



# Piercing the glass ceiling: proposed personal brand equity framework for enhancing women career success

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## Abstract

Workplace gender inequality is a persistent challenge that constrains the realisation of sustainable development goal 5 in developing and developing countries. In Zimbabwe, a developing country in southern Africa, women remain under represented in senior management positions in stock exchange listed companies. This study examines the views of women in middle and senior management on the role of personal brand equity as a tool for enhancing career success. A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 523 women in middle and senior management positions employed in Zimbabwe stock exchange listed companies. Covariance-based structural equation modelling was utilised to test posited hypotheses. For women in middle management, brand differentiation was found to have a significant positive influence on career success, whilst the influence of brand appeal and brand recognition was insignificant. For women in senior management, brand differentiation and brand recognition were found to have a significant positive influence on career success, whilst the influence of brand appeal was insignificant. Education level and industry type were found to influence career success for women in both middle and senior management. This study contributes to promote gender equality in management by extending the application of personal brand equity model to address the glass ceiling challenge.

**Keywords** Women in management · Glass ceiling · Personal brand equity · Career success · Zimbabwe

## Introduction

Career progression for women in middle management to senior positions remains a challenge in developed and developing economies (Catalyst, 2020; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). The International Labour Organization (2018) reports that less than 5% of the Chief Executive Officers of the world's largest corporations are women and only 19% of corporate boards globally are gender balanced. The disparity

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between men and women in management is direr in Africa where conservative patriarchal cultures are rife (Chigudu, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2020). In Zimbabwe, the context of this study, almost 42% of companies listed on the Zimbabwe stock exchange do not have women in their boards (Chidziva, 2019; Chigudu, 2021). The ‘glass ceiling’ metaphor is employed in literature to refer to the challenges and obstacles confronting women in their quest for career progression in management (Fritz & Knippenberg, 2020; Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Career progression challenges for women are generally understood to begin from middle management level (Cho et al., 2024; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). At the same time, it is also worth noting that women who managed to attain senior management positions in Zimbabwe and elsewhere have achieved remarkable successes in their careers (Chigudu, 2021; Fritz & Knippenberg, 2020). Thus, we argue that women in senior management have the potential to provide valuable insights towards addressing the glass ceiling challenge.

It is also important to note that interventions instituted internationally to promote gender balance in management such as legislation, quotas and voluntary targets have not achieved the expected level of success (Amâncio & Santos, 2021; Casara et al., 2022; International Labour Organisation, 2018). The effectiveness of women empowerment laws was found to be saddled by lapses in enforcement and monitoring especially in developing economies (Chigudu, 2021; Zajiji et al., 2020). The implementation of the quota system is criticised for undermining the principle of meritocracy (Amâncio & Santos, 2021; Casara et al., 2022). Critics argue that quotas may lead to the unintended consequences of appointing unprepared women for leadership positions, a situation that compromises the quality of decision making (Casara et al., 2022; Kogut et al., 2014). Voluntary targets are also criticised for promoting symbolic representation which robs women’s independent contribution in decision making (Amâncio & Santos, 2021; Kogut et al., 2014). Previous studies (e.g., Kark et al., 2012; Murray & Syed, 2010; Zajiji et al., 2020) have also found that women’s perceptions of career success are also influenced by age, educational level and industry type. Thus, this study also examines this possibility.

As the debate on how to address the glass ceiling evolves, personal branding, which involves the process of conveying an individual’s unique personal and professional attributes is emerging as a promising career progression tool (Gorbatov et al., 2021; Pagis & Ailon, 2017). This perspective gains support from a strand of research (e.g., Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Saifuddin et al., 2019; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019) that acknowledges the potential role of individual factors in addressing the glass ceiling challenge. A personal brand is defined as the unique innate and acquired traits or skills that differentiate one individual from the other (Hines, 2005). This study argues that women in middle management are more likely to enhance career progression prospects if they understand how women in senior management have developed, positioned and defended their personal brands. The positive role of personal branding as a tool for enhancing career progression was confirmed in previous studies focusing on political leaders (Scheidt et al., 2018), business managers (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018) and celebrities (McGinnis & Glibkowski, 2019; Moulard et al., 2015) among others.

Although personal branding has the potential to enhance career success, there remains a dearth of empirical studies focusing on its role as a tool for enhancing women career progression. While a study by Smith et al. (2012) was helpful by measuring women's beliefs on the underlying causes of the glass ceiling, little is known about how PBE is perceived by women in management as a tool for enhancing career progression. Thus, this study employs a quantitative research method to test whether there are differences in the influence of PBE on career success between women in middle and senior management. By tapping into the lived experiences of women in senior management who have progressed in their careers, women in middle management are more likely to gain valuable insights. As far as we can establish, this is one of the pioneering studies to apply the PBE model to examine the influence of personal brand equity dimensions on career progression of women in management. In particular, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Does women in middle and senior management perceive PBE as a tool for enhancing career success?

RQ2: Are there differences in middle and senior management on how they perceive PBE as a tool for enhancing career success?

RQ3: Does educational level, age and industry type influence women's perception of career success?

