

Do Strong Personal Brands Make Stronger Employee Advocates? The Impact of Personal Brand Equity on Employee Advocacy

Dominyka VENCIUTE, ISM University of Management and Economics, Dominyka.Venciute@ism.lt

Gintautas SPENCE, ISM University of Management and Economics, 061895@stud.ism.it

Ricardo FONTES CORREIA, Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, ricardocorreia@ipb.pt

Abstract

In today's contemporary organizational contexts, employees aren't just workers, as they also play an important role in representing their organizations both offline and online. As personal branding increasingly shapes online identity and professional influence, organizations have begun to acknowledge the strategic importance of employees as brand advocates. This study examines the relationship between Personal Brand Equity (PBE) and Employee Advocacy Intention (AI), while also exploring the mediating effect of Organizational Identification (OI) and the moderating effect of employee hierarchy (managerial vs. non-managerial roles). The results of a quantitative online survey of 290 professionals in Lithuania across various industries demonstrate that PBE has a positive impact on AI, with OI fully mediating this relationship. This implies that identification with the organization is a key psychological construct that links employees' personal brands to their advocacy intentions. The results also show that for non-managers, the link between personal branding and advocacy is stronger than for managers.

Keywords: personal branding, employee advocacy, organizational identification
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INTRODUCTION

Personal branding, defined as the process of communicating one's identity, values, and expertise (Jacobson, 2020), has become an important determinant of one's credibility that positively contributes to career outcomes (e.g., Scheidt et al., 2020), leaders' communication (e.g., Venciute et al., 2023), and professional visibility (e.g., Gorbatov et al., 2018; Gorbatov et al., 2024). As social media and professional networking platforms like LinkedIn continue to reshape communication dynamics, employees have acquired unusual control over how they present themselves online. This evolution positions employees not only as workers of the organizations but also as advocates of their organizations. With digital visibility becoming a form of professional currency, the perceived equity of an individual's personal brand, commonly referred to as Personal Brand Equity (PBE), has gained significance both for individual career outcomes and broader corporate branding strategies.

While prior research has highlighted the importance of employee advocacy, defined as

voluntary promotion or defense of an organization and its values (Thelen, 2020), the mechanisms linking personal brands and advocacy behaviors remain underexplored. This study explores the impact of PBE on Advocacy Intention (AI), focusing on the mediating role of Organizational Identification (OI) and the moderating role of hierarchical position (managerial vs. non-managerial roles). Building on Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959) and Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), the research aims to provide empirical insights into how employees' personal brands shape their advocacy intentions, while also acknowledging organizational identification and employee's role (managerial vs. non-managerial) within the organization.

The research gap raises the following questions: what is the impact of employees' perceived personal brand equity on their employee advocacy intentions, and how does organizational identification mediate this relationship? How is the relationship between employees' perceived personal brand equity and employee advocacy intention moderated by employee hierarchy (managerial vs. non-managerial role of the employee)?

BACKGROUND

Positioning Employees as Personal Brands

Personal branding has evolved from self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) into a strategic tool for professional visibility and credibility (Labrecque et al., 2011). Employees with strong Personal Brand Equity (PBE) are perceived as valuable professionals, characterized by distinctiveness, authenticity, and trustworthiness (Gorbatov et al., 2020). PBE encompasses dimensions such as brand clarity, recognition, and differentiation, which collectively shape perceptions of competence and influence. Research shows that employees with strong personal brands often engage in behaviors that enhance both their careers and their organization's image, and considers them as employee influencers (Jacobson et al., 2023). The emergence of employees as informal brand ambassadors has been particularly visible in digital environments, where personal storytelling and professional networking foster trust and engagement (Venciute et al., 2024).

Signaling Theory and Professional Identity

Building on Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), employees communicate their value by sending observable, credible signals through their personal brands. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn amplify this signaling process, enabling individuals to showcase competence, alignment with organizational values, and authenticity (Connelly et al., 2011).

In advocacy contexts, signals include reposting company achievements, engaging in organizational storytelling, or endorsing corporate initiatives (Leonardi & Treem, 2020). Employees with strong PBE thus act as communicative bridges between themselves and their organizations, with advocacy functioning as both a professional and organizational signal. Nevertheless, alignment between personal and corporate values is critical, as signal

inconsistency can undermine authenticity (Thelen & Formanchuk, 2022).

