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# Chapter 6



## **Chapter 6. Discussion and Conclusions**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The aim of this dissertation was to examine the topic of personal branding as it relates to career success in the context of contemporary careers and to address important methodological issues that arise when tackling this question. This final chapter summarizes the key findings of the dissertation (Section 6.2 and Table 6.1), explicates the theoretical implications of this work together with the suggested avenues for future research (6.3), and suggests some implications for practice (6.4). It concludes with the discussion of the assets and limitations of this work (6.5).

### **6.2 Summary of Main Findings**

In Chapter 1, I posed several research questions targeted at closing the knowledge gap regarding the role of personal branding in contemporary careers as a new way of self-presentation. We did not know: 1) how individuals engage in personal branding in today's work environment, 2) how personal branding and its related concepts (i.e., personal brand and personal brand equity) are conceptualized and operationalized, and 3) what the antecedents and outcomes of personal branding were. These issues were addressed by a) a systematic review of the extant literature on the topic of personal branding, b) proposing a conceptual model of personal branding, c) developing definitions of personal branding, the personal brand, and personal brand equity, d) developing measurement instruments for personal branding and personal brand equity, e) examining the antecedents and outcomes of personal branding, as well as the signaling function of own competence in relation to career outcomes. The results shown in Table 6.1 provide integrative answers to the research questions that were addressed in detail in Chapters 2-5. I will now proceed to elaborate on the three key themes emanating from the results of the dissertation.

Table 6.1

*Research Questions and Results*

<b>Research question</b>	<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Key results and findings</b>
<i>Question 1:</i> How do individuals engage in personal branding in the context of contemporary careers?	Chapter 2	- A conceptual model is offered that captures inputs, processes, and outcomes of personal branding
<i>Question 2a:</i> How is personal branding defined?	Chapter 2	- Personal branding positioned as a distinct construct in its nomological field - Suggested definition of personal branding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>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</i></li> </ul>
<i>Question 2b:</i> How is personal brand defined?	Chapter 2	- Suggested definition of personal brand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>a set of characteristics of an individual (attributes, values, beliefs, etc.) rendered into the differentiated narrative and imagery with the intent of establishing a competitive advantage in the minds of the target audience</i></li> </ul>
<i>Question 2c:</i> How is personal brand equity defined?	Chapter 4	- Suggested definition of personal brand equity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>the accrued perception of the value of an individual's professional and personal qualities in the minds of the target audience</i></li> </ul>
<i>Question 3a:</i> How can personal branding be measured?	Chapter 3	- 18-item 3-factor developed with the factor analyses performed on two different samples (total $N = 1,001$ ) - The scale was found to possess adequate dimensionality, reliability, and invariance across genders

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<p><i>Question 3b:</i> How can personal brand equity be measured?</p>	<p>Chapter 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 12-item 3-factor scale developed and validated in four different samples (total <math>N = 1,558</math>)</li> <li>- It was found meeting all the required psychometric properties (dimensionality, reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity)</li> <li>- Criterion-related validity was established by examining a moderated mediation model linking PBE with career achievement aspiration, perceived employability, and career self-efficacy</li> </ul>
<p><i>Question 4a:</i> What are the antecedents of personal branding?</p>	<p>Chapter 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Career achievement aspiration was found to be the strongest predictor of personal branding</li> <li>- Career feedback negatively related to personal branding intention</li> <li>- Career self-efficacy positively related to personal branding but not to personal branding intention</li> </ul>
<p><i>Question 4b:</i> What are the outcomes of personal branding?</p>	<p>Chapter 3</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personal branding was found to lead to subjective measures of career success, such as perceived employability and career satisfaction</li> </ul>
<p><i>Question 5:</i> Why do people invest effort in doing MOOCs and how does this investment relate to job search outcomes?</p>	<p>Chapter 5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- School brand importance and self-promotion were important predictors of invested effort in MOOCs, while learning goal orientation towards MOOCs was not</li> <li>- The invested effort in MOOCs positively related to signaling of MOOC-related competencies and perceived employability, which, in turn, were positively related to perceived usefulness of MOOCs in getting a job</li> </ul>

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### **6.2.1 Conceptualization of Personal Branding and Related Constructs as a New Way of Self-Presentation in Contemporary Careers**

The first key theme tackled in this dissertation concerns how individuals present their professional selves in the modern labor environment. Chapter 2 reported on the results of a systematic review of 100 academic articles on the topic of personal branding. In the review process, I integrated the extant knowledge of the subject around the input-process-output conceptual model of personal branding developed in that study. I employed a rigorous method of establishing construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010) to position personal branding as a distinct concept in its nomological field. Based on the attributes of personal branding, exuded from the definitions in the reviewed articles, I constructed the definitions of personal branding and personal brand that meet Suddaby's (2010) criteria of a "good" definition.

