

The Impact and Mediating Role of Personal Brand Authenticity on the Self-Actualization of University Graduates Entering the Workforce

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Purpose of the Study: This study highlights the value of teaching personal branding to university students and preparing them for the workforce. A conceptual model of the personal branding process is proposed utilizing Bandura's self-efficacy theory. We examine how student confidence in their personal brand management (personal brand management efficacy) and their ability to reference themselves and others as brands (personal brand belief concept) influence the authenticity of their personal brand, which impacts the self-actualization of students.

Method/Design and Sample: Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) were used to analyze 117 undergraduate business student participant responses from a large university in the southeastern United States.

Results: *Personal brand concept belief* and *personal brand management efficacy* positively influenced *personal brand authenticity*. *Personal brand authenticity* positively influenced *self-actualization*. Further, the effects of personal brand concept belief and personal brand management efficacy on self-actualization are mediated by personal brand authenticity.

Value to Marketing Educators: As university graduates encounter competitive and volatile employment markets, educators can provide value through teaching personal branding strategies. Our results suggest personal branding has the potential to provide direction and advantages to students navigating the job search process. Academic programs can assist students in their personal branding through coursework, assignments, and interactions with industry professionals who have created their own successful brands.

Keywords: personal branding, personal brand management efficacy, personal brand concept belief, personal brand authenticity, self-actualization, job market, marketing education

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INTRODUCTION

Following the onset of the worldwide pandemic related to Covid-19, 81% of the global workforce had their workplace partially or completely closed (ILO, 2020). The Bureau of Labor Statistics put the April 2020 unemployment rate at a post Great Depression high of 14.7%. This starkly contrasts with the record low 3.5% unemployment rate for 2019, which ended the longest economic expansionary period (126 months) in the history of the United States (NBER, 2020). This occurs while the nature of entry level jobs is changing (Buchmann, 2002). Additionally, the job market is becoming increasingly competitive in a global marketplace (Dutton, 2017). Employers have high expectations for entry-level employees and managers desiring certifications, education, and experiences (Pefanis Schlee & Harich, 2010). With the advent of the

gig economy, individuals are now competing for short-term work (Davis, 2016). Students can reach self-actualization by finding a fulfilling career where they can solve problems and find meaning in their work. To do this, they must conquer some of the obstacles in finding a job in today's environment.

In this volatile and stressful environment, educating students on marketing strategies that facilitate converting opportunities into successful employment becomes critical. One such strategy is personal branding. This has attracted significant attention among scholars in different disciplines (Gorbatov *et al.*, 2018; Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). It is a hot topic in our society. Like successful corporate brands, individual personal brands can reap financial benefits.

Castrillon (2019) suggests personal branding is more important now than ever. This is very much the case with most consumers having a presence online.

Individuals have one chance to make a first impression. This is occurring earlier, preceding actually meeting in person. For university students, young professionals, and even established professionals, it is important to understand how they can communicate who they are to differentiate themselves in the cluttered marketplace and obtain more opportunities. Business professionals suggest personal brand management can be utilized to continually craft, edit, and refine oneself (Gupta, 2016; Llopis, 2013; Rousch, 2019). Others also suggest authenticity is an important component of personal branding which can be shown through storytelling (Childs, 2019; Sweetwood, 2017). Therefore, many practitioners highlight the importance of personal branding, brand management, and authenticity, but little is known about their relationships with one another. This warrants a further investigation into the processes and underlying relationships between these concepts to give professionals a roadmap as to how they can utilize personal branding strategies to achieve their desired goals.

Prolific research underscores the importance and relevance of personal branding, but research is lacking about the extent to which individual students use it to cut through the noise and differentiate themselves in a competitive job market. Also unknown is how prepared graduates are to engage in the personal branding process or what motivates that engagement. Researchers have worked to identify challenges individuals face when creating personal brands (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). Our research builds upon previous findings by investigating the extent to which university students embrace the *personal branding* concept, their perception of their skill in *brand management efficacy*, and how these impact *personal brand authenticity* and *self-actualization*. Identifying skills required for personal branding (Manai & Holmlund, 2015), and better understanding the personal branding process may provide valuable support to young students and others facing the upheavals in seeking employment (Gorbatov *et al.*, 2018).

