Key Constructs of Personal Branding: Proposal for a broad definition

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ABSTRACT

Personal Branding is one of the emerging constructs that is being discussed within management studies. Sitting on the intersection of variety of social sciences, at this stage of research it lacks the foundations which results in the lack of broadly accepted definition. In order to overcome this stage and to support academic advancement, this paper gathers the construct's origins, theoretical heritage and previous empirical researches, based on existing literature. Based on the findings and connections between relevant constructs and attributes, a new point of view is introduced that serves for a widely acceptable definition.

Summary

The aims of the paper – The purpose of this paper is to understand the theoretical origins of Personal Branding and propose a new, widely acceptable definition that is built upon previous researches.

Methodology/approach – Literature review and multi-case study based on keywords of „Personal Branding" AND „personal brand".

Most important results – Overview of the relations between relevant constructs and on top of revealing the progression of Personal Branding's definition, a new and unified version is proposed.

Originality/value – Understanding Personal Branding from a theoretical background aspect as process with identified inputs and outputs is crucial, as to date, there has not been any scientific work created that defines Personal Branding as a process and identifies its inputs and outputs based on theoretical origins.

Keywords: Personal Branding, personal brand, Employer Branding

Introduction

Branding has been widely covered in the academic management studies. In the last 20 years, even though Personal Branding is gaining an increasing interest as well, scientific research is narrow and stands in need for clarification. What we can identify as of this stage of research is that Personal Branding is in the crosswalks of variety of fields (Lair et al., 2005), yet still finding its right place.

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One of the goals of this article is to understand the theoretical backgrounds and origins of the five main disciplines – marketing, economics, psychology, sociology – that has covered the phenomenon so far.

The lack of a commonly accepted definition of Personal Branding poses a significant challenge for the field. Without a clear understanding of the key drivers and attributes of personal branding, opportunities for empirical research are limited. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive examination of existing theories of personal branding, in order to serve as a reference for future research in this area. Through an examination of the background and underlying principles of these theories, this paper aims to contribute to the development of a more robust and widely accepted definition of personal branding.

As an introduction, one of the key motivators is the transformation of responsibility at the intervals of organizations and individuals (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). One of the reasons for that is the effect of technological transformation on how people work and interact: „personal brands ... need to be managed in a virtual age" (Gioia, 2014, p. 131).

The article highlights suitable constructs and the development of current definitions, which do not contain an accepted definition (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Based on this review, the paper also proposes a new definition that exceeds current limitations and can be used in a wide application. This provides the Research Question of the article:

- RQ1: What is Personal Branding?

Methodology

Conducting a literature review serves to discover relevant studies and theoretical frameworks in a systematic and coherent approach. A search was conducted in various databases, such as Scopus, EBSCO, Web of Science; using „Personal Branding", „personal brand" as strings and keywords. The following criteria has been applied (((TS=("personal brand*")) AND TI=("personal brand*")) AND DT=(Article OR Review)) Timespan: All years, Search language=Auto. Additionally, the references of selected articles were also inspected and as an outcome, further articles were added to the list of 116 documents. Out of the first list, irrelevant results – different topic, not scientific, out-of-fate – were excluded.

In the next stage, the list was narrowed down to 42 articles focusing on the definition and origins of Personal Branding, then other articles from references were added, resulting in 48 articles.

It is fair to state that the research of this area is in its early development, thus the aim and methodology of this paper is theory development based on existing articles using the multiple case study method, which is considered to be one of the best tools for theory development (Perry, 1998).

Given the lack of research in this area, this study is aimed at theory development rather than theory testing. The present empirical study draws on the multiple case study method, which is particularly powerful for theory development and to get a holistic view of a certain construct (Perry, 1998).

The literature review was conducted in four stages: (1) Initial keyword search yielded 218 articles. (2) Additional exclusion criteria applied: Working papers, non peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and duplicate articles were removed, resulting in 158 articles. (3) Abstracts and references analyzed,

resulting in 71 relevant articles. (4) Content analysis performed, resulting in 72 articles for the literature review. These articles provide a comprehensive understanding of personal branding and its constructs.