Chapter 4 contributes to the field by introducing the concept of personal brand equity. It supports the argument that a personal brand *per se* does not necessarily leads to a career outcome, as it is a representation of the desired self. Personal brand equity, on the other hand, concerns the aggregated value that the target audience attributes to an individual which would lead to an action if that value is perceived as likely to reasonably satisfy the need of the target audience. This is a helpful distinction because at times within the literature the concepts *personal brand* and *personal brand equity* are used interchangeably, while conceptually they are distinct: Personal brand is what is desired, while personal brand equity is what exists.

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

The second key theme examined in this dissertation relates to the methodological issues of measuring the key constructs of interest: namely, personal branding and personal brand equity. In Chapter 3, bridging the Chapter 2 findings with the marketing literature on brand equity, I

proposed a definition of personal brand equity. Comprehensive, yet focused and parsimonious definitions of personal branding and personal brand equity allowed me to proceed with the operationalization of these constructs.

I developed the personal branding and personal brand equity scales in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. However, while Chapter 4 reports on the full process of scale development and validation, following the required steps and procedures (Hinkin, 1998; MacKenzie et al., 2011), in Chapter 3 I develop the personal branding scale only as a necessary step to be able to test the hypotheses of that study. Such an approach was successfully employed, for instance, by Carmeli et al. (2015) in development of a measurement of respectful engagement. Both scales performed well in the subsequent phases of hypotheses testing, reported in detail in the respective chapters.

### **6.2.3 Antecedents and Outcomes of Personal Branding**

The third and final key theme concerns testing the conceptual model developed in Chapter 2 with regards to the antecedents and outcomes of personal branding. In the process of the literature review, reported in Chapter 2, I found that a confluence of factors has spurred many individuals into turning towards personal branding with the aim of getting ahead in their careers; shifting career agency away from organizations to individuals, with a combination of technological advancements facilitating self-presentation online, and the appearance of new forms of employment. In such an environment, developing, deploying, and maintaining a personal brand is viewed as an effective strategy for achieving career success.

This theme is directly addressed in Chapter 3. The results suggest that personal branding has a positive effect on subjective career success, which we operationalized as perceived employability and career satisfaction. The findings of Chapter 5 indirectly support this by demonstrating that self-promotion, another type of self-presentation behavior, was positively



indirectly related to perceived employability. That chapter adds to our understanding of self-presentation in the contemporary context by examining how individuals signal their competence through investing effort in MOOCs, which could be viewed as personal co-branding, when individuals intentionally associate themselves with the brand of another person or an organization. Chapter 5 reveals somewhat unexpected findings: learning goal orientation towards MOOCs was not significantly related to the invested effort in MOOCs, while the school brand importance and self-promotion were. These results are consistent with the literature with regards to the positive effects of self-presentation behaviors on career outcomes (Barrick et al., 2009; M. Bolino et al., 2016; Higgins et al., 2003). This literature also points to the fact that self-presentation in organizational contexts positively influences objective measures of success, and it would be an interesting area for future research to test the relationships between personal branding and a variety of career success measures, both subjective and objective.

Chapter 3 concerns the antecedents of personal branding, applying a framework of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Career achievement aspiration turned out to be the strongest predictor of engaging in personal branding. This finding fits well within research on career ambition linking desires to get ahead professionally with proactive behaviors which career seekers demonstrate (Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Kuijpers, Schyns, & Scheerens, 2006; Otto, Roe, Sobiraj, Baluku, & Garrido Vásquez, 2017). Extending the line of thought on career agency, career self-efficacy did not relate meaningfully to personal branding intention, but it did have a significant positive impact on personal branding. As the agency for career management has shifted to the individual (as explained in Chapter 1), it is a logical extension that those who are more likely to enact agency (i.e., individuals high in career achievement aspiration and career self-efficacy) will do so by engaging in career management behaviors, such as personal branding.

An unexpected finding was that career feedback negatively related to personal branding intention, the possible explanations of which are discussed in Chapter 3.

### **6.3 Theoretical Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

The previous section provided a brief summary of the research findings grouped by three key themes. In this section I will explore three broader implications of the studies presented in this dissertation. These are not specifically linked to a single research question, but instead flow from an overall reflection on the findings.