We fill this gap with an investigation into whether individuals: (1) embrace personal branding self as a brand concept, (2) possess personal branding skills perceived effective in executing a personal branding strategy, (3) use those personal branding skills to execute strategy toward an authentic personal brand, and (4) find the branding strategy leads to self-actualization goals. We contribute to the personal branding conversation and explore this strategy as a value-add students can use to secure the best career opportunities possible. This is important because, "taking control of your personal brand may mean the difference between an unfulfilling job and a rewarding career" (Clark, 2011, p. 78).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Personal Branding

The existence of people as brands was first common to industries such as film, music, sport, art and politics

(Shepherd, 2005), eventually gaining traction among more mundane vocations. Most scholars referenced the construct with the phrase "personal branding," while some used self-branding (Khamis *et al.*, 2017), and others opted for self-marketing (Chen, 2013). This illustrates how the academic terminology was inconsistently applied. Further, lack of clear definitions, made it difficult to specify theoretical relationships (MacKenzie, 2003).

Recently, a research review synthesized the widely disparate literature in order to identify the personal branding construct's core attributes, and provide an elucidating definition. "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). This unifying definition is largely consistent with prior literature (e.g., Peters, 1997; Shepherd, 2005). It adheres to the rigorous approach by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2016), by positioning the concept as separate and distinct in its nomological network, identifies antecedents as well as consequences, and also distinguishes it from related concepts.

The personal branding concept was introduced to the business world over two decades ago, with Tom Peters largely credited with introducing the concept (Peters, 1997). At that time, Peters forecasted the current state of affairs when he explained the personal branding opportunity would provide a "chance at becoming a free agent in an economy of free agents" (Peters, 1997, p. 2). In such an economy, everyone would enjoy a chance to stand out.

It took decades for the concept to gain the attention of scholars. With personal branding gaining popularity among industry professionals, it put practitioners ahead of the curve relative to academic insights into the topic (Gorbatov *et al.*, 2018). The introduction of social media tools that could be leveraged toward personal branding further fanned the flames of personal branding, which ignited an explosion of interest for academic research and practical applications.

Research suggests "branding is inevitable when participating in an online environment" (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011, p. 48). Executives initially shunned or avoided social media for brand management, because they did not understand how it could best be leveraged. Now embraced among business professionals, there is more of a need for proper personal branding by university students. When students utilize social media platforms as part of their coursework, they are more motivated and involved (Rinaldo *et al.*, 2013). Educators would benefit from showing how these tools can be utilized for personal branding, as well as creating more of a sense of community within the classroom (Clarke & Nelson, 2012). This can be helpful for students since they are hesitant to use social networking tools for education and work (Nemetz *et al.*, 2012). Given the pressures on universities and graduates, neither enjoy the luxury of

delay with regard to teaching the management and implementation of personal branding.

Complicating the matter is the complex interrelated nature of online networks, which allow anyone to create as well as contribute content and commentary related to one's personal brand identity (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). Not all information is within the control of the individual, which highlights the challenge of managing personal branding. Canned strategies do not work for corporate brands and will not work for individuals. There is a need to establish one's differentiating uniqueness (Cederberg, 2017; Chen, 2013; Gorbатов *et al.*, 2018). The purpose is to promote and differentiate oneself apart from the competition to gain positive attention in a noisy environment (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011; Shepherd, 2005).

University graduates are ultimately minted with the universities' imprimatur. The students are products of their environments (Thomson *et al.*, 2005), or in the case of the university, its environment, culture, and teachings. On the other hand, as agentic actors, individuals are simultaneously the producers of environments where they "influence the course of events and take a hand in shaping their lives" (Bandura, 2000, p. 75). Therefore, the personal branding process is consistent with a key premise of social cognitive theory, which is that individuals are producers of experiences and shapers of events (Bandura, 2000).

