Systematic literature and modeling review of Personal Branding

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THE AIMS OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize a standardized model and metric for Personal Branding that can be integrated into the antecedents of the limited research in the area. It also examines if a future standardized performance measurement can be added to success factors of business development.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic review of the literature was undertaken during the period of September 2021 and January 2022. According to Scopus, out of the 218 relevant articles to Personal Branding published in a span of 22 years. In the approach, they were searched using related keywords and specific selection criteria.

MOST IMPORTANT RESULTS

While Personal Branding is a growing identified academic phenomenon, there is no widely accepted definition of Personal Branding. This needs to be conducted in order to apply frameworks for standardization. As for developing theoretical frameworks that can be used to measure the effect of PB in BD as an input and output variable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

By reviewing the most relevant literature, this study motivates researchers to establish a commonly accepted definition for Personal Branding. Furthermore, the introduced routes encourage researchers to 1) analyze and categorize the concept and 2) review models that can be combined with attributes of Personal Branding's processes, providing generic inputs and outputs factors that can serve as measurable attributes in the context of the relationship between Personal Branding and Business Development.

Keywords: Personal Branding, personal brand, Personal Brand Equity, Business Development

INTRODUCTION

A growing focus on Branding within Business and Management has led to the birth and development of a noticeable domain of interest Personal Branding over the last two decades. There is an emerging research trend in the relationship between constructs of Personal Branding and success factors of business development. Whilst the latter has the common knowledge that a venture needs to meet factors like year-over-year growth, ARR, investment, timing, and opportunity (Sturdy 2008); Personal Branding is still being discussed in limited academic research and still requires room for justification.

Personal Branding sits at the intersection of several disciplines, mainly marketing (Liar *et al.* 2005) and management, and furthermore communication, psychology, sociology, and organizational behavior. As Papp-Váry (2019) draws a direct connection between a product's brand and a country's brand, this literature review applies the same logic between a (product) brand and a personal brand. One of the main reasons for the increasing focus on Personal Branding is the widening shift between the responsibility of organizations and individuals in terms of success (Arthur & Rousseau 1996). Out of many articles, Gioia's (2014) words it perfectly: „personal brands ... need to be managed in a virtual age". Furthermore, in today's business environment, everyone is a „CEO of his or her own company" (Peters 1997).

Similar to Gorbatov *et al.*'s (2018) framework, this literature review attempts to indicate future directions by proposing relevant constructs and drawing relations between them. The above-mentioned fields show several commonalities that serve as indicators for further research. It is crucial to define and explain how Personal Branding works and understand its input and output variables. The importance arises from the fact that the existing scholarly activities have not found a commonly accepted and integrated definition or theoretical model (Gorbatov *et al*. 2018). The expected results may offer a valuable connection and a new perspective on Personal Branding; to take steps toward filling the gap between non-scientific pronouncements of Personal Branding, such as if it is a necessity of success and how much personal and organizational levels are interconnected by their goals (Vallas & Cummins 2015).

The results will potentially serve as a base to further empirical studies to measure the performance and effect of PB. Existing definitions definitions across fields need to be synthesized by an integrated and multi-disciplinary understanding. Then, examine if Gorbatov *et al.*'s (2018) distinct construction is applicable parallel to established concepts of success. It is conducted by the following preliminary research questions (RQs):

- *RQ1: What are the key components and dimensions of Personal Branding as described in the literature, and how can these be integrated into a comprehensive definition of Personal Branding for practical use in management and business contexts?*
- *RQ2: Does business development benefit from strong Personal Branding?*
- *RQ3: Can the added value of a strong personal brand be measured?*

METHODOLOGY OF THE LITE-RATURE REVIEW

The database collection is based on the recommendations of Gorbatov *et al.* (2018), Scheidt (2020), and the PRISMA metrics by Moher *et al.* (2009). PRISMA was chosen in order to ensure that all relevant information is processed in a transparent and comprehensive way, guaranteeing the quality and reliability of the study.