Theoretical Origins of Personal Branding

Indisputably, Personal Branding is an interdisciplinary construct, having origins in broad cluster of theories. While recent articles revolve within management studies, sources of origins go back to psychology, sociology, economics and marketing (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Wee and Brooks, 2010) outlines it. Theoretical backgrounds serve as foundation to understand the constructs for a proper definition of Personal Branding.

Psychological Theories

Identity to others is one of the key aspects of Personal Branding activities that in a positive outcome, may result in self-fulfilment. Psychological scientific discussions focused on these phenomenon since the early 20th century, starting with Mead's (1934) identity formation. Throughout fulfilment and self-esteem studies (Cohen, 1959), it evolved to an own track of self-development (Shepherd, 2005; Khedher, 2015).

Sociological Theories

Influencing perception is also a fundamental construct of Personal Branding, may it be strategic or unconscious. This might be the reason why considerable management articles base their research on sociological theoretical backgrounds, since it examines inputs and outputs (Goffman, 1959) of the construct, which can also be used to understand the motivators of Personal Branding.

Economic Theories

On the course of defining Personal Branding, it is pivotal to recognize how economics shape social interactions. The identified earliest work that has been well-cited in regards to Personal Branding is Spence's (1973) signalling theory, which identifies the unique characteristics and differentiations within communication. To get a full circle picture up to current state of research, reputation economy (Gandini, 2016) also references signalling theory as one of the origins with the aim to identify economic motivators in shaping perception.

Marketing Theories

Marketing theories serve backgrounds for several constructs of Personal Branding. Human brand research emerged from brand identity and personality studies (Aaker, 1997). Brand equity measurements aim to understand the relation to financial equity (Simon & Sullivan, 1993). A similar approach is presented as in sociological theories, which is understanding branding as a process, which is the outcome of positioning (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Branding literature (de Chernatony, 1999) has widened its focus from a solely on brand image and differentiation to brand identity (Kapferer, 1997).

Regarding to Personal Branding, "there has been virtually no empirical analysis of brand equity measures from a self-branding perspective" (Evans, 2017, p. 304).

Figure 1.: *Relevant Theoretical Origins of Personal Branding.*

Dimension / Theory	Psychological	Sociological	Economic	Marketing
Origins	Identity formation (Mead, 1934), Self-fulfillment (Cohen, 1959)	Dramaturgical perspective (Goffman, 1959), Capital-theory (Bourdieu, 1986)	Flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1990), Signaling theory (Spence, 1973), Reputation economy (Gandini, 2016)	Marketing beyond product (Kotler, 1967)
Foundation	PB's role in identity formation to others	"Entrerprising self"	Link between PB and motivators	Human brand, reputation

Source: own table

The common demeanour is that all of the theories are within social sciences and are all fundamentals in order to define Personal Branding (Vallass and Cummis, 2018). A brand is recognized the brand itself and its attributes are not only known but understood by its target audience (Simeon, 2006). Key identified constructs are identity, perceptions, brand management, and economic motivators. While it is worth understanding the origins and get a clear picture of the theoretical frameworks, they are, in fact, theoretical with no or minimal added value to the advancement of Personal Branding research.

Defining Personal Branding

Previous research has established that definitions of personal branding are diverse. The terms "personal branding" (Shepherd, 2005) and "self-branding" (Gandini, 2016) are commonly recognized in the literature. However, various synonyms have been employed to describe the concept of positioning oneself for success (Parmentier et al., 2013).

Theoretical frameworks can assist in grouping these definitions into two segments: 1) marketing, which utilizes principles similar to product branding, and 2) psychology and sociology, which focus on the way others interpret individuals. Marketing terms such as "added value" and "differentiation" are utilized, while psychology and sociology focus on concepts such as "reputation," "uniqueness," "image," "identity," and "self-promotion." Despite being referenced in various articles, there is no widely accepted definition of personal branding, and as a result, a standardized metric system for measuring personal branding, such as "the process in which people make efforts to market themselves" (Khedher, 2015, p. 20), is currently not available.

Previous attempts to define Personal Branding relied on four key attributes (Gorbatov et al., 2018):

(1) *Strategic* attributes anticipate a directed outcome for an explicit target group. This narrow approach leaves out other crucial aspects, since not every impression management is strategic or intentional, yet on the contrary might be unconscious (Bolino et al., 2016).

