongly related to perceived employability. We, therefore, expect that its antecedents will have a positive indirect effect on perceived employability too.

*Hypothesis 6:* Personal branding intention and then personal branding sequentially mediate the relationship between (a) career achievement aspiration, (b) career feedback, and (c) career self-efficacy and perceived employability.

### **3.5.1 Study 2 Method**

#### ***3.5.1.1 Participants***

Participants were recruited via the researchers' networks, e.g. LinkedIn and WeChat, popular in China, and were encouraged to ask their colleagues to also participate using a standardized invitation about the project and a link to the survey. 249 responses were collected. After the visual and boxplot analyses, 35 responses were removed, resulting in an analyzable sample of 214 cases, containing no missing data (female = 65.4%; Mean Age = 36.7 ( $SD = 11.40$ ); China = 88.8%, the Netherlands = 6.5%, Germany = 1.9%; bachelor degree = 57.5%, master's = 15.9%, high school = 11.2%, college = 10.3%, Ph.D. = 3.3%, secondary school = 1.9%; Employed full-time = 75.7%, part-time = 5.1%, not employed, looking for work = 13.6%, not employed, not looking for work = 2.3%; Thirty-eight percent had five years of work experience or less).

#### ***3.5.1.2 Measures***

The survey items were translated into Mandarin Chinese following the back-translation procedure (Sperber, Devellis, & Boehlecke, 1994). The only exception was the career feedback scale, the original version of which was provided to us already in Chinese by the scale authors. Responses to all the statements in this study were provided on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

*Personal branding.* We used the same 18 items as in Study 1 to assess personal branding. Chronbach's alpha was .90. The alphas for the three factors of the scale (strategic, differentiated, and technologically savvy) were .82, .76, and .88, respectively. As we are interested in overall personal branding behavior rather than its subfactors, we chose to stay at the higher scale level.

*Personal branding intention* was measured with two modified items similar to the ones used in a study of pro-environmental behavior based on the TPB (de Leeuw, Valois, Ajzen, & Schmidt, 2015). The items "I am determined to engage in personal branding behaviors on a regular basis" and "I have the will to engage in personal branding behaviors on a regular basis" were sufficiently highly correlated to demonstrate the stability of this scale ( $r = .82, p < .001$ ). We provided the definition of personal branding, used in this paper, to the respondents before they answered these questions.

*Perceived employability.* We employed the same 5-item scale to assess perceived employability. Cronbach's alpha was .89.

*Career achievement aspiration* was measured with a 6-item scale developed by Kim et al. (2016) for their studies of college women in Korea. As they voiced concerns around using reverse-scored items in studies in intercultural context, we chose to follow their advice to use a shorter scale vs. the original 8-item scale (Gregor & O'Brien, 2016), as it demonstrated good reliability and validity in that Korean study. An example item is "I plan to obtain many promotions in my organization or business". Cronbach's alpha was .87.

*Career feedback* was measured with the 4-item of the career improvement subscale of the career goal feedback scale (Hu, Creed, & Hood, 2017). A distinguishing feature of this scale is that the items are negatively worded, and hence were reverse-scored for the analysis. An example

item is “I do not get helpful advice from others about how I can reach my career goals”. Cronbach’s alpha was .91.

*Career self-efficacy* was measured by the 7-item scale developed by Dobrow and Higgings (2005). An example item is “I believe that I can do what I need to do in order to make my career successful”. Cronbach’s alpha was .92.

### ***3.5.1.3 Analytical Strategy***

The model in Figure 3.2 was tested in two steps, similar to the strategy of analysis employed in Study 1. There were differences in how we executed Step 2. We performed the SEM-analysis on a partial disaggregation model (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998) by creating parcels of items as suggested by Little et al. (2013). A large number of items can cause parameter instability related to the possibility of multiple solutions, cross-loadings, and correlated residuals, especially in a small sample such as ours (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). Parceling results in more stable model solutions, improves the variable to sample ratio, remedies small sample sizes, decreases the likelihood of correlated residuals and dual factor loadings, and reduces type I errors in the item correlations (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998; Little et al., 2013). To estimate the indirect effects and mitigate the impact of multivariate non-normality of the data, we used the same bootstrapping procedures as in Study 1.