This study offers four major contributions to the glass ceiling literature and managerial practice. First, this study extends the application of the personal branding as a tool to address the glass ceiling problem. The potential of personal branding as a tool for enhancing career progression was confirmed in previous studies on corporate leadership (Fetscherin, 2015; Gorbатов et al., 2019) and political leadership (Scheidt et al., 2018). Career ownership, self-promotion and confidence building are central to the value proposition of personal branding as a career progression tool (Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020). Second, personal branding offers a new perspective for women career progression which is grounded in meritocracy (Amâncio & Santos, 2021). This minimises the over-reliance on legislative interventions such as quotas which are perceived as a form of tokenism and whose impact depends on effective enforcement (Zajiji et al., 2020).

Third, this study contributes to efforts to promote gender equality in a manner that assists the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (United Nations, 2015). This is particularly important for developing countries such as Zimbabwe that are still lagging behind in the implementation of sustainable development goals (Muposhi & Mugwati, 2024). Additionally, this study encourages the presence of women in senior management as it acts as a source of competitive advantage which promotes workplace diversity and inclusivity (Boluk et al., 2019). Lastly, this study also contributes to address the stereotypes related to the aptitude and attitude of women at the workplace (Amâncio & Santos, 2021). By conveying their personal brands, women aspiring for senior management positions will be empowered to demonstrate that they possess the necessary disposition and professional competencies to assume senior leadership positions.

## Literature review

### Business case for women inclusion in senior management

The importance of including women in senior management positions is widely acknowledged in leadership literature (Boluk et al., 2019; Hoobler et al., 2018; Jalbert et al., 2013). At macro-level, inclusion of women in senior management is aligned to Sustainable Development Goal 5 as it addresses gender and social inequalities (Boluk et al., 2019). At organisational level, gender diversity in top management is linked to improved financial performance metrics such as return on investment, sales volumes and profitability (Hoobler et al., 2018; Jalbert et al., 2013). This was confirmed in a study of Fortune 500 companies where gender balanced boards reported higher returns on equity than those with male dominated boards (Catalyst, 2020).

In order to make a substantial contribution to organisational performance, women should constitute a critical mass in terms of the number of managerial positions they occupy (Joecks et al., 2012; Songini & Gnan, 2009; Torchia et al., 2011). This view gains theoretical support from the critical mass theory. Drawing from the critical mass theory (CMT), it is argued that women in senior positions are more likely to add value if they constitute a substantial minority (Joecks et al., 2012; Songini & Gnan, 2009; Stichman et al., 2010). For example, Joecks et al. (2012) projected a 30% women representation to be the necessary lower limit. In this way, Joecks et al. (2012) contend that women will be more capacitated to cope with the entrenched decision making norms that are skewed towards male leadership. However, other scholars (e.g. Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Paxton et al., 2007) argue that the focus should not be on critical mass thresholds but on the strategic importance of positions assigned to women. Lewis and Simpson (2012) further argue that women are more likely to add corporate value if they are assigned strategic business portfolios. If women are predominantly assigned non-strategic portfolios, male leaders will continue to have an unchecked grip on organisational power including having an unfettered influence on gender dynamics (Joecks et al., 2012; Paxton et al., 2007).

There is also an emerging proposition that emphasise the need for women to improve on their personal brand equity (Mezey, 2019; Wu, 2019). Personal brand equity refers to a set of personality attributes and professional competencies that differentiate one individual from the other (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Personal brand equity is central to the development of an individual's personal brand (Dombek & Winska, 2018; Karaduman, 2013; Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2018). Personal brand equity is a potential long-term solution to address the glass ceiling because it compels women to develop unique competencies, values and capabilities that are aligned to corporate objectives (Wu, 2019). Despite the potential of personal brand equity as a tool to address the glass ceiling, little is known about the views of women intending to break the glass ceiling and those that have broken the glass ceiling about its effectiveness.

## Theoretical framework

The personal brand equity (PBE) model was derived from Keller's (1993) brand equity concept. The PBE model identifies personal brand appeal, personal brand recognition and personal brand differentiation as critical career success factors (Gorbatov et al., 2018). This study applies the personal brand equity model to understand the extent to which women in middle management and senior management perceive personal branding as a tool to enhance career success. The utility of personal branding as a tool to enhance career success was confirmed in previous studies on employability (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Khedher, 2019; Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020), athlete branding (Kucharska & Mikołajczak, 2018; Parmentier et al., 2013) and political marketing (Speed et al., 2015).

PBE is premised on the marketing proposition that a brand's competitiveness depends on how it is positioned in the minds of customers (Keller, 1993). In the same vein, we argue that women are more likely to enhance their career success if they strategically convey a unique set of skills and competencies at the workplace (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Vallas & Christin, 2018). Personal branding is regarded as an important tool to enhance career success because it empowers employees with social networking capabilities, emotional intelligence and assertiveness (Górska, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021; Wu, 2019). This study adopts the PBE as a response to calls by Thompson-Whiteside et al. (2018) to understand women in management's views on the importance of personal branding as a career success tool.

## Hypotheses development

### Dimensions of personal brand equity and career success

Women in management are persistently confronted with negative stereotyped perceptions from their male counterparts and this continues to be a major stumbling block to career success (Górska, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Embracing personal brand equity dimensions (personal brand appeal, personal brand recognition and personal brand differentiation) is recommended as one of the strategies that women can adopt to enhance career success (Jacobson, 2020; Shade & Jacobson, 2015). Career success refers to the objective and subjective assessment of an individual's achievement of desired professional goals (Bernarto et al., 2020; Wolff & Moser, 2009). Objective career success is measured by appraised job performance and salary progression (Bernarto et al., 2020), while subjective career success or perceived career success measures an individual's own appraisal of career success (Bernarto et al., 2020; Wolff & Moser, 2009). Perceived career success was considered in this study because it was difficult to collect data on objective career success measures such as performance appraisals and salary progression.