The Scopus database serves as the primary database for selecting the literature, using "Personal Branding", „Business Development", and "Success", as strings in the article title, abstract, and keywords. It is important to note that the initial research was used with „OR" parameter with an „AND" addition of the keyword „Personal Branding" as a keyword. In order to bypass the limitations of a single database, other sources were used as a control with the exact same parameters. Other databases were GoogleScholar, Web of Science, and EBSCO. These served as proof of the fragmentation of the phenomenon of Personal Branding. As an extra step, the reference was also examined of the gathered literature review type articles, resulting in additional relevant articles being added which can be seen in Figure 1. and Figure 2. This systematic approach enabled the research to be coherent, with minimal or no subjectivity.

Web of Science returned 81 results applying the following restrictions: (((TS=("personal brand*")) AND TI=("personal brand*")) AND DT=(Article OR Review)), Timespan: All years, Search language=Auto. With the exclusion of the non-relevant and outdated results, plus non-academic papers, in order to create an objective collection-, selection- and review process, the initial database is exact and interpretable to the topic, only showing relevant and actual results.

At this stage, it is clear that the first scientific articles were published in 2005 (Gorbatov *et al.* 2018), for this literature review only papers published between 2005 and 2021 in peer-reviewed journals were considered. Older academic papers were only used as a reference to understand the origins of the term Personal Brand. The time span of 16 years was predetermined due to the available scientific research on the concept of Personal Branding, which was in 2005 (Lair *et al.* 2005).

The objective was to get a clear overview and understanding of the definitions of Personal Branding; as well as a narrow focus on possible measurements and dimensions of it.

In the second phase, the database was narrowed down to articles that help in defining and understanding Personal Branding as a scientific phenomenon. After applying exclusion criteria and conducting a full-text review, a total of 65 articles were included in the final analysis. These articles were deemed to be the most relevant and appropriate for addressing the research question at hand. The identified articles were cross-referenced in order to ensure the completeness and comprehensiveness of the literature research. As a result, the database was extended to a total of 72 articles. Considering the characteristics of this new niche, further additions might be adequate, since new relevant studies may be published.

Cross-referencing and database expansion was crucial to minimize the risk of biases and ensure that all relevant studies are identified and included in the review. The incorporation of a variety of studies from diverse sources provides a more nuanced and robust understanding of the topic and enables the development of more evidence-based recommendations and conclusions.

After analyzing the abstracts of the articles, 87 references were excluded for any of the following reasons: (a) not being published in peer-reviewed journals ($N = 46$), (b) having no relevance to the topic ($N = 35$). At this stage of this literature review, the focus was on the full text of the Top 10 most relevant articles and literature reviews, which resulted in a manual addition to the references of the reviewed articles that has resulted in 6 additional references added to the whole list. The process is shown graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Stages of literature research
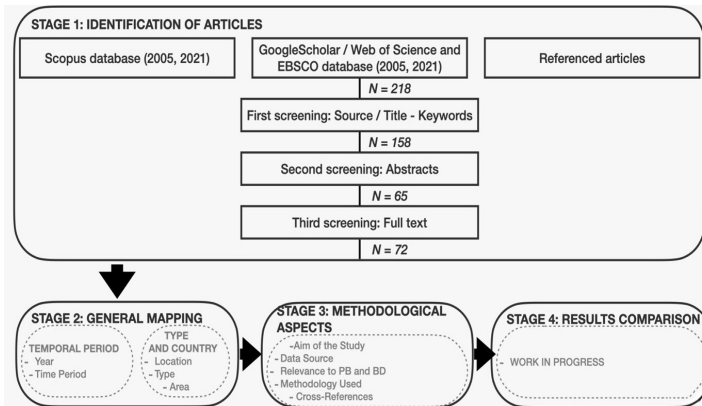
Source: own construction

The literature review was carried out in four stages (Figure 2.):

