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The effects of personal brand equity on hiring recommendation: why, how, when...?

Nikolaos Pahos¹ · Athanasios Polypartis² · Nikolaos Kyriakopoulos³ · Beatrice I. J. M. Van der Heijden^{4,5,6,7,8}

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Abstract

Although previous literature has identified personal branding as an important concept in marketing, little is understood about the effects of personal brand equity (PBE) during the personnel selection process. To address this research gap, we performed two experimental studies and one field study in the domains of sales and engineering to examine the effect of candidates' PBE on hiring outcomes through recruiters' perceptions. This research draws upon signaling theory and an integration of the accessibility-diagnostics model with the competence-based view of careers and regards PBE as the interpreted outcome of personal branding signals, reflecting how recruiters perceive and evaluate the value conveyed by job candidates. We unveil that candidates' PBE positively predicts hiring recommendation and that credibility mediates this relationship. Moreover, job hierarchy and objective job qualifications appear to negatively moderate the relationship between candidates' PBE and hiring recommendation. Our findings also indicate that objective job qualifications negatively interact with candidates' PBE in predicting their credibility. The present research contributes to personal branding and selection research by offering novel insights into the role of PBE during the interview process, thereby providing guidance for job candidates and practitioners.

Keywords Personal brand equity (PBE) · Hiring recommendation · Job hierarchy · Objective job qualifications · Credibility · Signaling theory · Accessibility-diagnostics model

Introduction

In today's highly competitive business environments, individuals are confronted with multiple challenges when trying to protect and promote their professional brands (Parmentier & Fischer 2020). It is not surprising that those who brand themselves are often compensated for

their efforts (Khedher 2019). Accordingly, job seekers are required to signal their brand, differentiate themselves from others, and stand out in their professional lives to increase their chances for employment. Voices from the corporate world emphasize the importance of personal branding for job candidates and identify it as an important strategy that can give them an edge over other candidates,

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regardless of their qualifications or experience (Ragavan 2022).

With its roots in marketing, personal branding has been regarded as a proactive, planned, and strategic process that individuals use to communicate their unique value (Venciute et al. 2024). Following previous conceptualizations on product brand equity, marketing scholars identified the notion of brand equity, which comprises the effects on consumers attributed to the marketing of a product/service because of its brand (Keller 1993). Despite the abundance of studies on brand equity in marketing research, its transposition to the context of personal branding within careers and organizational studies remains scarce. Furthermore, while recent investigations have provided preliminary evidence on the influence of *personal brand equity* (PBE) on various career and organizational outcomes (e.g., Gorbatov et al. 2021), the limited existing research relies on the perceptions of the candidates themselves, thereby overlooking the perceptions of recruiters in evaluating personal branding, even though they are, in fact, the receivers of brand signals and the decision-makers in the selection process.

We aim to shed light on this uncharted territory by examining PBE from a recruiters' perspective, in terms of the perceived value of the candidate's personal brand, which comprises its equity. We define PBE as the recruiters' perceptions about the value of a job candidate's personal brand, derived from its *appeal*, *differentiation*, and *recognition*. Furthermore, we draw upon the competence-based view on careers, which suggests that individuals develop three career competencies: knowing-why (Why do I work?), knowing-how (How do I work?), and knowing-whom (With whom do I work) (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Guan et al. 2019). Linking such a view on careers to PBE, we build on Gorbato and associates (2021, p. 508) who argued that knowing-why reflects the candidate's desired professional identity and image (i.e., *brand appeal*), knowing-how enables the candidate to establish the points of parity and differentiation in a professional field (i.e., *brand differentiation*), while knowing-whom comprises the candidate's communication

and engagement strategy to bolster recognizability in their professional field (i.e., *brand recognition*).

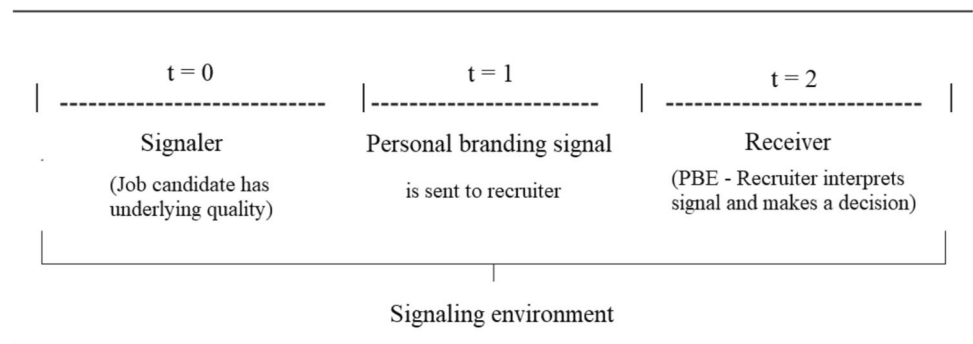
The above contextualized definition asserts that PBE stands apart from constructs within the same nomological field, such as popularity (i.e., being generally accepted by peers; Scott & Judge 2009) or prestige (i.e., attaining a higher social rank through recognition and respect for one's skills, success, or knowledge; Cheng et al. 2010). Unlike prestige, which is tied to social hierarchy, PBE is not necessarily hierarchical. Furthermore, while popularity and prestige can exist independently of an individual's actions and without them investigating strategic effort, PBE emphasizes the outcome of the deliberate crafting and sustaining of a personal brand.

It is also worth noting that personal branding and PBE are theoretically distinct concepts. Personal branding entails individual agency (Gorbatov et al. 2018) and reflects an individual's deliberate efforts to shape and enhance self-representation (Gorbatov et al. 2024). In contrast, PBE is the outcome, and the perceived value derived from these branding efforts. As Fig. 1 illustrates, in our empirical work, personal branding involves signaling a personal brand (in $t = 1$), whereas PBE reflects the interpretation of this signal and the perception of its value by others (in $t = 2$).

With this scholarly work, we aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of PBE in the hiring process by shifting the focus from candidates' self-perceptions of the value of their own PBE (Gorbatov et al. 2021, 2024) to recruiters' perceptions of PBE. Furthermore, we seek to extend existing PBE research, which primarily focused on $t = 1$ (e.g., Gorbatov et al. 2024), by shedding light on the under-researched mechanisms occurring in $t = 2$ where recruiters form judgments about a candidate's PBE. In doing so, we first examine the effect of PBE on hiring recommendation. Next, we aim to uncover moderating and mediating effects influencing this relationship.

In terms of moderating effects, we investigate the roles of *job hierarchy* and *objective job qualifications* in impacting the association between PBE and hiring recommendation. Understanding how PBE affects interview outcomes

Fig. 1 Signaling timeline of personnel selection (Adapted from Connelly et al. 2011)



Note: t = time



differently, for candidates of low versus high job hierarchy and objective job qualifications, may enable both interviewers and candidates to use PBE more strategically. In addition to these moderating effects, we also examine the mediating role of *credibility* and investigate how it funnels the effect of PBE on hiring recommendation. To the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have examined the role of PBE, credibility, objective job qualifications, and job hierarchy in one and the same empirical work, and in doing so we both add to the field of personal branding and to the field of careers literature.

Altogether, the objective of this scholarly work is to provide novel insights into the discourse surrounding PBE in organizational research. Two experimental studies and one field study are conducted to a) explore how PBE influences the outcomes of the personnel selection process, specifically hiring recommendation, b) shed light on the moderating roles of job hierarchy and objective job qualifications in the relationship between candidates' PBE and hiring recommendation, c) examine the mediating role of candidates' credibility in the relationship between candidates' PBE and hiring recommendation, and d) investigate the interaction effect between candidates' PBE and objective job qualifications in predicting candidates' credibility. Based on the outcomes of our empirical research, we provide theoretical implications and valuable recommendations for both recruiters and job candidates.