Personal Brand Authenticity

Brand authenticity has been defined by Morhart *et al.* (2015, p. 202) as "the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true toward itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves." Modifying this definition to a personal branding context, we suggest personal brand authenticity consists of the perceptions of self and others that an individual's portrayal of self to the outside world is accurate, true, and consistent. Brand authenticity includes being true to brand beliefs and values (Wood *et al.* 2008). When crafting their personal brand, individuals are advised not "to change oneself, but build on individual strengths" (Gorbатов *et al.*, 2018, p. 9). Failed segmentation, clashing identities, and mixed messages create inauthenticity. Authenticity is needed to enhance message receptivity and strengthen relationship quality (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011).

Consumer research reveals authenticity is attributed to brands (Napoli *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, authenticity is central to brand status, equity, and reputation (Beverland, 2005), considered essential to human development (Wood *et al.*, 2008), and is fundamental to well-being (Hora, 1998). Greater alignment between personality and roles is correlated to higher well-being (Roberts & Donahue, 1994), while lower levels of variability between personality and roles is related to greater authenticity. Greater feelings of inauthenticity inversely correlate to self-esteem, mediating the relationship between role variability and well-being (Sheldon *et al.*, 1997).

Research establishes that consumers struggle to differentiate between 'real' and 'fake' (Napoli *et al.*,

2014), while authenticity is self-authored (Wild, 1965) and self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Individuals should communicate their personal self-brand concepts are authentic as well as reflect sincerity, genuineness, reality, and truth (Hora, 1998). By being true and authentic to their self-brand concept, individuals leveraging personal branding strategies will convince employers and others that they are honestly represented and worthy of consideration.

Brand Concept Belief

Brand concept belief consists of whether individuals self-reference themselves and others to be brands (Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). In other words, this concept consists of individuals perceiving everyone to have their own unique brand, so these individuals would therefore recognize and believe in personal branding. We expect self as brand concept will lead to personal brand authenticity. Consistent with social identity theory, we expect cognition of "self as a brand" concept has an implication for the future behavior of the self in the role of a personal brand. This cognition effectively situates the self in a social network space and increases the commitment to that identity and "the likelihood of behavioral choices related to that identity" (Merolla *et al.*, 2012, p. 149). Therefore, structural positioning of the self as a brand should positively influence personal branding authenticity. Thus we hypothesize:

H₁: Brand—concept belief positively influences personal brand authenticity.

Self-Efficacy in Personal Branding Management

Some scholars question if an individual's success in personal branding may be separate from their actual professional expertise, skills, talent, and knowledge. This may be a consequence of the way these attributes are bundled, presented, and pitched (Lair *et al.*, 2005), or in other words, marketed. Leveraging marketing expertise through personal branding is not to be divorced from such skills and knowledge, but to instead feature them. Individuals build their personal brand with a brand promise that delivers value to their target audience. The value proposition must be consistent with reality, authentic and managed efficaciously. Much human action occurs based on the individual's belief of personal efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and marketing is one such human action. Efficacy is critical to human endeavor because it influences goals such as becoming the person one seeks to become. This confidence level also influences the mindset of the individual which can also influence action. Efficacy related to personal brand management will influence how strategically and optimistically the individual approaches the personal branding process, and even their willingness to engage in the process of becoming an authentic brand based on research of Bandura (2000). This is important because personal branding "requires agency and intentionality" in order to manage the "desired brand image" (Gorbатов *et al.*, 2018, p. 5) produced, which may result in a more authentic personal brand being presented to the marketplace.

Bandura (2000) suggests the degree to which an individual has efficacy, both directly and indirectly impacts their goals, as well as outcomes. The individual's efficacy of managing their personal brand may also be an antecedent to achieving the self-actualizing goals of personal branding in addition to creating personal brand authenticity.

Efficacy is a critical determinant in whether and how individuals are empowered to act. Individuals are assumed to have a need for power (McClelland, 1975), where power reflects their need to influence others (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). One of the most important mechanisms to influence others is to be authentic. Brand management efficacy serves as the motivational sense of power that allows individuals to self-manage the personal brand in order to adequately cope with events, situations, and/or the people with whom they interact. Generally speaking, everyone has a need for self-management to meet the demands imposed by their social world. One such social need is to be authentic in order to connect with others and persuade and influence them.