1. In the first stage of the collection, keywords were used to find relevant articles. Below is a keyword search for the Personal Branding construct as an example. Other constructs were explored using the same steps:
   - „Personal Branding";
   - „Personal Branding" and "Business Development";
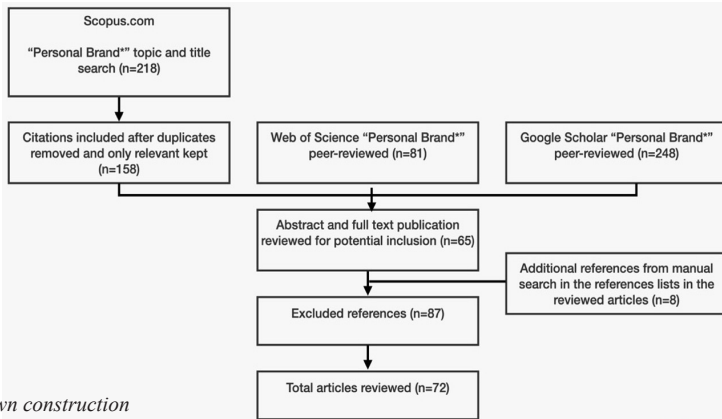   - „Personal Branding" and "Success";
   - „Personal Branding" and "Employer Branding";

2. The first stage of the collection yielded a total number of 218 articles. In the second stage, additional exclusion criteria were added: Working papers, non-peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and duplicate articles were removed, which resulted in a reduced number of articles: 158.

3. As an intermediate step, in the third stage the abstracts and references were analyzed

for several reasons: 1) in order to identify the relevant articles to the topic of this literature review, contracting the number of articles to 65; then 2) to find cross-references and adding to the list, that resulted in precisely selected articles of 71.

4. In the fourth stage, a detailed content analysis was performed; finally, 72 articles ended up shortlisted for this literature review. The selection provided a sufficient map of the interrelationships of the constructs of the topic as well as served for defining and grouping Personal Branding as a phenomenon.

Figure 2. Criteria and sources of literature research

Source: own construction

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the literature's taxonomic analysis. It can be drawn, that Personal Branding is becoming a more and more popular and widely discussed topic. A clearly identified direction is that a strong personal brand can play a relevant role in driving career success and business growth. However, despite its importance, the literature review shows that significant variability remains in how Personal Branding is defined and conceptualized, which can create confusion and limit the effectiveness of efforts to develop and maintain a strong personal brand. This study's analysis aims to provide an understanding of the key dimensions and components of Personal Branding.

Taxonomic analysis of literature
The review period from 2005 to 2021 was divided by the number of papers published in each year as shown in Figure 3. The majority of the selected papers were published in 2013–2020, which reflects the growing importance of Personal Branding. Figure 4. shows the results by subject area, the majority is within the area of business and management with 53.4%.

The selected articles were also categorized by research methods, which were: literature review, surveys, modeling, case studies, analysis, and conceptual/theoretical development.

### Origins and Theoretical Foundations of Personal Branding
What is unquestionable is that Personal Branding is multidisciplinary, it advances from a wide array of theories. Whilst the contemporary focus is on management studies, it is crucial to understand the origins of disciplines of psychology, sociology, economics, and not least, marketing as other literature reviews (Gorbatov *et al.* 2018, Wee and Brooks 2010) outline it.

In order to understand the findings and further constructs, it is fundamental to examine the origins of the term Personal Branding and Personal Brand. This section outlines the theoretical advancement of Personal Branding, based on earlier research papers.
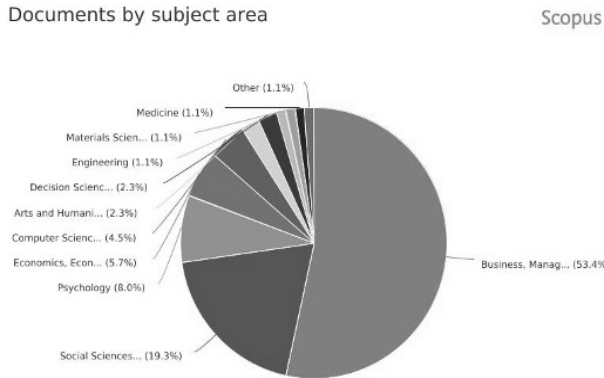
Psychological Theories
Three major research areas arise from the 20th century: identity formation (Mead 1934), self-fulfillment and self-esteem (Cohen 1959), and reflective practitioner theory (Schon 1984), the latter being described as a self-development tool by Shepherd (2005) and Khedher (2015). Based on these articles, Personal Branding plays an important role in identity formation. The discourse is focused on identity to others. Self-fulfillment and self-esteem are psychological needs, specifically a non-social motive