## Personal brand appeal and career success

Personal brand appeal (PBA), the first dimension of PBE, refers to the positive feelings or perceptions attributed to a personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2021; Pagis & Ailon, 2017). Related to this study, PBA measure the extent to which an individual's traits and qualities are aligned with job specifications. PBA is developed through the acquisition of the necessary habitus that allows an employee to fit in and comply with the occupation's specific expectations (Parmentier et al., 2013). For women aspiring for top management positions, this involves striving to overcome prevailing stereotyped perceptions through self-presentation and impression management (Khedher, 2019; Parmentier et al., 2013). This according to Hearn (2008) can be achieved by projecting interpersonal competencies which are anchored on a persuasive discourse with the objective of creating a personal brand appeal that is aligned to organisational culture. Previous studies (e.g. Gorbatov et al., 2021; Hedman, 2017) found a positive association between PBA and career success. It is therefore reasonable to speculate that, based on their experience, women occupying senior management positions are more likely to score higher on PBA enabling factors such as communication skills and emotional intelligence than those in middle management. It is therefore hypothesised that:

**H1** Women in senior management would score higher on personal brand appeal and perceived career success than those in middle management.

## Personal brand recognition and career success

Personal brand recognition (PBR) is the second dimension of PBE that is linked to career success. PBR refers to the salience of an individual's personal brand in a particular profession (Gorbatov et al., 2021; Parmentier et al., 2013). Women are more likely to lower the glass ceiling if they demonstrate that they deserve leadership positions (Amâncio & Santos, 2021; Kogut et al., 2014). This can be achieved by investing in cultural capital in the form of knowledge, competencies, education and professional achievements (Khedher, 2019; Labrecque et al., 2011). An individual's personal brand also stands to benefit from social capital in the form of membership to professional bodies and social networks (Khedher, 2019; Zamudio et al., 2013). Based on their achievements, affiliation to professional bodies and accumulated social capital, women in senior management are more likely to be recognised in their profession than those in middle management. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

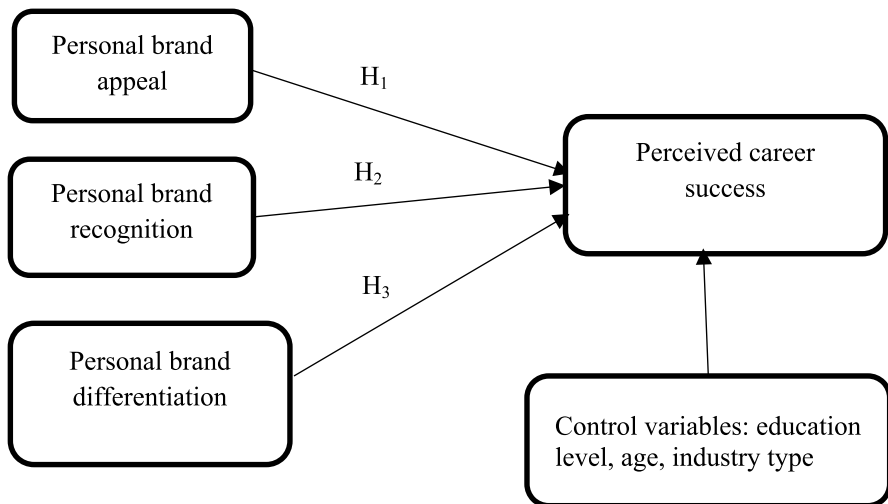
**H2** Women in senior management would score higher on personal brand recognition and perceived career success than those in middle management.

## Personal brand differentiation and career success

Personal brand differentiation (PBD) is the third dimension of PBE that is linked to career success. PBD refers to the position of a personal brand relative to competition (Gorbatov et al., 2021). Women aspiring for top management positions may enhance PBD by conveying a unique set of professional attributes that make them stand out from their male counterparts. In this regard, women are encouraged not to seek to imitate the masculinity posture portrayed by men but sculpt their own identity based on their own strengths (Elliott & Stead, 2017; Ngunjiri & Gardiner, 2017). In order to create a differential advantage, Elliott and Stead (2017) stress the importance of aligning such outstanding professional attributes with the values and ethos of the organisation. Previous studies showed that women in top management positions excel in ethical leadership, marketing orientation, change management, transparency and inclusivity (Kulik & Metz, 2017; Perryman et al., 2016). By demonstrating distinctive professional attributes, women occupying top management positions are more likely to be positioned competitively in the minds of key stakeholders in the organisation thereby enhancing career success prospects than those in middle management. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

**H3** Women in senior management would score higher on personal brand differentiation and perceived career success than those in middle management.

Based on the proposed hypotheses, the research model is depicted in Fig. 1. The research model posits that PBE dimensions influences perceived career success. Perceived career success is also expected to be influenced by control variables such as age, education level and industry type.



**Fig. 1** Research model

## Materials and methods

### Research approach and design

A quantitative method and a correlational research design were employed to test the hypothesised relationships between study constructs. The use of a quantitative research approach is recommended for studies that examine linear relationships between study constructs (Hair et al., 2014). The quantitative method aligned with the primary objective of this study of examining the relationships between personal brand equity dimensions and career success. This study was based on the proposition that the role of PBE as a tool to enhance career success could be examined using competing models involving women in middle and senior management.