(2) *Positive* as an attribute is used in more papers, implying that Personal Branding is always a positive impression. It excludes every other case with no positive outcome, which might cause misleading results, since a negative outcome can also serve as a differentiator of one's brand.

(3) *Promise* goes in hand with strategic attributes, signalling a promise to a certain target group. While human-, employer-, and employee branding (Thomson, 2006) do offer *'promise'*, Personal Branding might not.

(4) *Person-centric* shows one's actions and efforts, which is not necessarily present within human-, or employee branding.

Not only the lack of common understanding of these attributes, moreover the decision of whether or not they should serve as foundation for the definition might be the cause of variety of cited definition. While these attributes indirectly identified during the process of Personal Branding, their relation is not clear yet, thus the definition meets unclarified criteria. Namely, during the process of the Personal Branding, which includes stages of self-reflection, research, positioning, communication, and management.

The most common definition of Personal Branding in the reviewed articles originates from Suddaby's (2010) construct clarity guidelines and formulated by 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."*

As the analysis of the key attributes showed, Suddaby's (2010) definition consist of several limitations. Gorbatov (2018, p. 6) revised some aspects of the definition:

> *"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."*

The introduced definitions still leave debatable aspects. Just by focusing on the identified key attributes, it is dubious if Personal Branding in reality always is positive, strategic. Moreover, it is worth the argument if Personal Branding always results in a differentiated outcome that on top of the differentiation also secures competitive advantage.

In pursuance of constructing an all-around usable definition of Personal Branding, this article eliminates any limiting attributes should and proposes the following definition:

> *"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."*

To support the proposed definition, it is important to understand the difference between the constructs of personal brand and personal branding. It is especially important, since in academia, "personal brand" and "personal branding" are often used interchangeably, but there are subtle differences in their definitions.

Personal brand can be interpreted as an output or result. In marketing theories, it is defined as "the unique combination of skills and experiences that make individuals who they are, and how they are perceived by others" (Kotler et al., 2013, p. 577). This definition focuses on the unique characteristics and qualities that make an individual distinct and how they are perceived by others.

On the other hand, Personal Branding is a process, which is in a parallel fashion to the proposed definition. Fournier and Avery (2011, p. 39) defined Personal Branding as "the ongoing process of establishing a prescribed image or impression in the mind of others about an individual, group or organization". This definition emphasizes that personal branding is an ongoing process and focuses on the image or impression that an individual wants to create in the minds of others.

In summary, personal brand refers to the unique combination of skills, experiences, and qualities that make an individual distinct, and how they are perceived by others, while personal branding refers to the ongoing process of creating a desired image or impression of oneself in the minds of others.

Future Research

As a growing construct within academia, any further definition attempts and cross-application with other discipline's methodologies of theoretical backgrounds are not only welcome, but needed. Especially to understand Personal Branding as a process, including their attributes, inputs and outputs.

Further understanding of the process of Personal Branding with empirical evidence is needed in order to get a better understanding of the attribute and motivating factors of the process, for instance as Khedher (2015) identified several stages:

1) Self-reflection: This stage involves taking the time to reflect on one's own skills, values, and experiences. It is important to understand one's strengths and weaknesses, as well as what sets them apart from others.

2) Research: This stage involves researching the industry and target audience to gain a better understanding of what is in demand and what is expected of individuals in the field.

3) Positioning: This stage involves identifying one's unique selling points and choosing a target audience. This includes deciding on the message that one wants to convey to the target audience and the image that one wants to project.

4) Communication: This stage involves communicating one's personal brand to the target audience through a variety of channels such as social media, networking events, and personal branding materials.

5) Management: This stage involves actively managing one's personal brand by monitoring and adjusting it as needed. This includes keeping up to date with industry trends and adapting to changes in the market.

Conclusion

Personal Branding is awaiting to find its place within academia. Both comprehensive and specific empirical research and framework development contributes to its advancement at this stage. The

construct needs to be broken to parts by inputs and outputs with the underlying understanding of how it is connected to other constructs.

With hope, the definition introduced in this paper will contribute to the advancement of Personal Branding research.

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