## **3.5.2 Study 2 Results**

### ***3.5.2.1 Measurement Model***

In order to test the factor structure of our model, we tested several measurement models with the parcels tapping the six latent variables (career achievement aspiration, career feedback, career self-efficacy, personal branding intention, personal branding, and perceived employability). Since some of the alternative models had comparable fit indices and degrees of



freedom, we employed Akaike’s information criterion (AIC) index for the proposed and alternative models (Bozdogan, 1987). The AIC is useful for model comparison as it favors the more parsimonious models, while providing no information on the fit of a particular model. In general, the model with the lowest AIC is considered to have the best fit. As shown in Table 3.4, the measurement model with six latent factors showed the best fit to the data, and therefore was chosen for further analyses. All the items had significant loadings on the intended factors (range  $\lambda = .64 - .94, p$ 's  $< .001$ ).

Table 3.4

*Goodness of fit and comparative indices of the proposed and alternative measurement models (Study 2)*

<b>Model</b>	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	$\chi^2/df$	<b>CFI</b>	<b>TLI</b>	<b>SRMR</b>	<b>RMSEA</b>	<b>AIC</b>
Six-factor	188.07	89	2.11	.96	.94	.05	.07*	282.07
Five-factor	270.20	94	2.87	.93	.90	.07	.09	354.20
Four-factor	533.30	98	5.44	.81	.77	.10	.14	609.30
Three-factor	688.00	101	6.81	.75	.70	.11	.17	758.00
Two-factor	763.43	103	7.41	.72	.67	.11	.17	829.43
One-factor	882.77	104	8.48	.67	.62	.11	.19	946.78

*Notes:*  $\chi^2$  values are at  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA values are at  $P_{close} < .001$  except \*  $P_{close} = .007$ .

All the chi-square differences against the baseline seven-factor model significant at  $p < .001$ .

### **3.5.2.2 Descriptive Statistics**

Table 3.5 presents the variables means, standard deviations (SD), correlations and reliability measures of the scales. Personal branding, as expected, was highly and significantly correlated with other career-related constructs: perceived employability ( $r = .60, p < .001$ ), career

achievement aspiration ( $r = .57, p < .001$ ), and career self-efficacy ( $r = .56, p < .001$ ), which provides support for convergent validity of the personal branding scale.

Table 3.5

*Study 2 variables means (M), standard deviations (SD), and correlations.*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
1. Personal branding	3.47	0.59	<b>.90</b>					
2. Personal branding intention	3.38	0.94	.62**	<b>.82</b>				
3. Perceived employability	3.56	0.70	.61**	.58**	<b>.89</b>			
4. Career achievement aspiration	3.77	0.72	.57**	.55**	.71**	<b>.87</b>		
5. Career feedback	2.84	0.94	-.25**	-.31**	-.24**	-.09	<b>.91</b>	
6. Career self-efficacy	3.81	0.60	.56**	.46**	.64**	.63**	-.19**	<b>.92</b>

*Notes: N = 214; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ . The Cronbach's alphas are in bold on the diagonal.*

### 3.5.2.3 Hypotheses Testing

To identify the best model for the analyses, we compared the fit of several theoretically plausible models. Model 1 tested the originally hypothesized relationships as depicted in Figure 1. In Model 2, we tested the full mediation model between career self-efficacy and personal branding. In Model 3, we added direct paths from all the antecedents to personal branding. In Model 4, we removed a direct path between career feedback and personal branding. In Model 5, we tested full mediation between all the antecedent variables and personal branding. As we see from the results of the models testing (Table 3.6), Model 3 demonstrated both the lowest AIC and the better fit indices across the baseline and the alternative models tested, and it was

significantly different from the baseline model ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 19.24$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Hence, we proceeded with testing the model represented in Figure 3.2.