Participants were drawn from multiple sources which include the board of directors of 65 companies listed on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange, women in management enrolled for the MBA program at three leading universities in Zimbabwe, databases of the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe and Women Action Group. The two women's organisations were considered because they are at the forefront of championing women's rights and inclusive governance in Zimbabwe. However, the databases had women employed in other companies not listed on the ZSE hence could not be solely used as sample frames. To be included in the study, one had to be female, employed by a company listed on the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange, in a middle or senior management position, and with the desire for career advancement. For women in middle management, working experience of 5 years and above in the same position was considered. This timeframe was deemed long enough to suggest the existence of the glass ceiling. There were no time limits that were fixed to those in senior management as the objective was to understand their views on the association between PBE and career success. Middle managers were categorised as supervisors and functional managers, while senior managers included executive managers, board members and directors.

### Sampling procedure

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit study participants. Following the purposive sampling method, only participants who demonstrated knowledge of the glass ceiling concept were considered for the main study. Snowball sampling utilised business networks and referrals to recruit women in senior management positions as they were not easily accessible. Effort was made to have an equal representation of women in middle and senior management positions in line with the objective of comparing their views on PBE. The sample



was diverse as respondents were drawn from diverse sectors such as financial services, tourism and hospitality, manufacturing, mining and agro-business.

### Measurement scales

A structured self-administered questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from women in middle and senior management. A five point Likert scale was used to measure all the responses related to study constructs. The research model comprises three independent variables- personal brand appeal, personal brand differentiation and personal brand recognition. Personal brand appeal was measured using a 6-item scale that adopted from Gorbatov et al. (2021). A 5-item scale, developed by Gorbatov et al. (2021) was used to measure personal brand differentiation. Personal brand recognition was operationalised using a 6 item scale adapted from Gorbatov et al. (2021). The dependent variable, perceived career success was measured using a 6 item scale adapted from Turban and Dougherty (1994), and Goris et al. (2003). The questionnaire also included control variables (age, education level and marital status), organisation characteristics (sector) and managerial level. A pilot study was conducted with 40 female students enrolled for the MBA program who were not part of the main study. The reliability of the measurement scales was ensured and minor adjustments related to the phrasing of the scale items were done. Appendix 1 provides the measurement scales that were used to measure study constructs.

### Data collection

Data was collected for a period of 4 months from July to October 2022. The questionnaires were distributed electronically and physically. An electronic questionnaire was emailed to respondents that were recruited from databases of Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe, Women Action Group and companies listed on the ZSE. A physical questionnaire was distributed to women in management positions enrolled for the MBA program at three leading universities in Zimbabwe during their face to face lectures. A total of 615 questionnaires were distributed and 523 were valid for analysis representing an effective response rate of 85%. Table 1 summaries the demographic profile of respondents and industries from which they were drawn.

### Data analysis

SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 26 were used for data analysis. The data set was split into two samples, representing women in middle management and senior management. The results for women in middle management are presented first, followed by those for women in senior management.

**Table 1** Sample profile

Age	25–34 years	17% (n = 89)
	35–44 years	54% (n = 282)
	45–54 years	20% (n = 105)
	55 years and above	9% (n = 47)
Marital status	Single	36% (n = 188)
	Married	64% (n = 335)
Education level	Diploma	8% (n = 42)
	Degree	61% (n = 319)
	Postgraduate qualification	31% (n = 162)
Work experience (Years)	5–10 years	24% (n = 126)
	11–15 years	28% (n = 146)
	16–20 years	33% (n = 173)
	21 years and above	15% (n = 78)
Managerial level	Middle management	64% (n = 334)
	Senior management	36% (n = 188)
Sector	Financial services	21% (n = 110)
	Manufacturing	27% (n = 141)
	Agro-business	23% (n = 120)
	Tourism & hospitality	16% (n = 84)
	Mining	13% (n = 68)

## Results for women in middle management

### Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis was applied to assess the measurement model. The initial CFA model which consisted of 4 latent variables and 23 observed variables did not fit with the data. The model was then modified by dropping 6 observed variables with high cross loadings- BA5, BA6, BD5, BR6, CS5 and CS6. The modified CFA model fitted with the data:  $\chi^2/df = 2.196$ , CFI = 0.964, TLI = 0.957, GFI = 0.880, RMSEA = 0.071 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The reliability of measurement scales was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values above the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). The factor loadings for all observed variables and average variance extracted (AVE) values surpassed the approved threshold of 0.5 thereby indicating the attainment of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Reliability and validity indicators are shown in Table 2.

The Fornell–Larcker criterion was used to assess discriminant validity. The square root of the AVE was more than the inter-correlations between study constructs which shows evidence of discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Multicollinearity was not an issue in this study. The tolerance values were all below 1 and the variance inflation factor values were below 10 which shows that multicollinearity was not an issue in this study (Pallant, 2011). Discriminant validity indicators are shown in Table 3.

