Pick Me, Pick Me! an Extension of Theory Regarding Human Branding Through Investigation of Editorial Fashion Models

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This study investigates the characteristics of, and the strategies for building, human brands among editorial fashion models. We undertake this industry-specific investigation to build on existing branding knowledge and illuminate both unique and common aspects of building human brands. Situated within an institutional theory perspective, and drawing on interviews and archival data, this paper identifies two distinct types of human brands in the modeling context: “chameleon conformist” versus “archetypecast.” The analysis suggests that characteristics of institutional fields may influence not only what constitutes a viable human brand positioning, but also tactics conducive to creating brands.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In contemporary consumer culture, anything from soup to soccer players can be branded. Yet whereas a significant volume of research has shed light on the manner in which products may be effectively branded, much less systematic attention has been paid to the manner in which humans may become branded.

It can, of course, be argued that all research on branding is relevant to human brands as well as to consumer packaged goods, industrial goods, services, and every other entity. However, recent efforts to understand “human brands” (defined here, in an adaptation from Thomson (2006), as people who are the subject of marketing communication efforts) suggest that there are unique aspects to developing human brands such as celebrities. Moreover, there are reasons to expect that brand building will differ even within the category of “human brands.” While it may be fair to call both an actor and a self-employed accountant a human brand, the institutional fields in which each competes vary dramatically, and we would expect that characteristics of those institutional fields could influence not only what constitutes a viable human brand, but also what tactics are likely conducive to creating viable brands.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to investigate a) the characteristics and b) the strategies for building human brands within one type of institutional field. We undertake this industry-specific investigation in order to begin to shed light on what may be unique about building human brands, what may be common with human branding in multiple contexts, and what may be common with branding in general. The paper, informed by an institutional theory perspective, draws on interview and archival qualitative data to develop insights into the nature of human brand building in the editorial fashion modeling industry. Our methodology can be situated within contemporary approaches to grounded theorizing.

The editorial modeling context has features that make it a useful one in which to study human brand building. First, it is attractive because of the high volume of human brands in the industry, and because of the constant influx of new individuals seeking to become successful brands. Second, while it features famous brands such as Cindy Crawford, Heidi Klum and Tyra Banks who are relatively well known to many end-consumers, the majority of those who are among the most successful brands within the field (e.g. Carolyn Murphy, Daria Werbowy, and Gemma Ward) in terms of their income, power and status (see www.models.com) remain virtually unknown to the general public.

Consistent with this observation, we note that the modeling industry is a context where customers (in the form of fashion designers, magazine editors and photographers) are typically more influential than the end-consumers of fashion products. The modeling industry thus represents a highly institutionalized setting that contrasts with other contexts in which human brands have been studied and in which it appears that there are varied means of being and becoming a successful human brand.

Our analysis suggests that models competing for editorial fashion work have attempted to build one of two different types of brands, and have adopted contrasting strategies depending on which type they seek to become. We label the first brand type “chameleon conformist” and the second “archetypecast.” Models who achieve the “chameleon conformists” type of brand are those whose names and faces are likely to be unfamiliar to the general public for much of their modeling career, but whose visibility within the editorial fashion field is immense. These are models who, for much of their careers, conform to the norms typically preferred by the powerful designers in the industry, in that they promote the designer’s work more directly than their own fame. As part of conforming to the rules of the game within their field and the preferences of the powerful, these models constantly re-invent themselves. They are “chameleons” in the sense that they adapt their look to the evolving tastes in their field.

We have coined the term “archetypecasts” to refer to models who build successful human brands by achieving not only recognition within their field, but renown well beyond it. Theses models’ names and faces are widely known not only by industry insiders, but also by those who are relatively peripheral to the industry. Moreover, like iconic brands of products, they hold a set of distinct meanings for fashion consumers that may be difficult to completely articulate, but that appear to be tacitly understood by both insiders to the field, and outsiders. It is in this sense that these models’ branding efforts both “typecast” them and render them “archetypes.” It is significant to note that, in the modeling industry, this type of brand is not built by behaving in a manner that is isomorphic with norms in the field and the preferences of those powerful within the industry. Rather, these models are highly selective in their enactment of normal industry practice.

Our analysis suggest that both are potentially viable strategies, but also that a model may, partly due to institutional actors such as media, be effectively repositioned. Yet most models who are regarded as successful human brands can be seen to conform to one branding strategy or the other.

The paper concludes by discussing what appears to be relatively unique to branding within this field owing to characteristics of the institutional setting and to dynamics within it, versus what may have some more general relevance. It suggests that there may be a number of other institutional settings where high quality conformity constitutes one viable human branding strategy, while celebrity-seeking is a sometimes-suitable alternative. It briefly considers both similarities and differences between the human branding strategies identified here, and alternative branding strategies suggested in the prior product focused literature, highlighting the need for theoretical attention to human branding as distinct from other types of branding.

Reference