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Special Session Overview: Human Brand Dynamics

Consumers in contemporary consumer culture show increasing demand for human brands. They vote for politicians and business leaders who carefully brand themselves, follow celebrities who are ‘famous for being famous,’ or even rise to online celebrity status themselves, using only their wits and webcams. In contrast to corporate brands that can hide their managers’ character beneath shiny “brand veneers” (Holt 2002, p. 88), human brands take actual people into the limelight, with all their physical features, mental biases, and very human emotions.

The importance of understanding human brands – defined as people who are simultaneously managed brands – has been noted in the literature (Dion and Arnould 2016; Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber 2013; Parmentier and Fischer 2012; Thomson 2006), but research to date has focused mostly on treating humans *as* brands; that is, applying standard branding principles to humans. We argue, in contrast, that the fundamental human qualities of person brands require more attention in both human branding theory and practice.

In this session, we therefore focus on what makes the human so compelling from a branding perspective, and crucially, how to manage a range of complex human brand dynamics. Consumer culture research is only beginning to theorize these emerging phenomena. The papers in this session seek to contribute to this increasingly important, yet still nascent, literature by surfacing dialectical tensions that are specific to human brands, theorizing them, and discussing implications for human branding practice, in line with Inman et al.’s (2018) call for consumer researchers to articulate the implications of their findings. Specifically, this session explores three questions: What is needed to create a successful human brand; how to carry human brand value from company to company; and how to manage human branding intricacies?

The first paper explains how human brands acquire socio-cultural relevance through discursive, public authorization. Drawing on data from an Austrian footwear brand, the authors show how a founder/CEO acquired human brand equity by involving consumers and media commentators into circles of political polarization, encouragement, and criticism.

Unlike this Austrian CEO, many human brands work for corporate brands. The second presentation explains how employed person brands with celebrity status manage to maintain a certain independence from the brands they work for and thus preserve career flexibility. Studying fashion designers, the authors document tactics through which these human brands build their employer’s brand equity while also remaining independent.

Many celebrity person brands are loved and admired for their aspirational status, which poses notable challenges to their management when they inevitably act as humans; that is, off brand. The third presentation draws on a longitudinal analysis of Martha Stewart the person brand to illuminate how the person and the brand are inextricably tied together, and uncovers the elements of being human that need to be managed, in contrast to inanimate brands. Namely, mortality, hubris, unpredictability and the impact of social others.

Together, these three studies undertake a first step towards defining the contours of a consumer culture research field that Fournier and Eckhardt (forthcoming) have labeled “human brand dynamics.” The three presentations in this session demonstrate that human brands face unique challenges that are tied to dialectical tensions between authenticity and manageability, or independence and dependence, for example. However, much more work is needed to understand the multiple complexities that human brands face when seeking or accidentally finding fame, gaining and losing person brand equity, and becoming independent or corporate. In this session, we begin to address these issues and provide some empirically-based guidance for human brand management.

We believe that this session only marks the beginning. Our discussants, both leading experts in the field of person brands, will explore a future roadmap for this burgeoning, multifaceted and increasingly significant area of research. After all, isn’t the rise and fall of human brands material from which consumer culture’s greatest fairytales are made?

Paper 1: Authorizing the Charismatic Brand Leader

Human brands are known to be a powerful force for brand building (Belk and Tumbat 2005; Stern 1988; Dion and Arnould 2015; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015; Parmentier and Fischer 2015). Human brands like celebrity chefs, fashion designers, internet pioneers, or artists add a much-needed human element to otherwise rather technocratic brand assemblages, thus contributing significantly to enticing consumers and building brand equity (Muñiz, Norris and Fine 2014).

Some human brands, however, pursue agendas that move beyond brand equity. Visionary leaders such as Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, Elon Musk, or Coco Chanel, for example, ostensibly dedicate(d) their lives to change consumers' use of technology, revolutionize transportation, or liberate women. How do such visionary leaders turn consumers and other audiences into eager followers, and earn themselves authority as brand leaders? How do they sustain their public leadership status in times where such an authority is a fragile asset (Delgado-García, Quevedo-Puente and Blanco-Mazagatos 2015).

To explore the discursive authorization of human brand leaders, we draw on theories of charismatic authority as analytical lens (Andreas 2007; Turner 1993; Weber 1978). One key premise of this literature is that charismatic authority is not an inherent character trait, but is socially ascribed and as such requires constant validation from public audiences in order to be sustained (Weber 1978 [1922]; Turner 1993; 2003). In other words, leadership authority is understood as relationship with multiple actors.

To study empirically how authorization works in the context of human branding, we conducted an extended case study of an Austrian footwear brand with a vocal leader, sustainably produced product range, loyal follower base, and an outspoken group of antagonists. Our analysis reveals that leaders trigger the authorization process by sparking popular discourses that speak to latent cultural tensions and institutional ambivalences. Charismatic brand leaders thus leverage existing anxieties, promote alternative future scenarios, and take immediate actions that allow brand audiences to reconsider their view of a given social situation and experience moments of "charismatic fervor" (Eisenstadt in Weber 1968: xix).