Organizational Identification as a Mediator

Organizational Identification (OI) reflects the extent to which employees define themselves in terms of their organizational membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Employees with strong OI tend to internalize organizational values, which should lead to greater alignment in behaviors such as advocacy. This study positions OI as the key psychological mechanism linking PBE and advocacy. Recent evidence also suggests that leaders' personal branding efforts spill over to organizational outcomes, which contributes to enhanced visibility, image, and talent attraction, as well as reinforcing organizational identity among employees (Venciute et al., 2024). These insights suggest that OI is a mechanism that ensures personal branding benefits not only the individual but also the organization and can be considered as a variable that transforms personal branding from an individual-level strategy into organizationally beneficial advocacy.

The Role of Employee Hierarchy in Advocacy

While managers often engage in advocacy as part of formal responsibilities, non-managers may rely on advocacy as a pathway to visibility and career mobility. Non-managerial employees tend to use social media informally, creating perceptions of greater authenticity and trustworthiness. In contrast, managerial advocacy may be perceived as institutionalized, limiting its impact on authenticity. Previous research shows that leaders' personal branding is closely tied to organizational identity, positioning them as brand ambassadors whose communication often appears more strategic and aligned with organizational objectives (Venciute et al., 2023). At the same time, employees in emerging professions such as social media management embody an "always-on-the-job-market" mentality, strategically curating their personal brands for both current and future audiences (Jacobson, 2020). These insights suggest that hierarchy may condition the perceived authenticity of advocacy but also shapes employees' motivations to engage in it.

Based on the theoretical background above, the following hypotheses are raised: **H1:**

Perceived Personal Brand Equity has a positive impact on Advocacy Intention. **H2:**

Organizational Identification has a positive impact on Advocacy Intention. **H3:**

Organizational Identification mediates the relationship between Personal Brand Equity and Advocacy Intention.

H4: Employee role (Manager vs. Non-Manager) moderates the relationship between PBE and Advocacy Intention.

The conceptual model of the research is provided in Figure 1.

METHODOLOGY

To test the hypotheses, a quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted. Data were collected from 290 Lithuanian professionals employed across diverse industries and active on social media. The online questionnaire, administered via Qualtrics, included validated scales

for measuring PBE (Gorbatov et al., 2020), OI (Edwards & Peccei, 2007), and AI (Thelen & Formanchuk, 2022). Respondents also indicated their role (managerial vs. non-managerial) to examine the moderation effect. Data quality was ensured through screening questions, attention checks, and back-translation of survey items, and data collection complied with GDPR guidelines.

Reliability was evaluated through Cronbach's alpha, with all scales achieving excellent internal consistency ($\alpha > .93$). Descriptive statistics summarized the sample profile, followed by Pearson correlations to assess construct relationships. Hypotheses were tested via multiple regression models. Mediation was examined using the three-step procedure proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), while moderation was tested by introducing interaction terms (PBE \times Employee Role). Normality assumptions were checked through skewness and kurtosis values, all of which fell within acceptable ranges.

RESULTS

Sample Profile. Of the 290 respondents, 77.2% were female, 49.3% were aged 18–25, and 67.2% held non-managerial roles. Participants represented diverse industries, including education (29%), sales and marketing (20.7%), and healthcare (9.7%). Social media activity was high, with Facebook (76.2%) and Instagram (68.6%) being the most used platforms, followed by LinkedIn (43.4%).

Descriptive and Correlation Analysis. Participants generally reported moderate-to-high levels of PBE ($M = 3.54$), OI ($M = 3.89$), and AI ($M = 3.99$). Correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations among all constructs: PBE–OI ($r = .350, p < .001$), PBE–AI ($r = .344, p < .001$), and OI–AI ($r = .830, p < .001$).