University mentors and instructors have the ability to foster self-efficacy beliefs among mentees and followers so students realize greater power in their brand management. Self-efficacy beliefs in personal brand management are critical for student success in personal branding, which empowers students to learn how to establish authentic personal brands. Skill development, mastery of technology, and competitive job markets satisfy self-efficacy needs (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011) and serve as motivators for students. Stronger brand management efficacy strengthens the individual's initiation and dedication behaviors related to the need for authentic brands. Brand management efficacy determines the effort people expend and how long they persist when confronting challenges (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura's self-efficacy theory, individuals' self-efficacy beliefs provide the impetus for achievement, serving as a "working model" for their respective world, and these thoughts or cognitive processes exert determinative influence (Bandura, 2001, pp. 3-4). Brand management efficacy will also influence the individual to learn more about how to execute a good personal branding strategy, which includes focusing and communicating one's brand authenticity. Thus we hypothesize:

H₂: Brand management efficacy positively influences personal brand authenticity.

Self-Actualization

Maslow's theory of motivation provided for a hierarchy of human needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. This revealed an individual's need for self-actualization and characterized it as a lifelong development process (Maslow, 1943). The self-actualizing individual is engaged in a process aimed at maximizing their potential.

Young adulthood is particularly relevant to the self-actualization process, because this is typically when

young people move away from being cared for by others and into a role of satisfying their own deficit needs as well as the pursuit of self-actualization. It is the point in time where the young graduates enter the workforce, build romantic relationships, begin a family, and so on. Employers often express dismay at finding these young people bring different attitudes, expectations, preparation, strengths, and shortcomings into the world. Millennials and Plurals want to feel they are making an important contribution. They want to collaborate and take their rightful place as part of something larger than themselves leaving a positive mark on the world (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). This suggests younger generations are focusing on self-actualization at an earlier life stage than those in the past. Very often, young people not only attend college, but also work part-time or full-time. This allows them to seek self-actualization through activities such as building a socially valued profession or focusing on important causes. Self-actualization is an important life goal and it is a primary motivation for building personal brands (Labrecque *et al.*, 2011). A more concrete outcome of self-actualization is the time students need to obtain full-time employment. Personal branding is one avenue that has the potential to provide the forward thrust they need. We expect authenticity will influence self-actualization goals and outcomes. Research indicates authenticity impacts products individuals consume and brands they own (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012). We suggest individuals can exist as brands and deploy strategies to build a reflection of their true authentic self, capturing the values and characteristics they offer as a brand.

Thus, we hypothesize:

H₃: Personal brand authenticity positively influences self-actualization goals and outcomes.

Further, we expect brand authenticity will mediate brand management belief's influence on self-actualization goals. As brand concept belief increases brand authenticity, individuals facilitate their professional self-actualization goals and concomitant motivations for self-improvement, growth and development because they feel more unique to represent themselves as a brand. Successful crafting of this authenticity serves as a mechanism for the brand concept belief to influence self-actualization of the individual as the personal brand, which is to say the brands that they become.

Thus, we hypothesize:

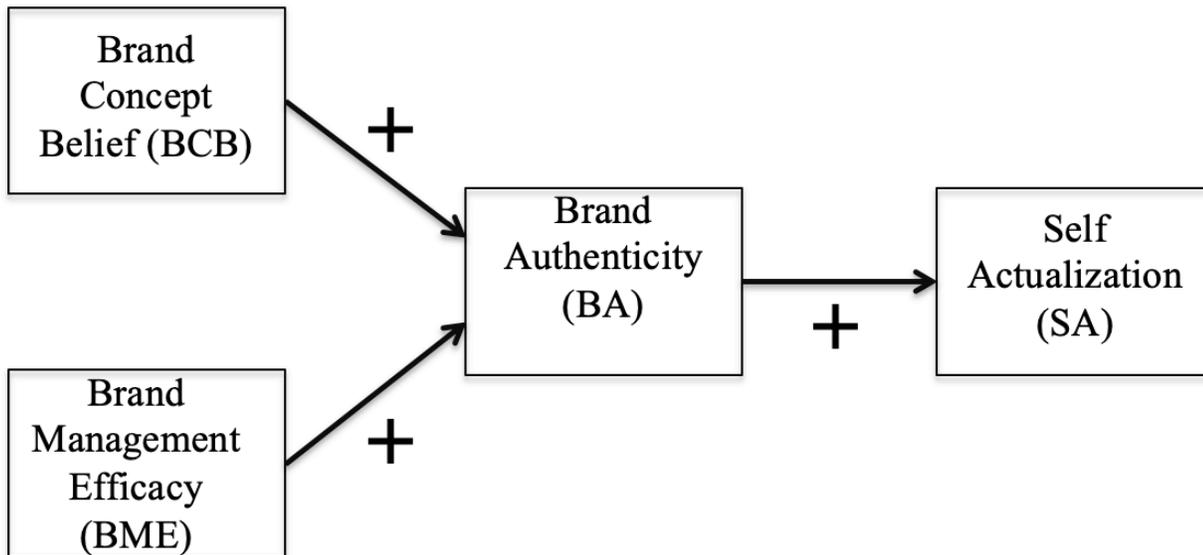
H₄: Personal brand authenticity mediates the influence of brand concept belief on self-actualization goals and outcomes.

Likewise, we expect brand authenticity will mediate brand management efficacy's influence on self-actualization goals. If individuals have a strong confidence to manage their own brand, they feel themselves as more authentic, which in turn, increases their self-actualization goals and outcomes.

H₅: Personal brand—authenticity mediates the influence of management efficacy on self-actualization goals and outcomes.

The hypothesized structural model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Hypothesized Structural Model



METHOD AND PROCEDURE

To test the proposed hypotheses, data were collected from senior business students at a large Southeastern university. Before surveys were distributed, a pre-test survey instrument was shared with graduate students and professors for general feedback and refinement. The survey used 7-point multi-item Likert scales (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) to measure constructs. To the extent possible, measurement scales from existing constructs used in prior studies were utilized and adapted to fit the personal branding context. Brand management efficacy is defined as “one’s belief in one’s overall competence to effect requisite performance” (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001, p. 63) in the management of one’s personal brand. Items measuring personal brand management efficacy (e.g., I can perform many personal branding tasks effectively) were adapted from the general efficacy scale of Chen *et al.* (2001). The wording was adapted to focus on personal branding. Brand concept belief is a two-item measure that captures whether participants consider themselves and others to be brands (i.e., I consider each individual to be a unique brand; I consider myself to be a unique brand). Personal brand authenticity captures the dimension of authentic living, which involves the brand “being true to oneself and in accordance to one’s values and beliefs” (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008, p. 386). Items measuring personal brand authenticity were adapted from Wood *et al.* (2008). Self-actualization was defined as “feeling that you are developing your best potentials and making life meaningful” (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001, p. 339). Items measuring self-actualization (e.g., I am becoming who I really am; I feel a sense of deeper purpose in my life; I feel a deep understanding of myself

and my place in the world) were based on Sheldon *et al.* (2001).

An online survey was utilized allowing participants access to the instrument via laptop, tablet, or mobile device. The sample was recruited from the large regional university’s senior business students who were attending a required weekend workshop event on-campus. A final sample of 117 undergraduate business students (response rate of 100%) was obtained. The gender distribution was 44% male. Table 1 includes the correlation matrix.

Data Analysis

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) thereby examining the complete set of interrelated relationships among unobserved constructs, while also estimating measurement error (Hair, Jr. *et al.*, 2010; Kline, 2015). We conducted a power analysis for our sample of 117 using an alpha level of .05. The estimated power of 0.9 supports that the sample size is adequate. We also draw upon research supporting the use of an SEM approach with small samples (Bentler & Chou, 1987; Schreiber *et al.*, 2006). Gignac (2006) also suggests SEM is an appropriate method to utilize even with samples of approximately 100 participants. Muthen and Muthen (2002) indicate that there is no hard and fast rule for sample size; the need is dependent on the study related to missing data, variable distribution and the strength of the relationships in the study.