Theory and hypotheses

PBE and hiring recommendation

The concept of an individual's personal brand can be viewed through a contemporary careers perspective but lacks the equity component, which lies in its perceived value. The value of one's personal brand (i.e., PBE) is highly context dependent, because different industries and target audiences prioritize specific characteristics. For example, unlike athletes, fashion models, or academics, whose personal brands are often defined by domain-specific achievements like competition performance, public visibility, or academic publications, the value of engineering and sales candidates' personal brands lies in their ability to balance technical or interpersonal skills with intangible qualities like collaboration, and industry networking.

In the context of selection, the employment readiness of the candidate is a central concern for the recruiter, and the latter tries to identify personal and intangible qualities that are indicators of their employability (i.e., career potential; Fugate et al. 2021; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006). We posit that signaling theory (Spence 1973) can be applied to reason that personal branding will enhance

others' perceptions of internal and external employability. Therefore, this research builds on signaling theory, focusing on the behavior of different parties that have access to information based on which they can make decisions. Besides, we base our line of reasoning on the accessibility-diagnostics model by Feldman and Lynch (1988) who argued that an input *A* in memory, in our case beliefs about their career competencies or PBE, are used in determining a related judgement (in our case credibility) and/or outcomes (in our case hiring recommendation), as a positive function of its own accessibility and diagnostics, and an inverse function of the accessibility and diagnostics of alternative inputs *B*, *C*, and so on. In other words, to enable recruiters to come up with positive hiring recommendation, we assume that recruiters' perceptions about a possible candidate that are characterized as being someone with a high amount of employability or career potential (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006), will enhance candidates' credibility, and through this, result into positive hiring recommendations in a recruitment process.

Furthermore, we draw upon the competence-based view on careers, which suggests that individuals develop three career competencies: knowing-why (Why do I work?), knowing-how (How do I work?), and knowing-whom (With whom do I work) (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Guan et al. 2019). Linking such a view on careers to PBE, we build on Gorbatoev and associates (2021, p. 508) and define PBE as the recruiters' perceptions about the value of a job candidate's personal brand, derived from its *appeal* (the extent to which the features and characteristics of a candidate are appealing), *differentiation* (the extent to which these features and characteristics stand out compared to other candidates), and *recognition* (the extent to which descriptive and evaluative information about the candidate is stored in one's memory) (Gorbatoev et al. 2021). In particular, we posit that objective job qualifications and job hierarchy are important factors that might explain the underlying mechanisms in the relationship between PBE, credibility, and hiring recommendation. Specifically, candidates with a lower amount of objective job qualifications and being in a low-hierarchy role will benefit from a situation wherein recruiters perceive their brand as being appealing, differentiating, and recognizable.

In recruitment situations, formation asymmetries may occur when various parties have heterogeneous knowledge, for example, when one party (i.e., the sender) is not fully aware of the quality of the other party (i.e., the receiver) (Stiglitz 2002). For those asymmetries to be reduced, the senders communicate their unobservable qualities to the receivers through signals (Pemer & Skjølsvik 2019). Then, the receivers react to the signal and must decide how to interpret it. We suggest that personal branding is an effective signaling mechanism that decreases information asymmetry between how candidates perceive their own qualities and



how the recruiters see them, therefore effectively increasing their chances to be hired. Furthermore, personal branding may signal agency and the internal locus of control which are promising and desirable qualities (Gorbatov et al. 2024).

As shown in Fig. 1, our study can be represented as a signaling system. In such an environment, job candidates send out observable signals (i.e., personal branding) about their unobservable abilities during an interview, which recruiters can perceive as attempts to communicate candidates' appeal, differentiation, and recognition, aiming at influencing recruiters' reactions (i.e., hiring recommendations). We posit that PBE serves as the interpretation of the personal branding signal and represents the candidate's perceived value which will affect the likelihood of a positive hiring outcome. In other words, while a recruiter may recognize and acknowledge a candidate's personal brand, the value of that brand in a specific hiring context (i.e., appeal, differentiation, and recognition) are of crucial importance as well.

Furthermore, recruitment professionals tend to base their decisions on all available observable or unobservable signals, based on which they evaluate the perceived value of candidates. However, constraints in time and cognitive capacity may lead recruiters to mental shortcuts and reliance on salient peripheral cues (Chaiken 1980; Petty et al. 1983) when forming a positive perception about a candidate (Van der Land et al. 2016). By providing salient cues of their personal brand, candidates can showcase their skills and unique value proposition to recruiters, making them more appealing, differentiated and recognized in comparison with other candidates. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1 *Candidates' PBE positively affects a recruiter's hiring recommendation.*

On the moderating role of job hierarchy

While prior research examined different aspects of the role of job hierarchy (Cook & Emler 1999; Dupree & Torrez 2021), it lacks evidence on how PBE influences subsequent evaluations for varying hierarchical levels. We put forward the proposition that characteristics of the environment wherein the signaling process occurs might affect the extent to which this process reduces the information asymmetry (Rynes et al. 1991). For instance, one might expect differences to arise depending on the task environment (i.e., low vs. high-hierarchy position) when it comes to signal effectiveness. Specifically, in more "complex" environments, different characteristics might compete and reduce signal observability (Connelly et al. 2011). Also, it has been shown that signal receivers may apply varying

weights to different signals (or characteristics) and even distort the signal from the sender's original intent (Ehrhart & Ziegert 2005).

In the personnel selection context, recruiters will assign a differently weighted importance to the personal branding signals from candidates of low vs. high-hierarchy roles. For the purpose of this study, we distinguish between low- and high-hierarchy roles based on the level of authority and power associated with a given position (Cook & Emler 1999). Specifically, we posit that entry-level or junior roles (e.g., sales assistants) typically involve executing predefined tasks with limited autonomy and no managerial responsibilities, whereas senior roles (e.g., sales directors) encompass strategic planning, leadership responsibilities, and significant decision-making authority. For candidates of low-hierarchy positions, the personal branding signals are expected to be more visible since those – more junior – applicants still lack status and a substantial professional trajectory. However, for high-hierarchy positions, personal branding signals will not be so observable compared to the low-hierarchy jobs, as in these cases of more senior candidates, signaling takes place in a 'noisier' environment (Connelly et al. 2011). In particular, the candidates for such high-level positions have already attained higher professional status based on their more substantial professional trajectory. Being in high-hierarchy positions can be perceived as a signal of quality in that "highly sought after individuals having numerous external directorships are perceived as having higher status" (Zhang & Wiersema 2009, p. 698).

Analogously, building on the accessibility-diagnostics model by Feldman and Lynch (1988) and integrating this with the competence-based view on careers (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Guan et al. 2019), we follow the line of reasoning by Gorbatov and colleagues (2021), and state that especially candidates in a low-hierarchy role can make the most of a situation wherein recruiters have positive evaluations about their appeal, differentiation, and recognition, as this will make them most attractive when being compared with their peers.