Figure 3. Distribution of articles by year

Documents by year   Scopus
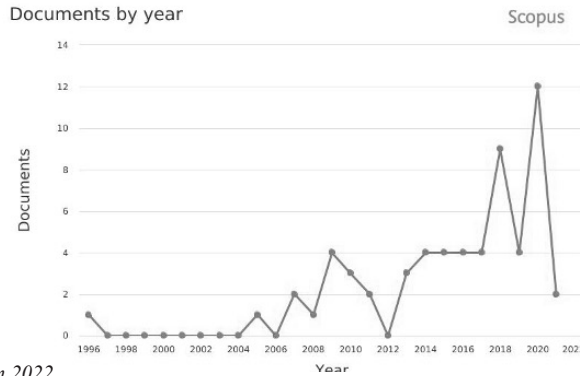
Source: Scopus.com 2022

Figure 3. Distribution of articles by year

Documents by subject area   Scopus

Source: Scopus.com 2022

that drives the need for power and advocacy, as well as providing entertainment.

Sociological Theories

Several authors based their conceptualization on sociological theories. Goffman's (1959) drama-turgical perspective is the most referenced, which defines Personal Branding as input (reflection, sense-making, etc.) and output (feedback, impression, etc.) to influence perception. Taking into factor, that Goffman could have not incorporated the digital aspects, the definition circles around real-life interactions and self-presentation, thus leaving room for overlooking outcomes in Personal Branding.

Later research direction can be found within four areas: impression management, reflexivity theories, social capital, and enterprising culture theory. The focus of sociological theories is A) how individuals build their own identities, B) the accumulation of social and cultural capital in specific organizational fields, C) controlling the narrative, D) categorizing Personal Branding as a new type of work, resulting in the definition of „enterprising self".

Economic Theories

Economic theories help in providing links to the effect of Personal Branding on macro-environmental motivators. The term reputation economy is researched by Gandini (2016). He bases his article on economic conditions shaping social interactions, exploring terms like flexible accumulation (Harvey 1990), controlled discourse (Andrejevic 2007), and emotional capitalism (Illouz 2007). Other articles refer to the signaling theory (Spence 1973) that draws differences in communication of unique characteristics.

Marketing Theories

The expansion of marketing beyond product originates from Kotler (1967) (Shepherd 2005). On one hand, Keller (1998) was the first to distinguish between branding in terms of product – „small b" – and beyond as „large b" that focuses on services, organizations, and people. On the other hand, Aaker's (1997) efforts in researching brand personality and brand identity. The latter draws a path within human branding, arriving at today's focus of three internal approaches, „1) "consumerist"– viewing human brands from the position of consumers, 2) "reputational" – assuming a passive approach in having a brand, and 3) "agency"– proactively creating and managing one's personal brand" (Eagar & Dann 2016). The third establishes the basis for further research about understanding brand equity and reputation.

To conclude, an extensive interpretation of Personal Branding routes back to the 20th century within social science. The earliest indication of Personal Branding's concept's origin dates back to the 1960s and 80s. Goffmann's (1959) perception influence and Kotler's (1967) approach to marketing beyond product serve as fundamental as seen in Vallass and Cummis' (2015) reference to marketing studies from the 1980s. An applicable summary can be drawn in terms of shaping identity and needs (psychological perspective), managing perceptions for certain benefits (sociological perspective), brand management (marketing perspective), and nonetheless, how these are put in motion on a larger scale of organizational and economic levels (economic perspective). These early articles are highly conceptual and have no added value to contemporary research that has begun in the mid-2000s.