Table 3.6

*Goodness of fit and comparative indices of the proposed and alternative models (Study 2)*

<b>Model</b>	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	$\chi^2/df$	<b>CFI</b>	<b>TLI</b>	<b>SRMR</b>	<b>RMSEA</b>	<b>AIC</b>
Model 1	245.23	95	2.58	.94	.92	.06	.08	327.23
Model 2	307.40	96	3.20	.91	.88	.11	.10	387.40
Model 3	225.99	93	2.43	.94	.93	.05	.08	311.99
Model 4	229.16	94	2.44	.94	.93	.05	.08	313.16
Model 5	307.40	96	3.20	.91	.88	.11	.10	387.40

*Notes:* RMSEA values are at  $P_{close} < .001$ . All the chi-square differences among the four models significant at  $p < .001$ , except for the difference between Models 3 and 4 ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 3.17$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .07$ ).

The hypothesized structural model did explain variance in personal branding intention ( $R^2 = 48.4\%$ ), in personal branding ( $R^2 = 88.1\%$ ), and in perceived employability ( $R^2 = 76.8\%$ ). Career achievement aspiration was positively related to personal branding intention ( $\gamma = .58$ ,  $p < .001$ ), career feedback was negatively related ( $\gamma = -.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while the relationship between career self-efficacy and personal branding intention was not significant ( $\gamma = .04$ ,  $p = .69$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 2a was supported, while 2b and 2c were not. Career self-efficacy was positively related to personal branding ( $\gamma = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 3. The analyses provided support to Hypothesis 4 that personal branding intention is positively related to personal branding ( $\beta = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Testing the mediating effects of personal branding intention, we found that career achievement aspiration had a significant indirect effect on

personal branding (*indirect effect* = .11, 95% CI [.11; .44]). The indirect effect of career feedback was significant but negligible (*indirect effect* = -.04, 95% CI [-.08; -.01]), and that of career self-efficacy was not significant (*indirect effect* = .01, 95% CI [-.05; .06]). Thus, Hypotheses 5a and 5b were supported, while Hypothesis 5c was not. Estimating the effects of sequential mediation between the antecedents and perceived employability, we found that career achievement aspiration indirectly positively influenced perceived employability via personal branding aspiration indirectly positively influenced perceived employability via personal branding intention and personal branding (*indirect effect* = .16, 95% CI [.08; .27]), while career feedback had a negligible negative effect (*indirect effect* = -.06, 95% CI [-.11; -.02]) and career self-efficacy had a non-significant effect (*indirect effect* = .01, 95% CI [-.07; .08]). These results support Hypothesis 6a and do not support Hypotheses 6b and 6c.