Hence, we expect that when it comes to high-hierarchy roles, the perceived value of the candidates' personal brand will diminish, as the signaling effect of personal branding might be drowned out by other signals, such as the attained status and/or previous professional accomplishments of those candidates, and by their competencies being perceived to be less appealing, differentiating, and recognizable. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2 *Job hierarchy moderates the effect of candidates' PBE on hiring recommendation, such that this effect will be stronger for low, rather than for high-hierarchy roles.*



On the mediating role of credibility

The notion of credibility has been widely used in marketing and consumer behavior research as a signal of overall product quality associated with consumers' purchasing decisions (e.g., Erdem & Swait 2004). Credibility has also been used in the recruitment and selection field, referring to the credibility of the provider, also referred to as source credibility (Liu et al. 2018). For instance, previous studies already emphasized the effects of credibility of the information provider and recruiting messages on job seeking and application decisions (Acarlar & Bilgic 2013; Collins & Martinez-Moreno 2022). We build on prior literature and posit that a person's credibility is based on the extent to which they are trustworthy (i.e., being reliable and honest) and competent (i.e., possessing skills and abilities (i.e., quality) in fulfilling a particular role, and that these evaluations of trustworthiness and competence are subject to the perception of the observer (Kim et al. 2009).

Scholars adopting a signaling perspective (Spence 1973) proposed that high credibility occurs when receivers believe that signalers have made a "significant investment by sending a signal" (Wells et al. 2011, p. 376). High-quality signalers cannot afford to send false signals due to the risk associated with losing their reputation and will do their utmost best to convincingly show their qualities, resulting in a 'separating equilibrium' that enables receivers to distinguish high-quality from low-quality signalers (Boulding & Kirmani 1993). Importantly, credibility provides a strong signal about quality (Davila et al. 2003; Wells et al. 2011). Without a credible signal, receivers (i.e., recruiters) are unable to identify high-quality signalers (i.e., candidates), while simultaneously, those applicants cannot separate themselves from their lower-quality counterparts (Davila et al. 2003). Otherwise, job candidates' credibility is a signal of possessing the qualities necessary to perform the job competently, hence providing a signal of quality to the recruiters. According to Janney and Folta (2006), good signals are observable and credible. Therefore, it is expected that credible and observable signals, such as the job candidates' personal branding cues, will help recruiters decide the hiring outcome. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3 *Candidates' PBE has a positive effect on hiring recommendation through increasing candidates' credibility.*

On the moderating role of objective job qualifications

Previous research has widely explored the critical role of applicants' job qualifications, showing that these are strong

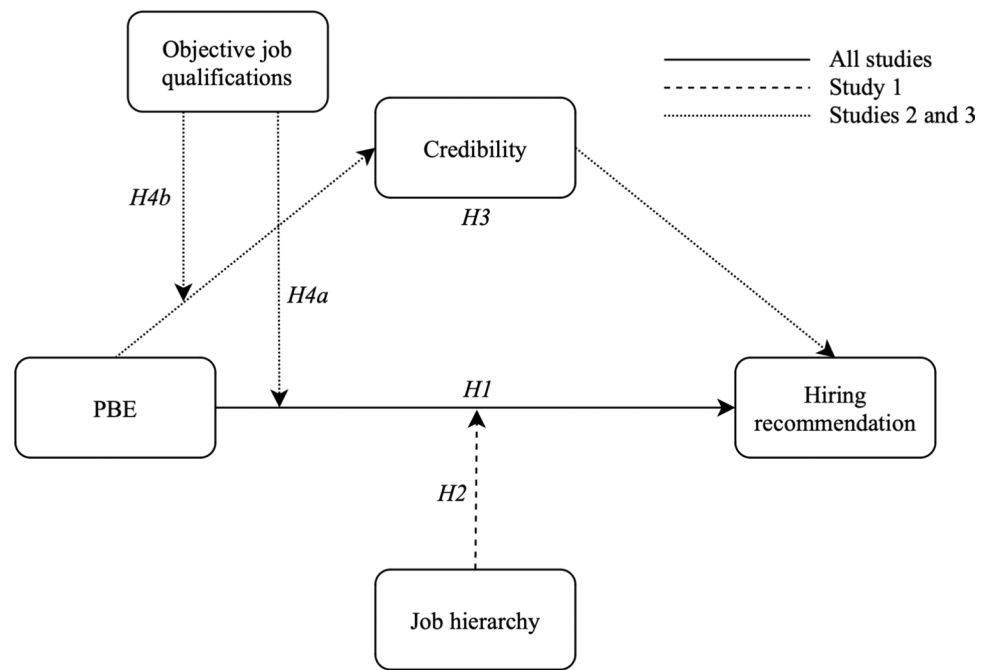
determinants of personnel selection outcomes (Baron 1993; Singer & Bruhns 1991). Each personnel selection process aims to select candidates with objective job qualifications that match the requirements of the job (Higgins & Judge 2004). For example, educational attainment and work experience are identified among the most commonly used objective credentials in personnel selection decisions (Hazer & Jacobson 2003; Kinicki et al. 1990;).

However, we posit that objective job qualifications is not the only predictor of positive hiring evaluations, as the subjective assessments of recruiters might be even more important for their selection decision (Gilmore & Ferris 1989; Higgins & Judge 2004). Previous literature already clearly distinguished between competencies, encompassing soft skills and technical skills, to mention but a few examples, and objective job qualifications, like prior work experience and academic credentials, all of which are relevant in the recruitment context (Murrar et al. 2022). Building on the differentiation made by Murrar and associates (2022), we argue that PBE and objective job qualifications are distinct constructs that both need to be taken into account in our conceptual model to shed light on how these might be inter-related in predicting recruiters' hiring decision processes. Especially in the field of self-presentation tactics, previous studies have shown that subjective evaluations of tactics, such as impression management can be crucial for hiring decisions as well, sometimes even outweighing the importance of applicants' objective job qualifications (Becton et al. 2019; Gilmore & Ferris 1989). Therefore, and building the competence-based view on careers (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Guan et al. 2019), in our research model we study both the effects of objective job qualifications and PBE, with the latter representing the recruiters' perceptions of the job candidates career potential, derived from the appeal, differentiation, and recognition of their brand.

Specifically, while job qualifications show the specific requirements and objective credentials for the job (i.e., education and/or working experience required), PBE showcases the value that derives from candidates' experiences and accomplishments, i.e., their competences (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006) that go beyond those qualifications, such as professional and personal achievements, social connections, and relationships (Avery & Greenwald 2023). In other words, while qualifications represent an objective value through measurable criteria required for a particular job (e.g., a software engineering job may require coding experience), PBE is about the perceived value (i.e., employability or career potential; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006) of a candidate's personal brand.

In particular, during the personnel selection process, job candidates signal their perceived quality by sending both signals of personal branding of competences and objective job qualifications to recruiters. According to previous



Fig. 2 The conceptual model

literature, potential employers commonly accept education and previous experience as signals of unobservable ability (Hegde & Tumlinson 2021) that do not need further proof. On the other hand, competences serve as a signal of unobservable ability as well, yet these competencies need to be clearly expressed through candidates' appeal, differentiation, and recognition (i.e., PBE), in order to have its desired effects in terms of increased credibility and positive hiring recommendation. We put forward the proposition that there will be a substitutive relationship between signals of PBE and objective job qualifications during personnel selection. Otherwise, the effectiveness of a certain signal will be reduced because a signal of a similar type is sent by the signaler concurrently (Akdeniz et al. 2014), resulting in a 'trade-off' between the two signals (Li & McConomy 2004). In the eyes of a recruiter, objective job qualifications are external signals¹ that are seen as solid indicators of a candidate's actual quality and which are not a product of candidates' marketing efforts. On the other hand, PBE refers to internal signals that capture a personal marketing orientation (Gorbatov et al. 2019). As a result, when it comes to high-qualified candidates, recruiters will not rely to the same

extent on PBE, as the high levels of education and working experience, that is the objective job qualifications, already provide a high-quality assurance to them. Conversely, for low-qualified candidates, PBE will act as a substitute for these qualifications, as recruiters will seek this 'lost' quality in the candidates' PBE efforts during the interview process.