A strong personal brand is not only essential for individuals seeking to advance their careers, but also for businesses looking to differentiate themselves in a crowded market. To develop a more effective strategy for building and maintaining a strong identity, it is crucial to understand Personal Branding and its key components. By doing so, this strategy can be leveraged in practice to drive business growth and success. Thus, the findings contain important implications for both individuals and organizations looking to stay competitive in today's rapidly evolving business landscape.

Understanding the constructs and Definitions: Personal Brand, Personal Branding

This section investigates the main constructs of the study and their dimensions, resulting in an understanding of the diverse definitions with the help of the reviewed literature. Existing literature reviews' necessary first step was to „determine the construct clarity" and positioning it to related concepts (Gorbatov *et al.* 2018). This is crucial to define Personal Branding as its own-standing construct.

The two widely recognized terms are „personal branding" (Shepherd 2005) and „self-branding" (Gandini 2016). Gandini refers to the process of creating a personal brand identity that reflects one's values, skills, and unique qualities. While Shepherd's interpretation of "personal branding" tends to focus more on creating a strong brand image for oneself, the term "self-branding" emphasizes the importance of authenticity and aligning one's personal brand with one's true self. In today's competitive and interconnected world, where individuals need to navigate the complex web of social and professional relationships, both of these concepts have become increasingly important in order to effectively achieve goals.

However, different names have been used to significantly similarly define and understand „how people can position themselves to be successful" (Parmentier *et al.* 2013). In order to gain high clarity of the definition of the construct, Gorbatov *et al.* (2018, p. 4.) used four sections: „(1) analysis of the definitions encountered in the reviewed literature; (2) study of the related concepts in the nomological network of personal branding as informed by this literature; (3) synthesis of the key attributes of personal branding from the reviewed definitions and analyzing presence or absence of the identified attributes in the related concepts; and (4) defining personal branding and a personal brand".

As it has been previously established, that the definitions are heterogeneous, theoretical approaches can help to group them into two segments: 1) marketing uses similar principles relating Personal Branding to a product branding process; while 2) psychology and sociology put Personal Branding to a person-centric activity that surrounds around how others interpret individuals. Marketing uses terms like „added value" or „differentiation", while the mentioned social sciences focus on „reputation", „uniqueness", „image", „identity", and „self-promotion". While these are referenced in various articles, there is no commonly acknowledged definition, where Personal Branding can be used as a „process in which people make efforts to market themselves" (Khedher 2015, p. 20.).

The common basis of the following terms is how they manage others' perceptions of an individual. Zinko and Rubin's (2015) overview consists of reputation, status, image, frame, celebrity,

pedigree, legitimacy, credibility, branding, and impression management. Gorbatov *et al.* (2018) found the following concepts as the most used, based on over 100 papers:

- *Human branding* is within marketing's branding literature and examines individuals within inter-organizational communication (Thomson 2006).
- *Impression management* is "the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them" (Kowalski & Leary 1990, p. 34.). Since it is a process, it is within Personal Branding, but not necessarily in a personal brand.
- *Self-promotion* is important to mention since some articles link it to Personal Branding, but the basis of activity differs: self-promotion highlights positive outcomes, while a Personal Brand includes negatives as well.
- *Image* is used in a professional setting (Roberts 2005), while Personal Branding goes across other areas of life.
- *Reputation* is linked to Personal Brand in a variety of articles. Since reputation as a construct has its own research history, it also lacks an accepted definition. While it is related to Personal Branding, its focus is narrower (Zinko & Rubin 2015).
- *Employer Branding* is and should be related to Personal Branding. As Héder-Rima and Dajnoki (2020) draw a connection between the role of employer branding and organizational culture, it is worth exploring the construction of a similar framework to discover variables between the two constructs.
- *Employee Branding* is one of the clear unobtrusive relations to Personal Branding in connection to an organization. Miles and Mangold (2004, p. 68.) interpret employee branding within internal marketing as "the process by which employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents". Further investigation of this definition provides extensive opportunity for understanding the Personal Brand's contribution to an organization's success.