We first tested the measurement properties using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). All factor loadings were significant on the intended latent constructs indicating internal consistency. Composite reliabilities (CRs) and Cronbach alphas (CAs) satisfy adequacy thresholds (Hair, Jr. *et al.*, 2010; Kline, 2015) with all CRs and CAs above 0.78. Additionally, all average

variance extracted (AVE) values were greater than 0.62, indicating construct validity. Further, with the exception of the values for personal brand authenticity, the largest shared variance (LSV) of all variables was 59%, lower than the lowest AVE of 62%, lending support for discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker,

1981; Kline, 2015). In sum, the measures demonstrated both convergent validity and reliability (Bagozzi, 1980; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Results of the means, standard deviations and measurement analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix, Means, Standard Deviations and Measurement Analysis

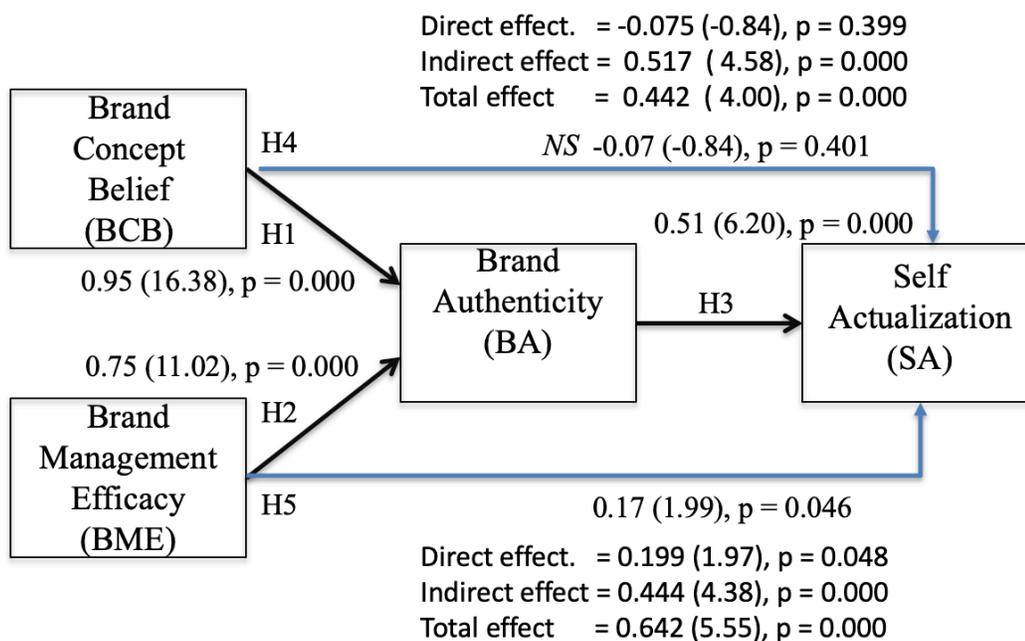
Variable	BCB	BME	PBA	SA	Variable	M	SD	AVE	LSV	CR	α
BCB	-				1. BCB	6.04	1.09	0.78	0.00	0.87	0.87
BME	.57**	-			2. BME	5.22	1.08	0.74	0.59	0.81	0.81
PBA	.71**	.77**	-		3. PBA	5.89	1.00	0.62	0.59	0.78	0.78
SA	.36**	.53**	.53**	-	4. SA	5.22	1.14	0.78	0.00	0.84	0.84

Note. BCB = brand concept belief; BME = brand management efficacy; PBA = personal brand authenticity; SA = self-actualization; n = 117. **Indicates a .01 significance level (two-tailed).