Furthermore, external signals are perceived as being more credible, hereby decreasing the relative effectiveness of internal signals (Akdeniz et al. 2014). Accordingly, a high amount of objective job qualifications will be perceived as a credible signal, diminishing the effectiveness of PBE signals during the selection interview process. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4a. *Objective job qualifications moderate the positive relationship between candidates' PBE and hiring recommendation, such that the strength of this relationship is weakened for candidates with high objective job qualifications.*

Hypothesis 4b. *Objective job qualifications moderate the positive relationship between candidates' PBE and candidates' credibility, such that the strength of this relationship is weakened for candidates with high objective job qualifications.*

Figure 2 presents the conceptual model of our study:

¹ We utilize the definitions of internal and external signals, with internal signals being the ones that are produced in-house, and external signals referring to the signals that indicate verification externally (Mavlanova et al. 2016). We argue that PBE represent signals that are produced during the selection interview process and where the candidate has the full control of it. On the other hand, objective job qualifications are externally validated signals that are achieved outside the interview setting and that are outside the candidate's control.

Empirical overview

We tested our research hypotheses with two experimental studies and a field study. In Study 1, a scenario-based experiment regarding a sales position, we manipulated PBE and job hierarchy to examine the effect of PBE on hiring recommendations (Hypothesis 1) and the interaction effect of PBE and job hierarchy on hiring recommendation (Hypothesis 2). For Study 2, we used a scenario-based experiment about a sales position, manipulating PBE and objective job qualifications to investigate the effect of PBE on hiring recommendation (Hypothesis 1) and the mediating impact of candidates' credibility in the relationship between PBE and hiring recommendation (Hypothesis 3). This study also tested the interaction effect of objective job qualifications and PBE on hiring recommendation (Hypothesis 4a), as well as on candidates' credibility (Hypothesis 4b). Study 3 was a field study conducted in the Netherlands among full-time recruiters in engineering. It replicated the findings of Study 2 regarding the effect of PBE on hiring recommendation (Hypothesis 1) and the mediating effect of candidates' credibility (Hypothesis 3), but also examined the interaction effects of PBE and objective job qualifications in predicting hiring recommendation (Hypothesis 4a) and candidates' credibility (Hypothesis 4b). Furthermore, we controlled for recruiting experience in all our studies, as potential variations in recruiters' experience might result in differences in their decision processes (Graves 1993).

Study 1

Method

Participants

One hundred twenty Prolific users (42.1% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.68$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.33$) from the United Kingdom participated in this study. We applied pre-screening criteria to ensure that the participants were full-time employees with recruiting experience and hiring responsibilities within their respective companies.

Experimental design and procedure

We employed an experiment with a 2 (PBE: low vs. high) \times 2 (job hierarchy: low vs. high) between-subjects design and randomly allocated participants in one of the four experimental conditions. Specifically, we provided participants with a hypothetical scenario in which they were asked to imagine that they needed to hire a new sales assistant (or sales director, depending on the job hierarchy condition), among a pool of equally eligible candidates in terms of their work performance.

Furthermore, we informed participants that they would provide their recommendation for hiring based on an interview transcript they would read on the following page. Each of these transcripts contained different candidates' responses to a recruiter's question ('How appealing, differentiated, and recognized are you in your professional field?'), based on the three dimensions of PBE. The transcripts were designed to represent candidates with varying levels of appeal, differentiation, and recognition, hereby reflecting different levels of perceived PBE. In the high PBE condition, the candidate's response was carefully scripted to convey a high level of appeal, differentiation, and recognition. In contrast, the transcripts for the low PBE condition contained candidates' responses that were intentionally more muted and generic for the three PBE dimensions. Thus, the contrasting candidates' responses in the transcripts allowed for a manipulation of high versus low PBE conditions (the experimental stimuli can be found in the Appendix). By using transcripts for our experimental design, we intended to eliminate other verbal and non-verbal cues that are different from PBE, such as smiling, eye contact, and physical attractiveness, that could otherwise impact the recruiters' assessments of interviewees (DeGroot & Motowidlo 1999).

Following the manipulation of PBE, participants responded to measures of hiring recommendation, to an attention check (see also Abbey & Meloy 2017), and to manipulation checks of PBE. They also provided their recruiting experience in years (for this and the subsequent studies), responded to basic demographic questions, and then were thanked for their participation.

Measures

For the measure of hiring recommendation, we obtained and adjusted the three-item 7-point ('very unlikely—very likely') Likert-type scale ($\alpha = 0.96$) from Chiang and Suen (2015), to fit with the specific context of our study. The manipulation checks comprised twelve 7-point Likert-type scale ('not at all—very much') items ($\alpha = 0.97$) adapted from Gorbатов et al. (2021). The specific PBE measure that we used has been utilized in prior research to examine its relationship with career-related outcomes, such as employability and job performance (e.g., Gorbатов et al. 2021, 2024), making it suitable for our study context. Recruiting experience was measured with a self-reported item, as a continuous variable. The measures for Study 1 and the subsequent studies can be found in Table 1.

Results

Manipulation checks

Six participants failed the attention check and were therefore eliminated from the subsequent analyses. Manipulation



Table 1 Measurement constructs*PBE—Manipulation check* (Gorbatov et al. 2021)

The candidate has a positive professional image among others
 The professional competences of the candidate are clear
 The candidate is a preferred candidate for projects and tasks
 The candidate is considered a better professional compared to others
 The candidate is known in their professional field
 The candidate's name is well-known in their professional field
 The candidate has a positive professional reputation
 The candidate is appealing to work with
 The candidate has a reputation for producing high-value results
 The candidate is regarded as delivering higher professional value compared to others
 The candidate is known outside their immediate network
 The candidate is often recommended by others to their professional contacts

Objective job qualifications—manipulation check (self-developed)

The objective qualifications (i.e., academic degree, years of experience) of the candidate are high
 The candidate has the objective qualifications that are required for the job

Hiring recommendation (Chiang & Suen 2015)

I consider the candidate to be suitable for hiring into the specific position
 The candidate would have a good future in the specific position
 The candidate would perform well in the specific position

Credibility (Kim et al. 2009)

Honest-dishonest
 Straightforward-shifty
 Trustworthy-untrustworthy
 Sincere-insincere
 Competent-incompetent
 Informed-uninformed
 Qualified-unqualified
 Intelligent-unintelligent

checks showed that the manipulation of PBE was successful. Respondents in the high PBE conditions reported significantly higher ratings of PBE ($M=5.38$, $SD=1.13$) compared with respondents in the low PBE conditions ($M=3.65$, $SD=1.07$), $F(1, 110)=70.95$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.39$. The main effect of job hierarchy ($p=0.21$) and the interaction effect between job hierarchy and PBE ($p=0.45$) were non-significant.

Hypotheses' testing

An ANCOVA with PBE (1: low, 2: high) and job hierarchy (1: low, 2: high) as independent variables, with hiring recommendation as the dependent variable, and with recruiting experience as a covariate revealed a significant main effect of PBE on hiring recommendation, $F(1, 109)=37.74$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.26$. Respondents in the high PBE conditions reported significantly higher ratings of hiring recommendation ($M=5.24$, $SD=1.28$) compared with respondents in the low PBE conditions ($M=3.69$, $SD=1.31$), providing support for Hypothesis 1.