As a new approach, in order to define Personal Branding and establish any association between the above-mentioned constructs, the key attributes needed to be defined. Gorbatov *et al.* (2018) use five first-level attributes (strategic, positive, promise, person-centric, and artifactual). In order to help with definition purposes, this literature examines four of them.

- *Strategic* definitions predict a certain directed outcome for a specific audience – which misses other aspects. Bolino et al. (2016) highlight that not all impression management is strategic and intentional, but can also be unconscious.
- *Positive* definition is welcomed in several articles, understanding PB as a favorable impression, but there are cases that demonstrate a different outcome than positive, thus highlighting a more appropriate characteristic of differentiation. Here it is worth introducing two sub-constructs: insufficient branding and misdirected branding.
- *Promise* comes from marketing as signaling a promise to a specific target audience. The difference of PB is a better-received quality by the target audience. It falls under human branding (Thomson 2006) and employee branding of transferring a promise – this being relevant for further research of organizational success metrics.
- *Person-centric* is an agency attribute on the second level and serves as an important one, due to an extra criteria of the individual's involvement that human branding and employee branding lacks.

Grouping the reviewed literature by the definition of Personal Branding, it can be distinguished by whether the construct is viewed as a process, a product, or both. A good portion of the studies agrees to use the definition of Personal Branding by Suddaby's (2010) „good definition" (Gorbatov, 2018, p. 6.):

Personal branding is a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based on a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery.

Gorbatov *et al.* (2018, p. 6.) elaborated on the definition, combining it with Ottovordemgentschenfelde (2017, p. 10.):

A personal brand is 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.

Both of the definitions leave questionable aspects, such as always being strategic, and/or positive, and/or differentiated, and/or attaining competitive advantage. Leaving these attributes out enables a definition that can be used for standardization:

Personal Branding is a process of positioning an impression of an individual's characteristics, which results in establishing certain outcomes for any chosen target audience.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Gorbatov *et al.*'s (2018) literature review was the first attempt to portray the scientific advancement of Personal Branding. Reviewing the most relevant articles, having provided further definitions and interconnections to Personal Branding, it is clearly visible that more in-depth, comprehensive research is needed in order to 1) analyze and categorize concepts and 2) review models that can be combined with attributes of Personal Branding's processes, providing generic inputs and outputs factors. While the directions are not clear, starting points could be drawn out from the literature review.

Model development (standardization, definition)
Several articles (Zinko & Rubin 2015) expressed the demand for connecting concepts across relevant fields. The clear first step is closing the gap between constructs by identifying measurable attributes. The introduced new definition of Personal Branding serves as the starting point for further research.

Studying contextual relations between an organization's employee branding and Personal Branding
Only a handful of articles focus on individual vs. organization in relation to Personal Branding (Hughes 2007, Bendisch et al. 2013, Karaduman 2013, Nolan 2015, Zinko & Rubin 2015, Ottovordemgentschenfelde 2017). Understanding how individual impacts and business goals are connected, which in research history have been studied separately.

Empirical Research
In order to find relevant frameworks and conduct quantitative studies, it is highly relevant to understand the origins of Personal Branding and find accepted methodologies. This literature review found several interdisciplinary routes. These serve as undiscovered channels of empirical research.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the efforts put into the systematic review and conceptualization of a standardized model and metric for Personal Branding, this paper has several limitations that need to be addressed. One limitation is the sample size – 218 articles over 22 years –, which is relatively small due to the nature of this new and narrow research field.. This may limit the generalizability of the findings to other domains and contexts. Moreover, the proposed model and metric for Personal Branding need to be tested in different contexts to ensure their validity and reliability. Lastly, it is important to highlight that the proposed definition is based on the literature review and the included theories, thus for real-world usability, further empirical testing is needed.

CONCLUSION

The field of Personal Branding has gained considerable interest in academia. This is why a generic understanding of Personal Branding is needed and requires further research. This study's added value is exploring the inputs and outputs of the construct. Furthermore, the proposed definition and empirical framework contribute to advancing research in academia, offering valuable insights into the holistic nature of Personal Branding.

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