Hypotheses Testing. The regression analysis provided clear support for all four hypotheses. First, Hypothesis 1 was supported, as Personal Brand Equity (PBE) was found to significantly and positively predict Advocacy Intention (AI) ($\beta = .344, p < .001$). Hypothesis 2 was also supported, with Organizational Identification (OI) emerging as a particularly strong predictor of AI ($\beta = .808, p < .001$). Hypothesis 3 proposed that OI would mediate the relationship between PBE and AI, and this was supported: when OI was introduced into the model, the direct effect of PBE on AI became non-significant ($\beta = .061, p = .080$), indicating full mediation. Finally, Hypothesis 4 was supported as well, showing that employee role moderated the relationship between PBE and AI ($\beta = -.886, p = .022$). Notably, non-managers demonstrated a stronger connection between personal branding and advocacy intentions compared to their managerial counterparts. The summary of the results is provided in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three key contributions. First, it supports the notion that PBE has a positive

impact on advocacy intentions, aligning with prior research on self-presentation and career signaling (Labrecque et al., 2011; Gorbato et al., 2020). Second, it establishes OI as a full mediator, underscoring the importance of internal psychological alignment in converting personal branding into advocacy (Bartels et al., 2006). Third, it demonstrates that employee hierarchy moderates advocacy dynamics, with non-managers exhibiting a stronger relationship between PBE and AI. This finding challenges the assumption that managers are the primary advocates and highlights the importance of rank-and-file employees in shaping external perceptions. By building on Self-Presentation Theory and Signaling Theory, the study contributes to identity-based perspectives of employee advocacy. Advocacy emerges not only as a function of external branding but also as an outcome of internalized organizational identification.

Theoretical Contributions

The results highlight the strategic value of personal branding initiatives and suggest that organizations can support employees in developing authentic personal brands through training and mentoring while also strengthening organizational identification by cultivating shared values, transparent communication, and ethical alignment. It is equally important to recognize non-managers as vital advocates and provide them with opportunities for visibility and influence. Moreover, advocacy programs should be tailored to hierarchical levels, encouraging voluntary rather than mandated engagement. By aligning personal and organizational branding in these ways, companies can unlock authentic, credible employee advocacy that enhances corporate reputation.

Limitations and Future Research

The study's limitations include its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported data, and geographic focus on Lithuania, which may limit generalizability. Future research should employ longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to test the stability and transferability of these findings. Mixed-methods approaches could enrich understanding of employees' experiences of branding and advocacy. Additional mediators (e.g., job satisfaction, perceived organizational support) and moderators (e.g., generational differences) could also contribute to further understanding of these relationships.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that while strong personal brands have a positive impact on employee advocacy, the impact also operates through organizational identification. Also, employee role matters given that non-managers leverage personal branding as a stronger driver of advocacy than managers. These findings indicate the need for organizations to cultivate both employees' personal brands and organizational alignment in order to ensure that advocacy is authentic, voluntary, and impactful.

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Figure 1. Conceptual model of the research

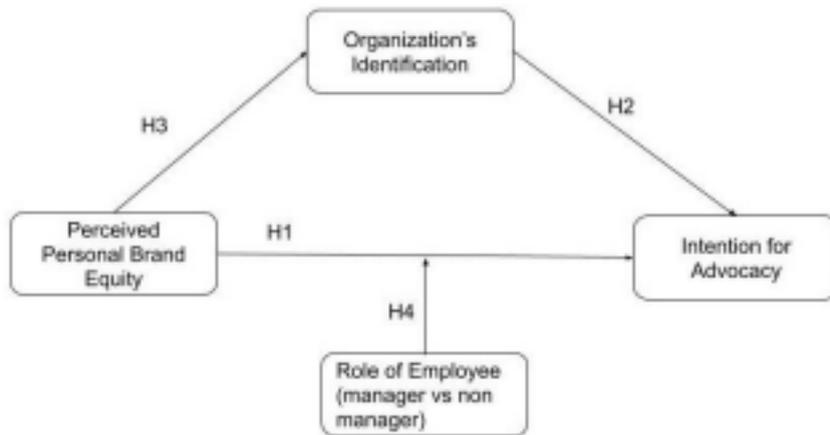


Table 1. Summary of Regression Results and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis		β (Standardized)	p-value	Result
H1	PBE \rightarrow AI	0.344	< .001	Supported
H2	OI \rightarrow AI	0.808	< .001	Supported
H3	PBE \rightarrow OI	0.350	< .001	Supported
	PBE + OI \rightarrow AI (testing mediation)	OI = 0.808 PBE = 0.061		Full
H4	PBE * Job Role \rightarrow AI	0.886	0.022	Supported