A significant negative interaction effect of job hierarchy and PBE on hiring recommendation was found, $F(1, 109)=4.78$, $p<0.05$, $\eta^2=0.04$. Respondents in the high PBE, low job hierarchy condition reported significantly higher ratings of hiring recommendation ($M=5.83$, $SD=0.82$) compared with respondents in the high PBE, high job hierarchy condition ($M=4.72$, $SD=1.39$), $t(54)=3.57$, $p=0.01$, $d=0.97$. Nonetheless, respondents in the low PBE, low job hierarchy condition reported no significant difference between measures of hiring recommendation ($M=3.74$, $SD=1.34$) compared with respondents in the low PBE, high job hierarchy condition ($M=3.64$, $SD=1.30$), $t(56)=0.27$, $p=0.79$. The difference in hiring recommendation between the low PBE, high job hierarchy, and high PBE, high job hierarchy conditions was also significant, $t(57)=-3.08$, $p<0.01$, $d=0.80$ (see Fig. 3). The effect of the covariate (recruiting experience) was found to be non-significant ($p=0.41$).

Conditional effect analysis with SPSS PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes 2018), 5,000 bootstrap samples showed a significant negative interaction effect, with an interaction



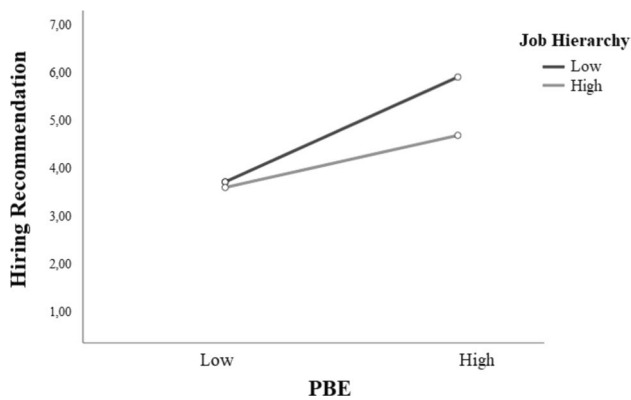


Fig. 3 The interaction between job hierarchy and PBE for sales positions

coefficient of -1.02 , $p < 0.05$, C.I. $[-1.94, -0.09]$, in support of Hypothesis 2.

Discussion

Study 1 showed that the manipulation method works and that candidates' PBE positively predicts hiring recommendation (Hypothesis 1). Recruiting experience was examined as a covariate and appeared not to affect the effect under investigation. Importantly, a significant negative interaction effect between job hierarchy and PBE on hiring recommendation was found, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2.²

In the subsequent Study 2, we focused on junior candidates, and further disentangled the mechanism behind the PBE-hiring recommendation linkage by examining how credibility might mediate the abovementioned relationship, and how job qualifications and PBE can potentially intertwine.

² We conducted a follow-up study to Study 1 to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 in a different industry (engineering) for more generalizable findings. Given that sales positions are customer-contact jobs (Tsai et al. 2005), which may require strong interpersonal skills, recruiters may consider PBE a determinant of hiring recommendation due to the idiosyncrasies of the focal position. We chose engineering positions as the job context to examine a non-customer-contact job context with the same manipulation method. Findings unveiled that Hypotheses 1 and 2 were confirmed within the different industry.

Study 2

Method

Participants

Two hundred thirty-nine Prolific users (43.7% females, $M_{age} = 39.30$, $SD_{age} = 10.94$) from the United Kingdom participated in Study 2. All participants were full-time employees and demonstrated prior recruiting experience and hiring responsibilities.

Experimental design and procedure

The goal of Study 2, apart from further establishing the outcomes regarding Hypothesis 1, was to test Hypothesis 3 on the mediating role of credibility in the relationship between PBE and hiring recommendation. Study 2 also intended to shed light on the interaction between the candidate's objective job qualifications and PBE on hiring recommendation (Hypothesis 4a) and credibility (Hypothesis 4b).

We employed a 2 (PBE: low vs. high) \times 2 (objective job qualifications: low vs. high) between-subjects experiment. Participants were randomly allocated across the four conditions. For objective job qualifications, we manipulated the candidate's experience (i.e., years of experience) and education (i.e., possession of relevant degree). We chose to focus on these two credentials as these are in line with previous conceptualizations, and are commonly considered in hiring decisions (Kinicki et al. 1990; Olian et al. 1988). In particular, we informed participants that a sales assistant typically has at least two years of sales experience and usually holds a relevant academic degree. For the high job qualifications conditions, we indicated that the candidate holds a bachelor's degree and has five years of work experience. In contrast, in the low job qualifications conditions, we indicated that the candidate does not hold a relevant degree and has two years of work experience. Following the manipulation of job qualifications, we manipulated PBE by applying the same procedure as in Study 1, through an interview transcript for a sales assistant position (see Appendix).

Next, participants responded to measures of hiring recommendation, to an attention check, and to manipulation checks of PBE and job qualifications. They also provided their recruiting experience in years, responded to basic demographic questions, and were thanked for their participation.

Measures

The same measures of hiring recommendation ($\alpha = 0.96$) and manipulation checks of PBE ($\alpha = 0.97$) that were used in Study 1 were again used in Study 2. For the manipulation

checks of objective job qualifications, we used two self-developed 7-point Likert-type scale (“*not at all – very much*”) items ($r=0.76$). Credibility was measured through eight reverse scored items in a 7-point semantic differential scale adapted from Kim et al. (2009; $\alpha=0.93$). This scale has previously been used to evaluate top management and is also particularly relevant in the hiring context, where candidates’ personal branding might convey indications of their credibility that influence hiring decision. The measures are portrayed in Table 1.

Results

Manipulation checks

Ten participants failed the attention check and were eliminated from the subsequent analyses. While participants failing the attention check were excluded to ensure data quality, additional analysis for this and the other studies revealed no significant differences in characteristics between excluded and retained participants, mitigating concerns about potential bias. Manipulation checks showed that the manipulation of PBE was successful. Respondents in the high PBE condition reported significantly higher ratings of PBE ($M=5.48$, $SD=0.92$) compared with respondents in the low PBE condition ($M=3.72$, $SD=1.24$), $F(1, 225)=148.80$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.40$. The main effect of job qualifications ($p=0.12$) and the interaction effect between job qualifications and PBE ($p=0.88$) were found to be non-significant.

Similarly, manipulation checks of job qualifications revealed that the manipulation of job qualifications was successful. Respondents in the high job qualifications conditions reported significantly higher ratings of job qualifications ($M=5.64$, $SD=1.32$) compared with respondents in the low job qualifications conditions ($M=3.53$, $SD=1.24$), $F(1, 225)=156.00$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.41$.

Hypotheses’ testing

An ANCOVA with PBE (1: low, 2: high) and objective job qualifications (1: low, 2: high) as independent variables, hiring recommendation as the dependent variable, and recruiting experience as a covariate revealed a significant main effect of PBE on hiring recommendation, $F(1, 224)=85.22$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.28$. Respondents in the high PBE condition reported significantly higher ratings of hiring recommendation ($M=5.61$, $SD=1.15$) compared with respondents in the low PBE condition ($M=4.06$, $SD=1.43$). Hypothesis 1 was further established.