#### **6.3.1 Personal Branding in Contemporary Careers**

To my knowledge, this work is the first attempt to define the constructs of personal branding, the personal brand, and personal brand equity following a meticulous review process of the extant literature. There have been previous attempts at defining these terms by several other scholars. They have enabled this dissertation to draw on their contributions to conceptualize and subsequently operationalize personal branding and personal brand equity. Similarly, in relation to defining the terms, there have been efforts to produce measures which are referenced in Chapters 3 and 4. Yet, this dissertation offers the methodological rigor and comprehensive approach to scale development found to be lacking in prior studies.

One of the key contributions of this work is the integration of the extant research on personal branding into a conceptual model, allowing some of the main relationships to be tested. Bridging the discourses on personal branding and the contemporary career, I attempted to converge several disciplines such as sociology (self-presentation), marketing (branding), and economics (signaling). Baruch et al. (2015) urged career scholars to look for inspiration beyond their narrow disciplines, basically advocating for greater multidisciplinary in career studies, concordant with the views on theory integration in the recent editorial of the *Academy of*

*Management Journal* (Shaw, Tangirala, Vissa, & Rodell, 2018). As the nature of work continues to transform alongside advances in technology and broad societal changes, I hope that my work will entice scholars to apply a wider theoretical lens to their studies of contemporary careers.

I have established that personal branding is an important career competence in today's world of work, adding to the literature on the change in prerequisite skills required for contemporary career success (Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Blokker et al., 2019). The empirical chapters of this dissertation confirm and extend the previous findings in relation to the antecedents and outcomes of personal branding. There is overarching support for considering personal branding as an effective technique to achieve the desired career objectives.

At the same time, there is a body of literature that raises concerns about excessive personal branding behaviors. Scholars have called our attention to such negative aspects as the emotional labor required for self-presentation (Bridgen, 2011), turning the self into a detachable commodity (Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Wee & Brooks, 2010), and the fear of rejection for standing out (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018). Therefore, there is a need for future research to investigate both the positive and negative outcomes of personal branding through the lens of a cost-benefit analysis. This will help us understand better not only the positive effects of personal branding, but also the downsides associated with it.

Another important theoretical consideration relates to the understanding of the professional self, which has been addressed by the scholars of professional identity (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). The idea of personal branding rests on the assumption that the professional self is malleable and can be adjusted according to the needs of a particular target audience. Chapter 2 reports on the findings that individuals can have several personal brands for distinct needs, which gives way to a separate discussion on the authenticity of a

personal branding. The work of Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) similarly points in the direction that individuals can experiment and shape their professional selves, as they deem fit. This raises an interesting question about the potential reciprocal causal relationship between the personal brand and the professional identity of an individual. Future research should enquire into how the social construction of a personal brand relates to the psychological perception of self as a professional. A separate line of studies could focus on the moderating role of perceived and experienced authenticity of personal brands and the effect it has on the individual and the desired outcomes.

### **6.3.2 Understanding of Personal Branding in Diverse Contexts**

One of the findings of this dissertation is that personal branding is context specific. Chapter 2 integrated the previous research in order to demonstrate the differences between various industries and roles according to how conducive they are to personal branding behaviors. This finding is theoretically important as it helps further delineate the constructs of personal branding with others in the same nomological field, such as impression management, self-promotion, or reputation, all of which occur in human interactions with context being a less important boundary condition.

Also, this finding is significant given the changes in the nature of working relationships, such as digital work (Gandini, 2016), freelancing (Lo Presti et al., 2018), and the gig economy (Gandini, 2018; Kuhn, 2016). In this work, I was particularly interested in the role of personal branding outside of the organizational context. The empirical studies in Chapters 3-5 were conducted on individuals who were, for the most part, not fully employed (i.e., students, self-employed, and unemployed). Therefore, we could draw the conclusion that personal branding is an adequate career behavior for those who choose novel work arrangements, or those who are not employed. However, I cannot extrapolate these findings to the organizational context, as

further research is required in this respect. Future studies should take place both within organizations and across organizations to be able to draw generalizable conclusions about the role of personal branding in the work environment, but also to be able to account for the potentially confounding effects attributable to the specifics of a single company.

Culture is another important aspect to consider in understanding personal branding. Liu et al. (2019) in the editorial for the special issue of *Journal of Organizational Behavior* on the consequences of proactive behaviors specifically called out the need for studies in cross-cultural contexts. The Chapter 3 finding - that career feedback was non-significantly related to personal branding intention - was contrary to our hypothesis, which we theorized based on the previous predominantly Western-context research. One of the possible explanations for this finding is that in the Chinese work environment, advice that career seekers receive is different from what their counterparts in other parts of the world do. While this contribution would be welcome by those who criticize that the vast majority of social sciences research is performed in Western contexts (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), to increase the generalizability of the findings, further research is needed into cross-cultural beliefs, attitudes, and practices regarding personal branding.