Specifically, we find that authorization of human brands emerges from interactions of public (1) polarization, (2) encouragement, and (3) criticism. *Polarization* amplifies latent ambivalences and risks. The charismatic brand leader constructs a daunting, polarized risk scenario from latent cultural tensions in a non-commercial field, and stages branded crusades against the involved institutions to pursue an alternative future scenario. Those consumers, news media, and brand audiences, who readily subscribe to the leader's alternative vision engage in *encouragement* practices that publicly validate the leader as a charismatic authority and become followers. Antagonists, in turn, engage in *criticisms* that threaten and question the leader's alternative vision and ability to achieve them, but by the same token unintentionally provide the leader with opportunities for winning the next public battle and thus enhance authorization. Eventually, these discursive practices, spurred by leadership agency and public conversation on a market level, manifest in consumers' romanticizing the leader, validating and supporting the leader's endeavor, and sometimes evoke tangible institutional change. However, as public authorization is not permanent, the end of one cycle may well mark the beginning of the next. Authorization is granted exactly for that—managerial persistence in pursuing charismatic brand crusades against seemingly unsurmountable obstacles in a dramatic and humorous form of "protestainment" (Orkibi 2016).

While existing literature discusses how human brands build brand equity for themselves (McNally and Speak 2002; Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber 2013) and transfer their social and cultural capital from one setting to another in search for commercial opportunities (Parmentier and Fischer 2015), our study reveals an alternative path to human brand equity that rests on staged public dramas, sometimes involving civil disobedience. Contrary to the celebrity chefs and designers studied in presentation 2, personal brand leaders put the brand and its mission to the

fore, rather than their own expertise. As such, they serve as speakers and agile actors for the brand, but cannot escape the inherent risks of being human, as discussed in presentation 3. In that sense, human brand leaders add a personal path to the cultural branding repertoire. Their talk, devotion to the brand, risky practices and political engagement resembles Holt's (2002) postulation that brand leaders shoulder civic responsibility and become citizen-artists.

Paper 2: Working it: How Person Brands Protect Their Equity from Co-Branding Partners

“If once upon a time the top job at a big brand was the ultimate prize for many designers -- and once you got it, you didn't let go till they pried the sketch pad from your withered hands -- now the average term seems to be three years or less.” (NYT, December 15, 2016)

In times of pervasive market uncertainty, this research addresses a pressing person branding challenge: how can person brands protect their equity when they are in a cobranding alliance with a powerful brand? To answer this question, we build on insights from research that examines how person brands are built (e.g., Fresco 2017; Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber 2013) and that has studied the practice of cobranding between key employees and organizations (e.g., Graffin, Carpenter, and Boivie 2011; Hayward, Rindova and Pollock 2004) as a contemporary management phenomenon.

Cobranding, a popular product development and marketing communication strategy, happens when brands are marketed in combination (Newmeyer, Venkatesh and Chatterjee 2014). It entails presenting two or more brands to the public (Rao and Ruckert 1994). We argue that cobranding with a key employee occurs when a brand actively promotes public linkages between its core offerings and a prominent employee. Prior research on celebrity endorsement - a related, yet distinct phenomenon (see Wilcox and Carroll 2008) - and on cobranding alliances has most frequently focused on how consumers respond these arrangements (e.g., Geylani, Inman, Hostede 2008; Monga and Lau-Gesk 2007). Limited attention has been paid, however, to how brands, especially person brands, protect their equity from their cobranding partners.

Using an archival dataset of fashion coverage from mainstream and specialized newsmedia (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Women's Wear Daily*, *The Business of Fashion*) and marketing communications from brands – both product and person - (i.e. content from websites and social media accounts), we examine the tactics that a set of fashion designers (Raf Simons, Alber Elbaz, and Hedi Slimane) have used to (re)territorialize their person brand assemblages while working for luxury fashion houses (Dior, Lanvin, and Saint Laurent Paris respectively). We do so to understand how those tactics can preserve the designer's independent person brand equity.

Our findings point to four categories of tactics with the potential to territorialize the designers' person-brand. The first category of tactic is the cultivation of a self-caricature. The term “caricature” refers to a characterization of a person that exaggerates some characteristics and oversimplifies others. Designers routinely promote self-caricatures by maintaining a consistent set of material and symbolic components into their assemblages which serves to demarcate their persona. For example, the dark glasses and floppy bow tie inevitably sported by Alber Elbaz, made him instantly recognizable figure to industry insiders. As another example, Hedi Slimane consistently engaged in behaviors that marked him as a temperamental “artiste,” such as banning critics whose reviews he disliked from his fashion shows.