A significant negative interaction effect between job qualifications and PBE on hiring recommendation was also found, $F(1, 224)=12.10$, $p=0.001$, $\eta^2=0.05$. Respondents in the low PBE, high job qualifications condition

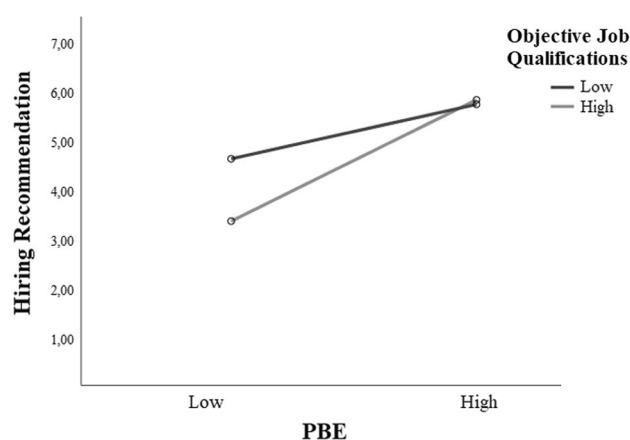


Fig. 4 The interaction between objective job qualifications and PBE for sales positions

reported significantly higher ratings of hiring recommendation ($M=4.62$, $SD=1.26$) compared with respondents in the low PBE, low job qualifications condition ($M=3.53$, $SD=1.39$), $t(113)=-4.40$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.82$. Nonetheless, respondents in the high PBE, high job qualifications condition reported no significant differences in measures of hiring recommendation ($M=5.57$, $SD=1.22$) compared with respondents in the high PBE, low job qualifications condition ($M=5.65$, $SD=1.09$), $t(112)=-0.37$, $p=0.71$. The difference in hiring recommendation between the low PBE, high job qualifications and high PBE, low job qualifications conditions was also significant, $t(110)=-4.64$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.87$ (see Fig. 4). The effect of the covariate on hiring recommendation was non-significant ($p=0.25$).

The negative interaction effect between job qualifications and PBE was further confirmed using SPSS PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes 2018), 5000 bootstrap samples, with an interaction coefficient of -1.17 , $p<0.01$, C.I. $[-1.82, -0.52]$. Hypothesis 4a was supported.

We examined Hypothesis 3 with a mediation analysis using SPSS PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes 2018), 5,000 bootstrap samples. We found a significant positive effect of PBE on credibility ($\beta=0.75$, $p<0.001$), which, in turn, significantly predicted hiring recommendation ($\beta=1.15$, $p<0.001$). The indirect effect of PBE on hiring recommendation was found to be significant (effect = 0.40, CI [0.21, 0.62], herewith supporting Hypothesis 3 on the mediating effect of credibility. The direct effect of PBE on hiring recommendation was still significant after the mediator inclusion (effect = 1.15, $p<0.001$), therefore, credibility was found to be a partial mediator.

Hypothesis 4b, on the moderating role of objective job qualifications on the effect of PBE on credibility, was tested using SPSS PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Conditional effect analysis



revealed a significant negative interaction effect on credibility, with an interaction coefficient of -0.64 , $p < 0.05$, C.I. $[-1.22, -0.05]$. The effect of the covariate was non-significant ($p = 0.65$). Therefore, Hypothesis 4b was supported as well.

Discussion

Study 2 established further evidence for Hypothesis 1. Importantly, it also supported Hypothesis 3 on the mediating role of credibility in the relationship between PBE and hiring recommendation. It also added strong support for Hypotheses 4a and 4b, proposing a negative interaction effect between objective job qualifications and PBE on hiring recommendation as well as on credibility. Next, Study 3 was performed to test those relationships with data from actual job interviews.

Study 3

Method

Participants

One hundred sixty actual job candidates applying for high-hierarchy positions (e.g., Maintenance Director, Principal engineer, etc.), participated in Study 3. These candidates were sourced by the engineering recruitment department (i.e., four recruiters) of a major Dutch recruitment agency. We administered a questionnaire to these recruiters specialized in recommending engineering candidates for high-hierarchy positions for client companies. All recruiters were full-time employees with prior recruiting experience and had hiring recommendation responsibilities. They conducted initial interviews with each candidate and provided hiring recommendation, thus deciding whether the candidate should proceed further in the hiring process. The recruiters completed unique assessments for all job candidates based on individual phone interviews.

Survey design and procedure

The goal of Study 3 was to further provide evidence for Hypotheses 1, 3, 4a, and 4b. We administered an online questionnaire form to all participating recruiters, asking them to answer it after the completion of each phone interview. In addition to the experimental studies, the replication of the studies' effects using phone interviews allowed us to eliminate non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, which can influence hiring decisions (DeGroot & Motowidlo 1999). This approach enabled us to a) enhance the generalizability of our findings using a different method

and b) increase ecological validity, as phone interviews are standard practice in many recruitment processes. Given that Study 2 focused on sales assistant (low-hierarchy) jobs, we intended to provide more generalizable findings by testing those relationships in the context of high-hierarchy engineering jobs. We also included a pre-screening question at the beginning of each questionnaire, intending to screen out all potential responses for positions that were not of high hierarchy. This pre-screening ensured that recruiters assessed only eligible respondents.

The introduction section of the questionnaire form contained instructions guiding each recruiter to fill it out sincerely, preferably after the end of the phone interview. Each recruiter was then encouraged to respond to measures of PBE, hiring recommendation, objective job qualifications, and credibility regarding the candidate they had just interviewed. Furthermore, to examine and verify whether PBE is a distinct construct, each recruiter responded to measures of popularity and prestige. Although the distinction between these constructs has already been identified in organizational and job seeking contexts (Gorbatov et al. 2021), our goal was to establish this distinction in the context of hiring. We argue that popularity and prestige are so-called static attributes that do not stem from a candidate purposefully signaling their value, which is critical for a hiring recommendation. For example, popularity may appear as interpersonal likability, while prestige might emerge through a candidate's honorary title, both typically originated passively from external recognition rather than from intentional personal branding efforts. The recruiter was then thanked for their participation. This process was the same and repetitive for all recruiters, yet unique per candidate and interview. No personal identifiable data were collected. The whole data collection process lasted eighty-eight days.

Measures

Table 1 portrays the measures of the core constructs of Study 3. To measure hiring recommendation ($\alpha = 0.94$), we used the same measures as in Studies 1 and 2. For the measures of PBE ($\alpha = 0.98$) and objective job qualifications ($r = 0.89$), we utilized the manipulation checks of Study 2. In addition, the credibility measure was the same as in Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.95$). Popularity ($\alpha = 0.89$) was measured with the 8-item scale developed by Scott and Judge (2009), while prestige ($\alpha = 0.85$) was measured using the 8-item scale of Cheng et al. (2010). Finally, each recruiter provided their recruiting experience in years as in the previous studies.

To ensure that the constructs are empirically distinct, we assessed discriminant validity using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio and the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker 1981). The HTMT values were between 0.408 and 0.770, below the conservative cut-off value of



0.85. Furthermore, the square root of each construct's AVE always exceeded the correlation between each construct and any other construct in the model. These tests provided evidence that the constructs of this model were empirically distinct.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with STATA 14 established that PBE is a distinct construct from popularity (Scott & Judge 2009) and prestige (Cheng et al. 2010). Our results revealed that the three-factor model (including PBE, popularity, and prestige) had a better fit [$\chi^2(347) = 799.65$ ($p < 0.001$), $\chi^2/df = 2.30$, CFI = 0.89, TLI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.08] than alternative models.