### **6.3.3 Self-Presentation Online**

The third theoretical implication concerns the process of how personal branding happens in contemporary work environments. Our conceptualization of personal branding presupposes that at least some portion of it will happen online. One of the key drivers for the increase in interest in the subject is technological advancement in general and social media proliferation more specifically. Presenting oneself effectively online leads to beneficial career outcomes, as evidenced, for instance, by a finding that LinkedIn profiles which are longer, include a picture,

and have more connections, are rated more favorably by recruiters (Roulin & Levashina, 2019). Likewise, the measurement instruments we developed include specific items and scales to gauge the degree of technological enablement of one's personal brand, such as the *technologically savvy* subscale of the personal branding scale and items like "I actively communicate about my professional activities on social media".

Going forward, researchers should explore the differences in personal branding approaches and outcomes in both online and offline conditions. While some individuals maintain completely online personal brands - shown in cases of professional journalists (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017; Holton & Molyneux, 2017), for example - others have no online presence whatsoever. Most individuals will utilize a combination of both online and offline personal branding activity. Although there is an emerging stream of literature on online self-presentation (e.g., Hogan, 2010; Rui & Stefanone, 2013), the majority of discourse is taking place within fields of technology and computer sciences. I would therefore welcome rapprochement of that research with the career scholarship.

## **6.4 Practical Implications**

The topics of career and employability are important for various groups of stakeholders. In order to provide a focused review, I will dwell on the three most central to these issues. Flowing from the findings of my studies, I suggest a set of implications for organizations, practitioners who perform career advisory services, and individuals.

### **6.4.1 Organizational Implications**

Companies should rethink their talent acquisition and talent management practices to account for the new career tendencies, such as an increase in personal branding activities and the emergence of novel tools to enhance employability, such as MOOCs, which we discussed in

Chapter 5. The talent acquisition functionalities should consider the impact that personal branding may have on the selection tools and processes, such as the practice of cybervetting (Berkelaar, 2014; Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015). Since the activities related to creation and maintenance of a personal brand can be subcontracted or outsourced, the online presence of a candidate may not be a valid representation of the claimed knowledge and skills, which could lead to adverse selection. Talent management practices should include a check for personal branding behaviors to ensure that the mere presentation of oneself in a more positive light does not influence the quality of performance, or potential assessment. At the same time, organizations should encourage their employees to make their talents and achievements visible. This might lead to best practice sharing, as well as dissemination of tacit organizational knowledge as demonstrated by Kucharska and Dąbrowski (2016). Professionals responsible for diversity and inclusion practices should conduct educational activities about the differences in personal branding outcomes for different employee groups. For example, women who use self-promotion could be viewed more negatively than men using the same tools (Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991; Rudman, 1998). Finally, organizational effectiveness experts could consider the effect that personal branding could have on company culture. Alonzo-Gonzalez et al. (2019) explored how personal branding could serve as a management tool to foster innovation and enhance sustainability, alongside with other beneficial outcomes for employees, thereby “changing their minds from a commodity-type professional to a free- agent world” (p. 127).

#### **6.4.2 Implications for Career Advisors**

My findings also put forward implications for career coaches and vocational counselors. The conceptual model proposed in Chapter 2 could be a useful tool to work with their clients in explaining how to build, deploy, and maintain their personal brand, and how such efforts lead to

positive career outcomes. A visual representation of the process might facilitate development planning and inform subsequent conversations to track progress. Additionally, career professionals may want to make use of the personal brand and personal brand equity scales developed, respectively, in Chapters 3 and 4. This could serve as a personal branding effectiveness diagnostic to identify under-utilized behaviors and tactics to build the desired professional image. Repeating the same diagnostic later could also serve to gauge progress. Asking others to answer the same questions would highlight any gaps between an individual's self-view and the perception of others.

### **6.4.3 Implications for Individuals**

The practical implications of my findings for individuals center around a need to build and maintain an effective personal brand that can signal value to a target audience. Our findings linking personal branding to subjective career success indicate that those who engage in personal branding feel more employable and, as a result, are more satisfied with their careers. I would like to make a caveat that it is likely that the need to differentiate one's personal brand will only intensify as an increasing number of career seekers resort to similar personal branding activities. The very nature of differentiation is being distinct from others, so in a context where everyone pursues a differentiated personal brand, the marginal value of having one could be reduced, forcing individuals to be more creative in their personal branding approach. For example, having a personal website used to be an important differentiator, but today when thousands of people have one, it is also necessary to make it stand out, be appealing, and clearly signal the desired benefits to the target audience.