**Table 2** Reliability and validity indicators

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Brand appeal (BA)	BA1	0.822	0.932	0.930	0.780
	BA2	0.906			
	BA3	0.868			
	BA4	0.926			
Brand differentiation (BD)	BD1	0.849	0.930	0.932	0.760
	BD2	0.888			
	BD3	0.847			
	BD4	0.904			
Brand recognition (BA)	BR1	0.900	0.962	0.960	0.840
	BR2	0.920			
	BR3	0.908			
	BR4	0.920			
	BR5	0.939			
Career success (CS)	CS1	0.818	0.868	0.870	0.620
	CS2	0.806			
	CS3	0.778			
	CS3	0.758			

CA, Cronbach alpha; CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted

**Table 3** Discriminant validity indicators

Constructs	BA	BD	BR	CS	Collinearity statistics		Durbin Watson value
					Tolerance	VIF	
BA	<b>0.883</b>				0.705	0.705	2.011
BD	0.651**	<b>0.775</b>			0.815	0.815	
BR	0.102*	− 0.171*	<b>0.917</b>		0.699	0.699	
CS	0.465**	0.510*	0.132*	<b>0.787</b>			

Bold values represent the square root of the average variance extracted

BA, brand appeal; BD, Brand differentiation; BR, brand recognition; CS, career success

\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

## Structural model and hypotheses testing

The fitness of the structural model was assessed using goodness-of-fit indices. The structural model fitted well with the data as indicated by:  $\chi^2/df = 2.180$ ,  $CFI = 0.923$ ,  $TLI = 0.930$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.063$  (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Brand differentiation was found to have a positive effect on career success for women in middle management, whilst the influence of brand appeal brand recognition was insignificant. Table 4 shows hypotheses testing results.

**Table 4** Hypotheses testing results

Path	Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	Decision
Brand appeal—> career success	0.095	0.048	2.009	0.064	Not supported
Brand recognition—> career success	0.047	0.026	1.768	0.077	Not supported
Brand differentiation—> career success	0.299	0.062	4.789	***	Supported

## Control variables and career success

To examine whether career success for women in middle management was influenced by categorical variables such as age, education level and industry sector, dummy variables for each variable were created and regressed with career success. For education level, diploma was used as a baseline category. For industry type, the financial sector was used as a baseline category. Lastly, for the age category, 25–34 years was used as the baseline category. The results showed that career success for women in middle management is influenced by education level and industry type. The influence of age was insignificant. The results are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5** Control variables and career success

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig	Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
<i>Model 1</i>							
<i>Education level</i>							
(Constant)	5.740	0.087		65.616	0.000		
Degreedummy	1.602	.252	0.022	5.256	0.000	0.522	1.200
Postgraduatedummy	1.203	.188	0.136	3.468	0.000	0.720	1.375
Dependent variable: Career success							
<i>Model 2</i>							
<i>Industry sector</i>							
(Constant)	6.179	0.201		30.695	0.000		
Manufacgdummy	0.508	0.220	0.308	2.311	0.022	.233	4.300
Agrodummy	0.515	0.316	0.367	2.921	0.015	.214	4.669
Tourism dummy	0.616	0.247	0.261	2.499	0.013	.377	2.650
Miningdummy	0.539	0.239	0.248	2.253	0.025	.340	2.943
Dependent variable: Career success							
<i>Model 3</i>							
<i>Age</i>							
(Constant)	5.790	0.084		69.242	0.000		
Age2dummy	0.228	0.117	0.144	1.954	0.062	0.756	1.324
Age3dummy	0.031	0.121	0.019	0.255	0.799	0.756	1.324
Dependent variable: Career success							

## Results for women in senior management

The measurement model for women in senior management was also modified by dropping scale items that showed high cross loadings- BA5, BA6, BD5, BR6, CS5 and CS6. The modified CFA model fitted with the data:  $\chi^2/df = 2.661$ , CFI=0.971, TLI=0.966, GFI=0.890, RMSEA=0.058 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The modified model also returned acceptable indicators of reliability and validity as shown in Table 6.

As shown in Table 7, the square root of the AVE was more than the inter-correlations between study constructs which indicates evidence of discriminant validity. Moreover, the correlation coefficients for all constructs were below 0.8 which shows that all variables were distinct and this confirms the attainment of discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014). Table 2 discriminant validity indicators.

## Structural model and hypotheses testing

The structural model for women in senior management also fitted well with the data as indicated by:  $\chi^2/df = 2.238$ , CFI=0.925, TLI=0.933, RMSEA=0.068 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Brand differentiation and brand recognition were found to have a positive effect on career success for women in senior management, whilst the influence of brand appeal was insignificant. Table 8 shows hypotheses testing results.

**Table 6** Reliability and validity indicators

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Brand appeal	BA1	0.822	0.921	0.920	0.750
	BA2	0.885			
	BA3	0.872			
	BA4	0.886			
Brand differentiation	BD1	0.822	0.924	0.922	0.732
	BD2	0.870			
	BD3	0.832			
	BD4	0.894			
Brand recognition	BR1	0.880	0.928	0.930	0.742
	BR2	0.852			
	BR3	0.826			
	BR4	0.902			
	BR5	0.827			
Career success	CS1	0.770	0.866	0.862	0.610
	CS2	0.776			
	CS3	0.804			
	CS3	0.774			

CA, Cronbach alpha; CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted

**Table 7** Discriminant validity indicators

Constructs	BA	BD	BR	CS	Collinearity Statistics		Durbin Watson value
					Tolerance	VIF	
BA	<b>0.866</b>				0.984	1.633	1.823
BD	0.670**	<b>0.855</b>			0.805	1.733	
BR	0.448**	478**	<b>0.861</b>		0.788	1.680	
CS	0.344**	0.409**	0.428**	<b>0.781</b>			