Subsequently, and consistent with the recommended procedures (Hu & Bentler, 1999; MacKinnon *et al.*, 2002; Mathieu & Taylor, 2007) procedures, we tested our proposed direct and mediation hypotheses with an SEM. Estimation of the structural model resulted in a model with good fit, $\chi^2(24) = 40.958$, RMSEA = 0.086,

90% CI [0.43, 0.126], p-close = 0.078, AIC/BIC = 2665.062-/ 2753.452; CFI = 0.975, TLI = 0.958, SRMR = 0.03, CD = 0.909. Our test results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Latent Structural Model Results



$\chi^2(24) = 40.958$, RMSEA = 0.086, 90% CI [0.43, 0.126], p-close = 0.078, AIC / BIC = 2665.062 / 2753.452; CFI = 0.975, TLI = 0.958, SRMR = 0.030, CD = 0.909. Standardized coefficients shown (z-scores in parenthesis).

RESULTS

H₁ predicts brand concept belief positively influences personal brand authenticity. As shown in Figure 2, brand concept belief has a strong, positive effect on personal brand authenticity ($\beta = 0.95, p < 0.001$), supporting H₁. H₂ predicts brand management efficacy positively influences personal brand authenticity. In support of H₂, brand management efficacy significantly enhances personal brand authenticity ($\beta = 0.75, p < 0.001$). H₃ predicts personal brand authenticity positively influences self-actualization. The results support the hypothesis by indicating a positive, significant link between personal brand authenticity and self-actualization ($\beta = 0.51, p < 0.001$).

In addition, we tested two mediation hypotheses if brand authenticity fully or partially mediates the relationship between brand concept belief and self-actualization (H₄) and the relationship between brand management efficacy and self-efficacy (H₅). Results show a full mediation effect between brand concept belief and self-actualization via personal brand authenticity (indirect effect: .517 (4.58), $p = 0.000$) as there is a non-significant direct link between brand concept belief and self-actualization ($\beta = -0.070, p = 0.401$) while there are significant relationships between brand concept belief and brand authenticity and between brand authenticity and self-actualization, supporting H₄. Next, results suggest a partial mediated effect between brand management efficacy and self-actualization through personal brand authenticity (indirect effect: 0.444 (4.38), $p = 0.000$) with the significant direct link between brand management efficacy and self-actualization ($\beta = 0.17, p = 0.046$), supporting H₅. Overall, the results provide support of all proposed hypotheses in the empirical model.

DISCUSSION

Drawing upon the theory of self-efficacy, our findings aid in understanding the direct role personal brand management efficacy has on self-actualization. We also show the influence of brand concept belief for personal brand authenticity—for individuals in the personal branding process. Self-efficacy in personal branding management allows individuals to create, position, and maintain a personal mix of characteristics that provide a brand promise to the target audience. Authenticity is particularly important for university graduates and new professionals, because they are entering a new phase of life that carries a high degree of uncertainty. Being authentic serves to reduce the angst of that situation, positively direct energy, and convert positive actions toward self-actualization goals. This resonates more strongly with the target audience because individuals are drawn to authenticity and generally have visceral negative reactions to all things inauthentic. Hence, students with authentic personal brands increase their employment prospects by being seen more favorably.

Personal brand management self-efficacy is important in this process because it determines coping strategies (Bandura, 1997), which are needed to refine the personal brand as one receives feedback. We identify the role of self-efficacy in managing a personal

brand specifically for its importance in coping with taxing demands, professional life choices, and realizing the accomplishment of self-actualization goals (Bandura, 1977). This is important for all emerging professionals, but particularly salient as young business students are struggling to self-actualize in an authentic and efficacious way.

Instructors have the ability to adapt their classrooms to teach skills in personal branding. This can be achieved through social media assignments (Petruca, 2016). A number of assignments and activities already exist for students to be able to build their personal brands online and utilize personal branding skills. This includes students creating their personal brands through a popular professional social networking site, LinkedIn (Zhao, 2020). Others have created personal branding activities through blogging exercises and other platforms like Pinterest (Johnson, 2017). Some educators have even gamified personal branding assignments to increase student engagement and participation in the learning process (Robson, 2019). Based on the number of recent assignments and activities instructors have created pertaining to personal branding student learning outcomes related to personal branding, our model supports the rationale and benefits of including these within the teaching curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Personal branding is gaining value among academics and practitioners, which highlights the value of our findings. This study narrows the gap between personal branding theory and its application (Hughes, 2007). Our findings suggest personal branding is important and worthwhile because when students effectively present an authentic brand, they attain greater levels of self-actualization, which has implications for progression in life beyond college.