Afterward, we tested the model fit for our research model. An analysis of a four-factor model (including PBE, hiring recommendation, credibility, and objective job qualifications) revealed a good fit between the model and the data [$\chi^2(269) = 561.50$ ($p < 0.001$), $\chi^2/df = 2.09$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.04] (Hu & Bentler 1999; Schreiber et al. 2006). Next, we compared this model to a three-factor model, where we loaded recruiters' credibility scores and hiring recommendation on one common factor. This model provided a worse fit [$\chi^2(272) = 899.03$ ($p < 0.001$), $\chi^2/df = 3.30$, CFI = 0.87, TLI = 0.86, RMSEA = 0.12, SRMR = 0.08]. Also, we compared the first model with an alternative, one-factor model (all items loaded into one common factor), which provided a worse fit as well [$\chi^2(275) = 2086.47$ ($p < 0.001$), $\chi^2/df = 7.58$, CFI = 0.53, TLI = 0.60, RMSEA = 0.204, SRMR = 0.17]. Overall, the fit of the four-factor model was significantly better than both the three-factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 337.53$, $\Delta df = 3$, $p < 0.001$) and the one-factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1524.97$, $\Delta df = 6$, $p < 0.001$) models, showing that our variables can be treated as distinct. The means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. PBE	4.34	1.41	-				
2. Objective job qualifications	4.91	1.34	0.392**	-			
3. Hiring recommendation	4.70	1.26	0.571**	0.732**	-		
4. Credibility	4.69	1.31	0.556**	0.416**	0.674**	-	
5. Recruiting experience	3.93	2.06	-0.169*	-0.052	-0.014	-0.014	-

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Hypotheses' testing

We used ordinary least squared regression analysis to test the hypothesized relationships. Table 3 summarizes the results of the regressions. Recruiting experience was added as a covariate in all our subsequent analyses. First, after controlling for objective job qualifications, PBE had a significant positive effect on hiring recommendation ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$) in support of Hypothesis 1.

To test Hypothesis 3, we used PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes 2018), 5,000 bootstrap samples, with PBE as an independent variable, hiring recommendation as a dependent variable, credibility as a mediator, and recruiting experience as a covariate. As shown in Table 3, PBE had a significant positive effect on credibility ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn significantly predicted hiring recommendation ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of PBE on hiring recommendation was found significant as well (effect = 0.26, CI [0.13, 0.46]). Hence, this field study further supported the mediating effect of credibility (Hypothesis 3). The direct effect of PBE on hiring recommendation was still significant after the mediator inclusion (effect = 0.27, $p < 0.001$), indicating that credibility is a partial mediator, just like in Study 2. The effects of the covariate on credibility ($p = 0.22$) and hiring recommendation ($p = 0.45$) were non-significant.

Next, we examined Hypotheses 4a and 4b. Table 4 presents the results of the moderation analysis. First, we used SPSS PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap samples, with PBE as an independent variable, hiring recommendation as a dependent variable, objective job

Table 3 Results of mediation analysis

Variable	Credibility	Hiring recommendation
Intercept	2.16**	1.13**
Recruiting experience (Covariate)	0.05	0.03
PBE	0.54**	0.27**
Credibility		0.49**
	$R^2 = 0.32^{**}$	$R^2 = 0.51^{**}$

** $p < 0.001$



Table 4 Results of moderation analysis

Variable	Credibility	Hiring recommendation
Intercept	4.58	4.59
Recruiting experience (Covariate)	0.05	0.05
PBE	0.46**	0.32**
Objective job qualifications	0.25**	0.59**
Objective job qualifications × PBE	−0.14*	−0.13**
	$R^2 = 0.40^{**}$	$R^2 = 0.67^{**}$

* $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$

qualifications as a moderator, and recruiting experience as a covariate. We found a significant negative interaction effect between PBE and objective job qualifications on hiring recommendation, with an interaction coefficient of -0.13 , $p < 0.001$, C.I. $[-0.19, -0.07]$. With this outcome, Hypothesis 4a was again supported. The effect of the covariate was non-significant ($p = 0.08$). Second, we used SPSS PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap samples, specifying PBE as an independent variable, credibility as a dependent variable, objective job qualifications as a moderator, and recruiting experience as a covariate. We identified a significant negative interaction effect between PBE and objective job qualifications on credibility, with an interaction coefficient of -0.14 , $p < 0.01$, C.I. $[-0.23, -0.05]$. Therefore, Hypothesis 4b was also supported. The effects of the covariate on credibility were non-significant ($p = 0.18$).

Discussion

Study 3 supported Hypotheses 1, 3, 4a, and 4b with field data. Results showed that candidates' PBE has a positive effect on candidates' hiring recommendation (H1). This effect is partially mediated by candidates' credibility (H3). Finally, we found a negative interaction of PBE with objective job qualifications in predicting hiring recommendation (H4a) and candidates' credibility (H4b).

General discussion

Theoretical implications

Our study highlights the effects of PBE on hiring recommendation, by building on signaling theory (Spence 1973), and on an integration of the accessibility-diagnostics model by Feldman and Lynch (1988) with the competence-based view of careers (DeFillippi & Arthur 1994; Guan et al. 2019). Specifically, our study examines a hiring context where candidates act as signalers, sending personal branding signals,

and where recruiters serve as receivers, interpreting personal branding signals to inform their decision. Unlike most extant research, which predominantly focused on candidates as receivers of organizational signals (e.g., Wilhelmy et al. 2021) or as self-evaluators of their own branding efforts (e.g., Gorbato et al. 2024), our study shifts the focus to how recruiters perceive the value of a candidate's personal brand (i.e., PBE). This shift to the perceptions of the receivers is of high importance, given the critical role they play in evaluating and selecting candidates. Moreover, our study is, to the best of our knowledge, the very first one that examined the role of those concepts in one empirical work, hereby adding to the available knowledge in both the personal branding and careers literatures.

Findings from Studies 1, 2, and 3 show a positive relationship between PBE and hiring recommendation. In other words, when recruiters place a high value on a candidate's personal brand, it leads to more favorable hiring recommendation. Establishing such a positive relationship is not a surprise when testing the research model in the sales industry, which is conducive to personal branding (Gorbato et al. 2018) and relies on a large variety of a candidate's skillsets, such as interpersonal skills. Conversely, the similarly positive relationship that we found in the engineering industry contrasts with prior literature in self-presentation, arguing that similar tactics are not as important for roles with lower customer-contact, such as R&D jobs (Tsai et al. 2005). From our study, we conclude that in today's business environments, such tactics may have become important for jobs in various industries, regardless of the level of customer interaction required.

Study 1 suggests that PBE is more crucial for candidates' hiring recommendation regarding low-hierarchy positions, supporting signaling theoretical propositions. Specifically, the personal branding signal of the junior candidates will be more visible to recruiters than that of more senior candidates. A plausible explanation may be that junior candidates have a limited status and professional portfolio. Conversely, the personal branding signal will be overshadowed by other signals (Connelly et al. 2011) in the case of senior candidates, leading recruiters to assign less importance and value to the brand of such candidates. These findings unveil that recruiters working in the field of selection for high-hierarchy jobs might consider other roles and/or industry-dependent soft or hard skills as more important than candidates' PBE.

Although prior studies theorized that credibility may be an intrinsic outcome of personal branding (Gorbato et al. 2018; Ward & Yates 2013), they provided no such empirical evidence. We contribute to the scarcity of scholarly work, unveiling the role of credibility in partially mediating the positive relationship between PBE and hiring recommendation. This mechanism supports central signaling propositions by demonstrating how recruiters infer unobservable qualities



about applicants from observable cues (Bangerter et al. 2012; Spence 1973). The value of a candidate's personal brand is a credibility signal corresponding to the signaler's quality (Connelly et al. 2011) that is favorably evaluated during an interview.

The findings of Studies 2 and 3 highlight that objective job qualifications attenuate the effects of PBE on hiring recommendation, offering insights into the unexplored area of personal branding. Unlike prior research suggesting that applicants' qualifications are not important in influencing self-presentation tactics (Gilmore & Ferris 1989), we suggest that PBE compensates for previous education and job experience. Study 3 also showed that job qualifications negatively moderate the effect of candidates' PBE on candidates' credibility. We confirm previous signaling perspectives, according to which there will be a substitutive effect when two signals of a similar type are sent to the receiver (Akdeniz et al. 2014). One possible explanation might be that the recruiters of this study, because of their diverse backgrounds, might not be entirely familiar with the focal job and the requirements for which they were interviewing (Higgins & Judge 2004) and thus they might be more confident in their hiring recommendation when considering job qualifications.