BA, brand appeal; BD, brand differentiation; BR, brand recognition; CS, career success. Values in square root of the AVE

\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$

**Table 8** Hypotheses testing results

Path	Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	Decision
Brand appeal—> career success	0.010	0.031	0.341	0.733	Not supported
Brand recognition—> career success	0.256	0.037	6.980	***	Supported
Brand differentiation—> career success	0.215	0.034	6.271	***	Supported

## Control variables and career success

The influence of age, education level and industry sector on career success for women in senior management was also examined. Dummy variables for each categorical variable were created and regressed with career success. For education level, diploma was used as a baseline category. For industry type, the financial sector was used as a baseline category. Lastly, for the age category, 25–34 years was used as the baseline category. The results showed that career success for women in senior management is influenced by education level and industry type. The results are presented in Table 9.

## Discussion of results

Perceived brand differentiation emerged as the strongest factor that positively influences career success perceptions for both women in middle and senior management. This result concurs with that of previous studies (e.g., Elliott & Stead, 2017; Perryman et al., 2016; Wang, 2023) that confirmed the differential advantage of women over men at the workplace. For example, compared to men, women were found to offer higher professional value in terms of ethical leadership (Wang, 2023), marketing orientation (Elliott & Stead, 2017), managing change (Kulik & Metz, 2017), corporate governance (Perryman et al., 2016; Wang, 2023). Thus, women in middle and senior management may leverage on this result to enhance their prospects of

**Table 9** Control variables and career success

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig	Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
<i>Model 1</i>							
<i>Education level</i>							
(Constant)	6.840	1.086		66.412	0.000		
Degreedummy	1.733	450	0.033	6.344	0.000	0.323	1.320
Postgraduatedummy	1.304	196	0.234	4.360	0.000	0.322	1.483
Dependent variable: Career success							
<i>Model 2</i>							
<i>Industry sector</i>							
(Constant)	8.260	0.302		31.290	0.000		
Manufacgdummy	0.742	0.108	0.19	2.821	0.000	0.423	3.200
Agrodummy	0.514	0.144	0.16	3.468	0.000	0.223	3.464
Tourism dummy	0.518	0.148	0.17	3.478	0.000	0.366	2.440
Miningdummy	0.529	0.153	0.19	3.493	0.000	0.340	3.842
Dependent variable: Career success							
<i>Model 3</i>							
<i>Age</i>							
(Constant)	6.680	0.083		68.240	0.000		
Age2dummy	0.322	0.116	0.145	1.850	0.068	0.740	1.425
Age3dummy	0.034	0.221	0.016	0.234	0.650	0.854	1.520
Dependent variable: Career success							

narrowing the glass ceiling and increase women representation in senior management positions.

There were mixed views on the influence of perceived brand recognition on career success. For women in middle management, the influence of perceived brand recognition on career success was insignificant, while for the senior management sample it was significant. This result suggests the need for women in middle management to enhance their personal brand recognition. This can be achieved by investing in personal brand recognition building in the form of professional knowledge, competencies, expertise and professional achievements (Khedher, 2019; Labrecque et al., 2011). Drawing from the findings of the study conducted by Khedher (2019), women in middle management may enhance their personal brand recognition through network building with other professionals outside the organisation and seek online profile endorsements from higher ranked professionals in their respective industries.

Personal brand appeal was found to have an insignificant influence on career success for both women in middle and senior management. This result suggests that women in management still need to improve their PBA in order to enhance career success. This result is consistent with findings from previous studies (e.g. Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Khedher, 2019; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018) where women aspiring for senior management positions were found to lack in

interpersonal skills, self-presentation and impression management. Khedher (2019) elaborated on this finding by explaining the importance of communication skills and emotional intelligence as critical career success enabling factors. Concurring, Baumgartner and Schneider (2010) also emphasised the need for women aspiring for senior management positions to acculturate themselves to a diverse workplace by way of professional image, communication style and work ethic.

Women career success was also found to vary by industry type and education level. This result is consistent with that of previous studies (e.g., Hutchings et al., 2016; Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2017; Moodley et al., 2016). In terms of industry type, manufacturing, mining, and agro-business were found to present challenges for women career progression, suggesting the need to consider the peculiar challenges presented by each industry when formulating interventions. The gender gap in educational level is acknowledged as a major challenge especially in science and technology related industries (Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2020). This challenge, according to the World Economic Forum (2020) is manifested by low enrolment for STEM disciplines by women. Thus, the selection of educational disciplines should be considered as one of the critical factors in addressing the glass ceiling challenge.

### Theoretical implications

This study offers a multidisciplinary perspective that infuses brand management and human resource management principles to address the glass ceiling challenge. It contributes to glass ceiling literature by extending the application of the personal brand equity model to explore other strategies for addressing the glass ceiling challenge. The model proposed in this study managed to integrate dimensions of the personal brand equity model and examine their interrelationship with career success. Such an extension of the personal brand equity model to understand the antecedents of the glass ceiling also provides novel insights that may guide further research.

Moreover, this study adopted a multi-industry perspective, which is an improvement from previous studies (e.g., Adapa et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2020) that focused on one industry. In particular, this study found that perceptions of glass vary by industry which calls for targeted interventions. This study also established that, women in senior management, who have managed to navigate the glass ceiling hurdle perceive personal brand equity as an important tool for career success. Thus, this study contributes to literature by identifying personal brand equity as a downstream tool for addressing the glass ceiling challenge.