Universities also benefit from this strategy because student debt loads, admissions scandals, budget crises and Covid-19 bring increasing pressures on higher education. It is critical that universities work harder to assist in promoting the success of their graduates. Early in academic programs, the university experience should provide students with tools for effective personal brand management. Undoubtedly, students turn their attention to the need for personal branding as they approach graduation or immediately thereafter. However, such delay may disadvantage them in their search for meaningful, satisfying employment, because personal branding is a long-term strategy that should be undertaken well before graduation is at hand.

Additional research is necessary to replicate findings and build on the current model. This cross-sectional study uses a small sample of students in a single college of one university in a specific region of the United States. This may limit the generalizability of findings to all emergent young professionals around the world. Additional research should investigate how students approach personal branding management in a variety of colleges, regions, and cultures.

Particularly pressing is the need for scale development and research informing how the personal brand is constructed and managed in modern labor markets where individuals experience escalating insecurity, gig-based work, and continually confront a need to train and embrace new jobs and career paths (Blair, 2016; Davis, 2016; Gorbатов *et al.*, 2018). Personal branding is a dynamic construct, subject to constant need for change (Cederberg, 2017). Future research should seek to expand upon these findings to improve understanding of how undergraduate students embrace the personal branding concept and their assessments of self-efficacy at implementing personal brand management strategies. This is especially imperative with the rise of individuals who value brands as part of their everyday consumption process (Blair, 2019; Corriea, 2016). It would also be useful to study these relationships among students over time, and review how different university programs may assist students in these endeavors. Identifying the best methods for teaching this process and requisites for effective curricula would be a beneficial pedagogical research stream.

It would be beneficial for future researchers to also explore other consequences of personal brand authenticity. This could include an exploration into career specific constructs such as expectations of career success. Research into this area would be beneficial for students, academics, practitioners, and researchers to build on our current model and understanding of brand management efficacy, brand concept belief, brand authenticity, and self-actualization.

With a number of business professionals suggesting personal brand authenticity is a critical component of building and maintaining your personal brand (Childs, 2019; Sweetwood, 2017), future research into the effectiveness of activities and assignments that marketing instructors could utilize in courses would be fruitful. An exploration into the effectiveness of different activities and assignments could give instructors more confidence that their desired learning outcome has been met. Accreditation agencies value activities and assignments that allow for assessment of student

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learning outcomes. Further, obtaining objective measures of dependent variables important to students and universities could provide evidence of learning outcome achievement. A few examples of such objective dependent variable outcomes resulting from personal branding include graduate employment rates, number of job offers and evaluation of starting salaries. In light of business school requirements to meet standards of accreditation bodies such as Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB) (Julian & Ofori-Dankwa, 2006), this would be a beneficial area for future research for multiple stakeholders in higher education. Future research could also explore the role of social media usage on personal branding knowledge of students. With individuals spending more time online and using social media platforms at younger ages (Smith & Anderson, 2018), marketing instructors may see more students coming into their classrooms with a better understanding of personal branding. Social media is one common way for individuals to build their brand through networking, creating content, and determining future personal branding strategies. Jacobson (2020) recently investigated how social media managers engaged in personal branding regularly because they viewed themselves as always on the job market. Being more active online could result in a better understanding of personal branding. Research exploring the relationship between social media usage and personal branding would be beneficial to instructors looking to create social media activities and assignments to continue the development of personal branding skills of students. Additionally, examining cohort differences between underclassmen and upperclassmen in a university setting (as well as generational cohorts) could show how differences in personal branding knowledge and experiences over the course of a university experience.

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