## **6.5 Limitations of this Dissertation and Related Suggestions for Future Research Directions**

After discussing the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, I would like to discuss its limitations and suggest relevant avenues for future research. These limitations refer to 1) restriction of range, 2) self-reported data, and 3) mostly cross-sectional designs.

### **6.5.1 Restriction of Range**

An important consideration regarding the generalizability of the results is that it is potentially impacted by the demographic characteristics of the study's participants. While the data collected via the Mechanical Turk platform for the EFA and CFA studies in Chapters 3 and 4 and the sample in Chapter 5 are drawn from a wide range of geographies, the samples on which the hypotheses testing was performed came primarily from the Netherlands and China.

In addition, the key empirical findings are drawn from relatively young samples. In Chapter 3, the mean age of the Western sample was 27 years ( $SD = 9.5$ ) and that of the Chinese sample was 36.7 ( $SD = 11.40$ ). The hypotheses in Chapter 4 were tested on a student population with a mean age of 19.53 years ( $SD = 1.43$ ), and in Chapter 5 the study was performed on student, unemployed, and self-employed MOOC learners with a mean age of 33 years ( $SD = 9.81$ ). While these findings are important to illuminate how those with little or no job experience navigate the issues of employment, factors such as aging and sustainability of careers have been highlighted as some of the acute career challenges of today (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2018; Thijssen et al., 2014). Thus, more research is needed to examine the effects of personal branding behaviors in specific organizational settings and for those who are more advanced in their careers.

### **6.5.2 Self-Reported Data**

Another limitation of the present research is that the data were collected using mostly surveys (although in Chapter 5 this was complemented with insights gathered through semi-structured interviews). While survey data are commonly used in social sciences research, there is always a possibility of the common method bias having a confounding effect on the results (Podsakoff et al., 2003, 2012). This means that the results may be skewed due to the self-report bias, manifested through, for instance, a personality characteristic of negative affectivity, the desire to present oneself in a more positive light, or an acquiescing manner of responding (Furnham, 1986).

Future designs should supplement the self-reported data with information collected from other sources. In the work settings, it would be interesting to collect data on how the immediate supervisor, colleagues, and subordinates perceive personal branding activities of an individual, and in turn, how they evaluate the strength of the resulting personal brand. Additionally, researchers could employ, for example, a social network approach, which would help illuminate the impact of the individuals' personal branding behaviors across their larger networks. Finally, using social media and online activity data could give extremely valuable insights into personal branding research. There are indications that in the future it will be easier to get access to such data; a recent article in *Nature* reported on Facebook giving unprecedented access to its data to more than 60 social scientists (Ledford, 2019). Such action could also be interpreted as signaling the importance of social media activity in the hyperconnected world of today.

### **6.5.3 Cross-Sectional Design**

Most of the findings in this dissertation come from cross-sectional data. Only in one study in Chapter 4 I used a time-lag design to mitigate the potential common method bias. This

severely restricts the ability to claim any causal inferences among the study variables. I did my best to overcome this limitation by employing data analysis methods such as structural equation modeling, which allows estimation of the best fit of the data to the theoretical model. Therefore, future studies should employ methods that enable the researchers to claim causal inferences. Conducting longitudinal studies would be an obvious option, but the research on personal branding could lend itself to a much wider variety of methodological designs. For example, experimental designs, advocated by Podsakoff and Podsakoff (2018), could examine the attitudes towards those with strong and weak personal brands in contexts conducive or averse to proactive self-presentation. Another idea could be using the policy capturing approach (Karren & Barringer, 2002) to elucidate the incremental validity of personal branding to predict job performance or career outcomes in conjunction with established predictors, such as intelligence (Kuncel, Ones, & Sackett, 2010), personality (Boudreau et al., 2001; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002), and intrapreneurial behaviors (Di Fabio, Palazzeschi, & Bucci, 2017) to name a few.

## **6.6 Concluding Remarks**

This dissertation is an attempt to integrate the existing body of research on personal branding as a novel career behavior that was found effective in attaining career success. Having provided definitional clarity of the focal concepts and having developed the new scales to measure them, I hope that this work provides a stepping stone for future research on personal branding and its role in contemporary careers.