### Practical implications

The results of this study suggests the need for women both in middle management to enhance their personal brand appeal. This can be done by investing in continuous professional development focusing on acquisition of soft skills such as communication, impression management and emotional intelligence. Such envisaged training should emphasis on empowering women with skills to cope



with the prevalent stereotyped practices directed towards them at the workplace. A focus on soft skills is critical in order to address the recurring finding from previous studies that shows that men are considered to be more appealing for top management positions than women (e.g., Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016).

The strategic role of personal brand recognition in enhancing career success was acknowledged by women in senior management. Based on this result, women in middle management aspiring for top management positions should strive to enhance their visibility by showcasing human and social capital capabilities. To achieve this, consistent with Shafiee et al's (2020) recommendation, women aspiring for top leadership positions should develop an integrated personal brand positioning strategy. This can be done by constant participation in business and social networks encompassing key stakeholders from respective industries. To enhance human capital, women inspiring should also show career ambition by engaging in professional development programmes in order to have a skills set that is relevant to the ever changing business environment.

The results of the middle and senior management samples confirmed the role of personal brand differentiation as a critical career success factor. It follows then that women intending to break the glass ceiling should endeavour to distinguish themselves from their male counterparts. To achieve such distinctiveness, Klabi and Debabi (2011) emphasise the importance of investing in personal brand traits that are aligned to organisational goals such as competence, enthusiasm, conscientiousness and sincerity. A focus on enthusiasm will assist in addressing the long held view that women lack in career progression ambition (Hakim, 2000). Conscientiousness and sincerity are critical as they are associated with transparency, integrity and ethical leadership which are regarded as central to good leadership (Karaduman, 2013; Moulard et al., 2015).

## Limitations and further research

This study relied on cross sectional quantitative data that was collected from women occupying middle and senior management positions. Thus, the results are limited in terms of tracking the possible changes in the views of the respondents as the concept of personal brand equity evolves. To address this limitation, a longitudinal study is recommended. Although this study allows for the generalisability of study findings to the Zimbabwean context, its quantitative nature limits a detailed understanding of the lived experience of women aspiring for top management positions as they interact with the glass ceiling phenomenon. Thus, future may need to adopt a mixed method approach in order to get a holistic view of the perceptions of glass ceiling in a developing economy.

Interventions directed towards addressing the glass ceiling challenge are influenced by structural and socio-cultural factors. As these factors vary across developing and developed economies, the findings of this study are also limited in terms of external validity. To address this concern, a comparative study of the underlying causes and strategies of managing the glass ceiling in developed and developing economies is recommended. Lastly, due to the non-availability of an

accurate sample frame, this study utilised non-probability sampling methods to select respondents. To minimise the perception of selection bias and enhance objectivity, future studies may utilise probability sampling methods.

## Conclusion

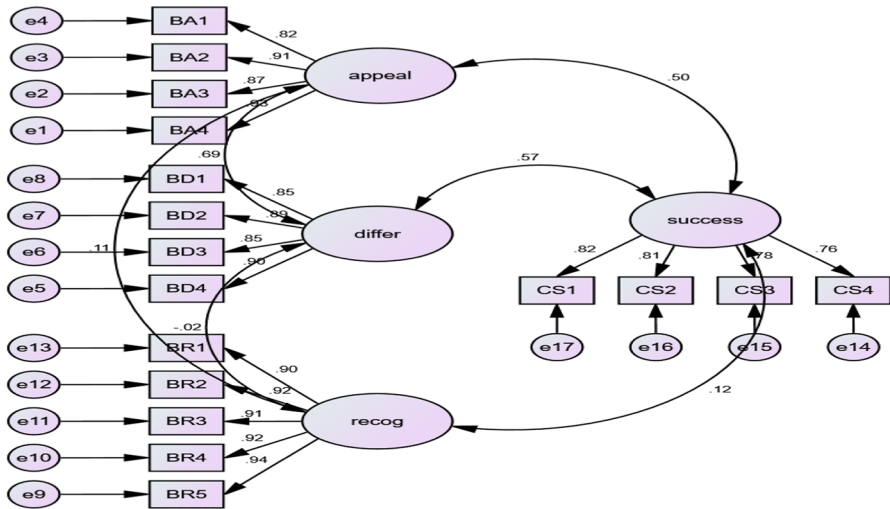
Women remain under represented in senior management positions in Zimbabwe's stock exchange listed companies. This study examines the views of women in middle and senior management on the role of personal brand equity as a tool for enhancing career success. A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 523 women in middle and senior management positions employed in Zimbabwe stock exchange listed companies. Covariance-based structural equation modelling was utilised to test posited hypotheses. For women in middle management, brand differentiation was found to have a significant positive influence on career success, whilst the influence of brand appeal and brand recognition was insignificant. For women in senior management, brand differentiation and brand recognition were found to have a significant positive influence on career success, whilst the influence of brand appeal was insignificant. Education level and industry type were found to influence career success for women in both middle and senior management. This study contributes to promote gender equality in management by extending the application of personal brand equity model to address the glass ceiling challenge.