Practical implications

We provide useful recommendations for recruiters and job candidates in the sales and engineering industries. First, the positive effect of PBE on hiring recommendation, suggests that recruiters should have the ability and take the time to evaluate the true value of a candidate's brand, given that a positive assessment will lead to favorable hiring outcomes. However, there is always the risk that a candidate's high perceived brand value may reflect excessive self-promotion rather than authentic indicators of quality. To address this, recruiters should consider structured training programs to help them distinguish between superficial branding efforts and authentic signals of a candidate's quality. In that way, recruiters can make more informed hiring decisions. From the candidates' point of view, this finding implies that job candidates in sales and engineering should invest in personal branding tactics to increase their chances of receiving an employment opportunity. Based on that, job seekers are encouraged to participate in soft skills training programs to improve their differentiation and appeal potential during a job interview.

Second, the negative moderating effect of job hierarchy implies that recruiters will assign higher weighted importance to a candidate's personal brand when it comes to low-hierarchy positions. This can introduce risks of recruiters' bias, as overemphasizing the added value of personal branding in junior roles may favor candidates

who are familiar with branding tactics over those with actual potential, while undervaluing branding in senior roles may overlook candidates with innovative and fresh perspectives. Therefore, recruiting departments should develop interview protocols that weigh the impact of personal branding along with career competencies, regardless of the hierarchical level, and use tools such as competency-based interviews (e.g., Farnham & Stevens 2000; Karimi et al. 2019; Ujah-Ogbuagu 2019) and behavioral assessments (e.g., Collins 2007). From the candidates' perspective, our results suggest that junior candidates should put more emphasis on personal branding during the personnel selection process, and highlight achievements such as fruitful collaborations, professional successes, and networking, as recruiters highly appreciate these details.

Finally, the negative moderating effect of objective job qualifications highlights the importance of effectively balancing personal branding and these qualifications in real world settings. For candidates in the low PBE condition, those with high objective job qualifications received slightly higher hiring recommendation than those with low job qualifications, showing that qualifications matter more when PBE is low. On the contrary, for candidates in the high PBE condition, hiring recommendation appeared to not significantly differ between high- and low-qualified candidates, highlighting that a strong personal brand can compensate for a lack of objective job qualifications. Overall, our findings show that PBE is less conducive for high-qualified candidates being hired. However, this poses a challenge as recruiters may prioritize objective job qualifications and overlook the additional value offered by a candidate's personal brand, hereby potentially missing out on candidates with unique interpersonal, strategic, or leadership competencies, to just give some examples. As a result, when assessing high-qualified candidates, we suggest recruiters to integrate the evaluation of personal branding into the hiring process, by focusing on aspects that cannot be captured by objective job qualifications alone. When it comes to possible candidates, we suggest that those who lack working experience and education should particularly invest in building their personal brands by developing strong professional networks and highlighting their unique achievements. For example, candidates in customer-contact roles (e.g., sales) can compensate their lack of objective job qualifications by showcasing measurable achievements, such as exceeding sales targets or having proven to be able to build strong client relationships, and by using platforms like LinkedIn to enhance their visibility through networking. Similarly, less qualified candidates in non-customer-contact settings (e.g., engineering), should use personal branding to emphasize their competencies, such as practical problem-solving and leadership, as that will help them create a competitive profile.



Limitations and future directions

This research comes with some limitations. First, the study employed a cross-sectional design and was conducted with recruiters from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands in the context of sales and engineering industries. While we believe this sample is appropriate for the objectives of our studies, the cultural and organizational differences inherent to UK-based and Dutch recruiters may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or industries. Future research should aim to establish sample representativeness more robustly. This could be achieved, for instance, by focusing on recruiters from a single country or by examining the role of cultural factors in the hypothesized relationship. To draw more valid conclusions, future researchers should also examine the abovementioned relationships at different points in time through longitudinal studies. In addition, although the focus on sales and engineering provided useful insights into the added value of the personal brand of job candidates, replicating the study in other industries (e.g., healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing) could provide more generalizable findings regarding the role of PBE in customer-contact versus non-customer-contact jobs. Such a replication could also provide meaningful insights into the importance of objective job qualifications, allowing us to evaluate their effect across different industries. While education and experience are highly relevant for personnel selection in corporate settings, exploring contexts such as creative industries or blue-collar work could also add to the scholarly knowledge in both the domains of personal branding and careers.

Second, future studies could further unlock the mechanism behind the PBE-hiring recommendation linkage by investigating potential mediating and moderating factors, as the partial mediating effect of credibility in our research implies that additional factors might explain this linkage. For instance, the effects of a candidate's personality (Graves 1993), a recruiter's uncertainty about the candidate's quality regarding the expression of personal branding tactics, or a candidate's perceived fit with the organization could increase the variance and generalizability of our findings. Regarding the latter, although this person-organization fit perception is a central variable in the recruiting context (e.g., Higgins & Judge 2004), our research design did not allow for examining a possible moderating or mediating role it might play in our research model. This limitation stems from the use of an imaginary hiring scenario in Studies 1 and 2, and the limited visibility of recruiters into client organizations in Study 3. Future research could explore such relationships within the context of corporate, in-house recruiting. As some last examples of factors that might shed more light on mechanisms underlying the PBE-hiring recommendation linkage and that might be appealing for future work in this field, one

can think of the familiarity of recruiters with the focal job, and the requirements, risk propensity and the vividness of information.

Finally, our study can be represented as a signaling system, starting from the personal branding signals sent by job candidates and ending at the stage where recruiters interpret the value of those signals and provide—or do not—their hiring recommendation. However, the feedback stage of the signaling process and the transmission of counter-signals by the receiver to the signaler is an area that has attracted little attention so far (Taj 2016). Exploring reciprocations between senders and receivers by focusing on how job candidates interpret recruiters' counter-signals would provide a roadmap to job candidates about using personal branding in their future interviews and careers.

Appendix: Stimuli (Interview transcripts)

STUDY 1, for Sales Director and Sales Assistant positions

Recruiter: How appealing, differentiated, and recognized are you in your professional field?

High PBE condition

Candidate: I am really appealing to work with, and I have a strong professional reputation since my work stands out from others. In addition, my colleagues always love to work with me on challenging projects because everyone knows that I produce high-value results. Finally, I am regarded as an expert, and I am very well-known in my professional domain

Low PBE condition

Candidate: My reputation is rather positive, and I think I am as good as everyone else in the company. Additionally, my work performance is considered satisfactory; whenever I am asked, I contribute at the expected level. Finally, I would say that generally, people know me in my company

Follow up study—Same Stimuli as in STUDY 1, for Engineering Director and Engineer Positions

STUDY 2 – Sample Stimuli (High objective job qualifications)

Imagine that you want to hire a new Sales Assistant for a company. A Sales Assistant typically has at least two years of sales experience. A relevant academic degree is not necessary but is a plus. You have concluded to a shortlist of candidates with equal eligibility in terms of their work performance, which you have already interviewed. You will now decide which candidate to hire based on the interview process

One of these candidates has a bachelor's degree in business administration and five years of work experience in sales

At the next page, you will read a short interview transcript for this candidate

(Page Break)

Interview Transcript (same stimuli as in Study 1 for Sales Assistant job)



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Declarations

Conflict of interest None.

Ethics approval We note that this research project was realized after approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Technical University of Delft, the Netherlands. In addition, we obtained informed consent from the participants of all studies.

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