A second category of tactics designers engaged in was fostering self-brand extensions which were protected from enrolment in the brand of the luxury house for which they worked. For example. Raf Simons had established his own eponymous menswear label, and he also enrolled a

“right hand man” into his own brand assemblage who has moved with him to each position he has held. As another example, Hedi Slimane maintained active involvement in the photography and music industries throughout his tenure at Saint Laurent.

A third type of tactic designers use to demarcate their own person-brands is to depart from the traditions of the heritage houses that employ them. Hedi Slimane accomplished this by moving Saint Laurent in a more commercial direction, and by dropping the name “Yves” from the Saint Laurent name. Raf Simons, for his part, moved Dior toward a modern form of minimalism that “turn[ed] a page on the retro-tinged glamour” of his predecessor John Galliano (*WWD*, 2012).

A final type of tactic of person-brand delimiting tactic that we identified is one we refer to as “leaving on your own terms.” Both Simons and Slimane chose to exit cobranding arrangements when the houses they were working for were at a pinnacle of success, and both limited the duration of their engagement to fewer than three full years. These decisions helped to portray the designers as masters of their own brand destinies.

Our paper concludes with a consideration of the managerial implications of our work both for person-brands and for product brands that ally with them.

Paper 3: Putting the person back in person brands: Understanding and managing the two-bodied brand

One of the most powerful marketing strategies involves the development of brands that are at once also people: a phenomenon variously referred to as human branding (Thomson 2006), person branding (Parmentier and Fischer 2012), and celebrity branding (Dion and Arnould 2011). There are tensions inherent in being both person and brand, and Bendisch, Larsen and Trueman (2013) affirm an urgent need to research this phenomenon. Previous research on the person brand phenomenon has focused on treating humans *as* brands and making humans *into* brands for sale in the commercial marketplace. We take inspiration from research highlighting the power of anthropomorphization, whereby inanimate objects are transformed with the addition of human-like characteristics (Aggarwal and McGill 2012), and the persistence of basic motivational tendencies (i.e., warmth and competence) whereby brands are considered for their essential human qualities (Malone and Fiske 2013), and argue to focus first on the *humanness* of person brands.

Using Kantorowicz’s (1957) theory of the King’s two bodies, we highlight two sides of the human brand: the body natural (the person) and the body politic (the brand)—which are united together within the person brand. The two-bodied theory was developed to inform understanding of how a human could be both a mortal who dies and a king that survives, and despite obvious applicability to human brands, this concept has yet to be considered within business or marketing. Doing so allows novel insights into the nature, process, and management of person brands. By theorizing two inseparable and interdependent components of person brands, we allow deeper reflection on their fundamental nature and consideration of the shifting balance and inconsistency between the two bodies that is yet to be considered in research.

To investigate the nature of person brands, and how the person and brand interact with each other, we conduct an interpretive, longitudinal analysis of the Martha Stewart human brand using the extended case method, or ECM (Burawoy 1998). While ECM is our overarching methodological approach, we analyze data that spans a twenty year horizon and thus incorporate tenets of a historical interpretive approach (Golder 2000; Karababa and Ger 2011). We focus on Martha Stewart as an ideal exemplar of the human brand concept. Stewart plays a central and visible role as the face of the brand and the primary public interface for brand articulations, and Stewart’s corporation and extensive product lines all bear her name.

Based on our analysis, we identify four tenets of human brands, all of which need to be understood and managed differently in comparison to inanimate brands: (1) mortality – the person will die – and (2) hubris – an exaggerated sense of self – which typically leads to an imbalance between the two bodies; and (3) unpredictability – not on brand at all times – and (4) social influence – intimate others define the brand – which can lead to inconsistency between the two bodies. We present a detailed analysis of these four characteristics, which present risks that non-human brands do not face. Yet, our data suggest that this risk can be mitigated by the much-needed authenticity that unpredictability provides the person brand, and the intimacy that social embeddedness yields, thereby yielding positive benefits from revealed inconsistencies between the two bodies of the person brand.

Authenticity is a rare and coveted benefit in the contemporary branding landscape (Beverland 2009), and the body natural can grant authenticity through inconsistency in a way that inanimate brands cannot. Key is the idea of a ‘real and true self’ behind whatever public mask the person brand projects. Essential humanity and the unpredictability of human action allow a person brand to not always be ‘on message’ and these natural meaning signals are appreciated as authentic (Meyers 2009). In an essential person brand dynamic, people appreciate an inside look even when it doesn’t paint a stable or favorable picture. Perhaps the greatest advantage of inconsistency between person and brand is that the resulting combined image is less tightly held and hence both bodies may be better able to assimilate disparate information. This suggests increased flexibility and degrees of freedom in the articulation of positioning platforms for person brands, a recommendation that stands in contrast to extant positioning advice for tightly defined brands (Aaker 1996).

In sum, person brands will continue to remain all too human, which is the source of their challenge and excitement. In today's commercialized society, the majority strive for a thriving person brand. Advancing our two-bodied framework can create value in this complex space.

References available upon request.