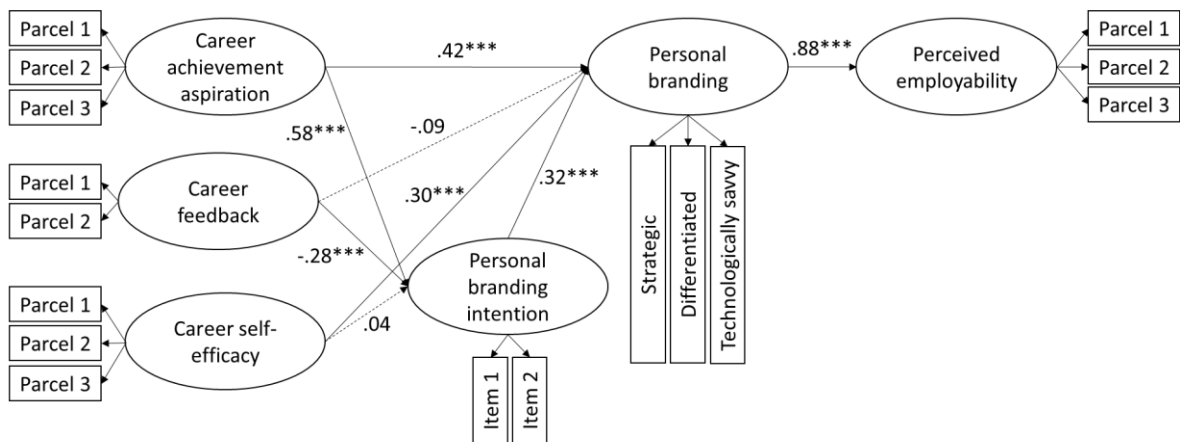


Figure 3.2. Maximum likelihood estimates for the personal branding model. Solid lines indicate significant paths; dashed lines indicate non-significant paths. Standardized beta weights are reported.  $N = 214$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Additionally, we estimated the indirect effects of career achievement aspiration and career self-efficacy on perceived employability via personal branding. The results indicated

significant positive relationships: *indirect effect* = .36, 95% CI [.15; .63] and *indirect effect* = .30, 95% CI [.04; .46], respectively.

### **3.5.3 Study 2 Discussion**

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine the antecedents of personal branding. Career achievement aspiration was the strongest predictor of the personal branding intention. Thus, the attitudinal disposition, as explained by the TPB, is the leading indicator for the personal branding behavior. Career achievement aspiration was also strongly related to personal branding, eventually leading to greater perceived employability, confirming the importance of attitudinal disposition for proactive career behavior.

We observe that the societal norm around personal branding has not been settled yet, especially outside the Western contexts (Phua & Caras, 2008; Saleem & Iglesias Bedós, 2013), which could explain the negative relationship between career feedback and personal branding intention. Those who receive a lot of career advice (and, therefore, enjoy career help from own network) may have a lower need to engage in personal branding. Our results are consistent with previous studies: A negative relationship was found between feedback on improvement needed and career exploration (Hu, Hood, & Creed, 2018), and a positive relationship between negative career feedback and career goal disengagement and lowering career goals (Hu, Creed, & Hood, 2019). Additionally, we can suppose that people receive and act upon career feedback from more experienced contacts who were likely to become successful in the traditional career models. Therefore, it is plausible to suppose that personal branding is not career advice that people get, and since ignoring the advisors' recommendations carries relational penalties for the seekers (Blunden, Logg, Brooks, John, & Gino, 2019), they do not engage in personal branding as an action competing for time and resources to whatever other advice is received.

Lastly, personal branding is still an emerging career competence (Gorbatov et al., 2018) requiring specific competencies and skills, such as technological, metacognitive, creative and critical (Lorgnier & O'Rourke, 2011). Yet, career success still can be achieved via traditional mechanisms, especially within organizations (McDonald & Hite, 2005). This could explain the nonsignificant relationship between career self-efficacy and the personal branding intention (it was measured with two items specifically asking about the intent to perform personal branding activities). However, given significant indirect effect of career self-efficacy on perceived employability through personal branding, we can conclude that people do engage in personal branding but may not call it that way.

### **3.6 General Discussion**

To better understand predictors and outcomes of personal branding, we conducted two studies, drawing on the contemporary career theory (Arthur, 2008), proactive behavior literature (Crant, 2000; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001), and the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). The studies tested the antecedents and outcomes of personal branding, providing quantitative evidence for its important role for individual career success in the context of contemporary work environment.

#### **3.6.1 Theoretical Implications**

With this paper we attempted to expand our collective knowledge of proactive career behaviors, such as personal branding, in the context of contemporary work relations. As the notion of career success changes to be seen as a dynamic, context-dependent social construction (Dries, Pepermans, & Carlier, 2008), we tried to address the need to examine the relationship between the contemporary view of career success and personal branding that has become “a prominent feature of the labor market, whether in face-to-face settings or in online platforms” (Vallas & Christin, 2018, p. 12). We were inspired by prior research to do so: Roberts (2005)

indicated that further research was needed on the “bottom-up tactics” in today’s work environment, Wang and Wanberg (2017) specifically called for more empirical studies of the consequences of engaging in the “gig economy”, while Sullivan and Baruch (2009) urged to extend the career research beyond the Western context.