## Appendix 1 measurement scales

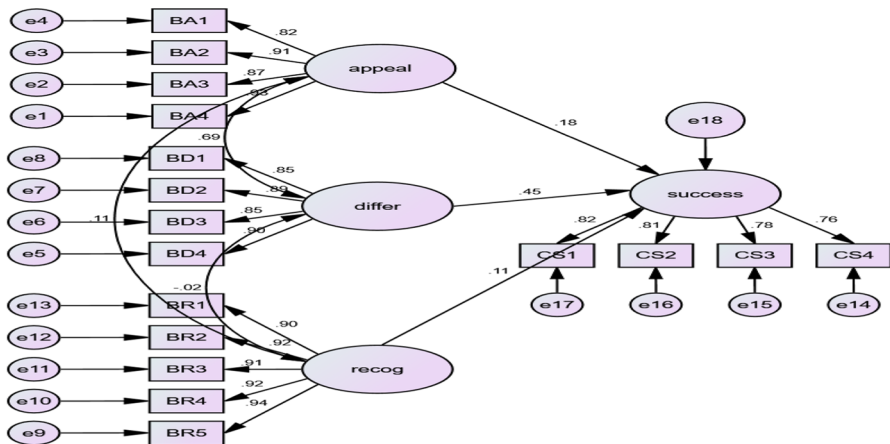
Constructs	Scale items	Source (s)
Personal brand appeal (PBA)	I have a positive professional image among others I have a positive professional reputation My personal values are reflected in my work My professional strengths are clear My work stands out from the work of others I have a distinct professional image	Gorbatov et al. (2021)

Constructs	Scale items	Source (s)
Personal brand differentiation (PBD)	I have a reputation for producing high value results I am considered a better professional compared to others My work is highly valued by others I am a preferred candidate for projects and tasks I am regarded as delivering higher professional value compared to others	Gorbatov et al. (2021)
Personal brand recognition (PBR)	I am known in my professional field My name is well known in my professional field I am known outside of my immediate network I am regarded as an expert in my professional domain I am often recommended by others to their professional contacts I have clear expertise in my professional area	Gorbatov et al. (2021)
Perceived career success (PCS)	I am satisfied with my career achievements I am pleased with the quality of my job performance My experience is in demand in the labour market I believe that my career path is on schedule My supervisor is happy with the quality of my work My workmates are pleased with the quality of my work	Turban and Dougherty (1994), Goris et al. (2003)
Organisation culture	The culture of my organisation promotes my career success The culture of my organisation promotes my equality The culture of my organisation promotes fairness in performance appraisal	Moodley et al. (2016)

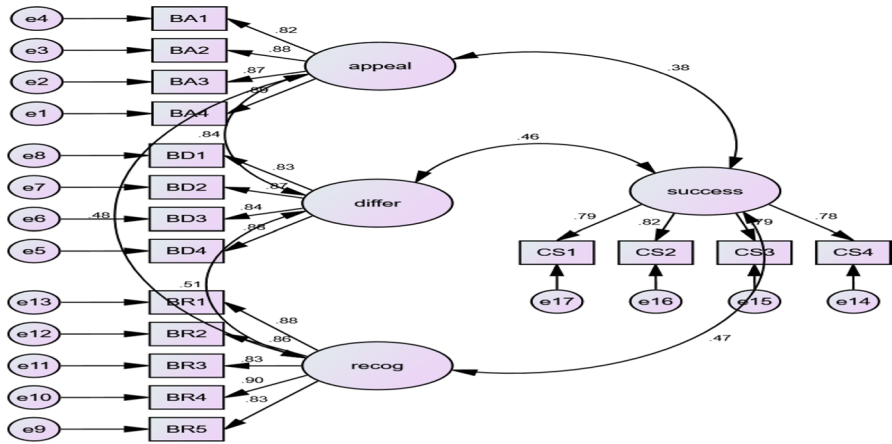
## Appendix 2: Measurement model for women in middle management



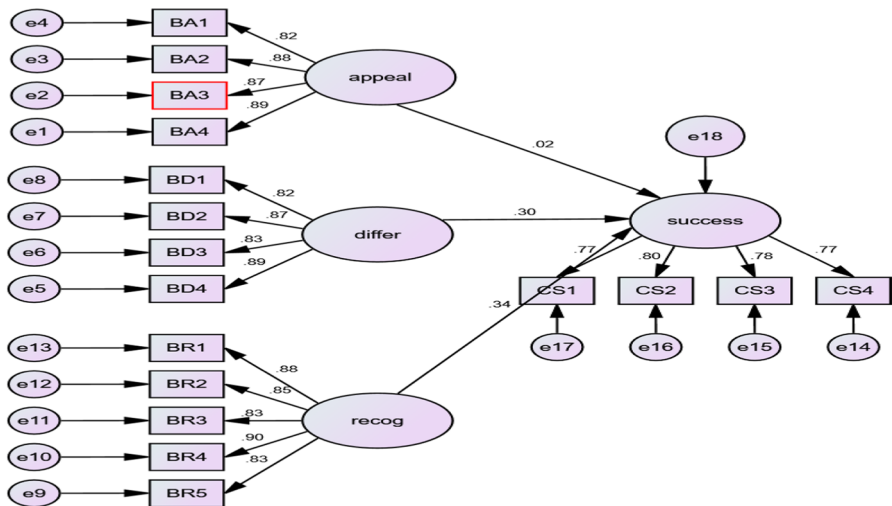
## Structural model for women in middle management



### Appendix 3: Measurement model for women in senior management



### Structural model for women in middle management



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