We also hoped to advance the career theory by examining the ontology of the relationships between personal branding and other career phenomena. In application of the TPB, we focused on the individual drivers leading to personal branding. Earlier research identified other attitudinal antecedents for constructing a positive personal reputation, such as desire for rewards or need to belong (Zinko & Rubin, 2015). Our findings that the attitudinal predisposition, namely career achievement aspiration, was the principal antecedent to personal branding in our study adds to the understanding of why people engage in personal branding. In both studies, personal branding was positively related to perceived employability and career satisfaction, both of which are measures of career success (Arthur et al., 2005; Boudreau, Boswell, & Judge, 2001; Greenhaus, Callanan, & DiRenzo, 2008; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005).

Finally, by providing a generic, reliable and valid scale to measure personal branding we hope to encourage other scholars in the field to partake in personal branding research. Given the changes in the way people work today that we mentioned in the introduction, more quantitative research is needed to understand how workers and job seekers construct, package, and present their work identities to the target audiences.

### **3.6.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This study has several limitations, like most research. First, although the mediation effects found in Study 1 are in line with the extant research (e.g., Dacre Pool & Qualter, 2013),

the data in both studies is cross-sectional, thus precluding us from claiming causal inferences and being more susceptible to common method bias. All our three samples rely on the same methodology: self-report surveys. We did our best to mitigate this limitation by conducting the studies in different cultural settings and testing alternative models, which showed worse fit than the mediation models. Further longitudinal and experimental research is needed to examine the causal nature of the personal branding – career satisfaction relationship, while, at the same time, accounting for the common method bias. Adding alternative sources of data, such as supervisor assessment or recruiter evaluation, will provide valuable insights on the effectiveness of personal branding.

A second limitation of our study is that the organizational context was out of its scope. Gorbатов et al. (2018) provided a list of work fields ranging from most to least conducive to personal branding, signaling that such activities may develop differently in diverse industry and firm settings. The professional role also should be accounted for, as for example, freelance workers are more likely to engage in personal branding activities (Gandini, 2016). The context, in which certain behaviors take place, typically serves as a moderator (see, e.g., Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000) or a mediator (see, e.g., Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014). Therefore, it is highly advisable that future research explore such moderating and/or mediating effects of the context, in which personal branding occurs.

A third limitation is that we explored only the positive consequences of personal branding for individual career seekers. However, several authors highlighted “dark side” of personal branding, such as personal branding failures (Labrecque et al., 2011), duress associated with the pervasive pressure to engage in personal branding (Vallas & Christin, 2018; Vallas & Cummins, 2015), pushing the ethical boundaries of the professional field (Cederberg, 2017),



commodification of reflexivity (Wee & Brooks, 2010), losing personal identity (Holton & Molyneux, 2017), or, refusing to do so, failing to fit the organization sufficiently to produce a meaningful impact (Shepherd, 2005; Sturdy & Wright, 2008). Future studies should investigate the deleterious impacts of personal branding for individuals, teams, and organizations.

### **3.6.3 Practical Implications**

Since personal branding, as a contemporary career behavior, in both studies demonstrated strong relationships with career success, workers, job seekers, employers and labor market intermediaries should invest in understanding what it means to them. For individuals, there is sufficient evidence that personal branding leads to a variety of beneficial outcomes, such as enhanced credibility, visibility, prestige, promotions, or monetary rewards (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Whether organizations benefit from having employees actively engaging in personal branding is still a matter for further research. In addition, the personal branding scale could be a useful diagnostic instrument in a diversity of contexts, such as in training courses aimed to help the participants obtain a deeper insight into career decision-making.