Human Brand Identity Types and Dynamics: the Role of Incongruent Extensions and Legitimacy Mechanisms - the Case of Film Directors
   Camille Pluntz, Université Paris-Dauphine, France
   Bernard Pras, Université Paris-Dauphine and ESSEC Business School, France

This research identifies human brand identity types and dynamics. In Study 1, we show the existence of 4 identity types among western film directors. In Study 2, conducted in France, we analyze the dynamics of human brand identity based upon film directors’ specific, bourgeois and popular legitimacy and incongruent/congruent extensions.

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Camille Pluntz, ISG International Business School, France
Bernard Pras, Université Paris Dauphine and ESSEC Business School, France

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Professional human brands have become substantial research objects. Scholars have already focused on professional human brand building strategies (Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber, 2008; 2013; Dion and Arnould, 2016) but have neglected to raise the question of human brand identity evolution. This issue needs to be addressed, as branded individuals are seen undertaking incongruent extension strategies in their careers, which come to alter their human brand’s identity.

Previous research suggests that only human brand identities resting on expertise associations (the chameleon conformist), or on expertise and creativity associations (the archetype) are viable (Parmentier et al., 2013). On the contrary, we assume that a human brand identity solely rooted in creativity associations can exist socially, and is thus also viable such as it is for artists (Becker, 1988) or charismatic creative persona (Dion and Arnould, 2011). Furthermore, we link the social existence of human brands to the legitimacy they hold (Arnould and Dion, 2013) in regards to various constituencies, that is, inside members of the industry (specific legitimacy), critics (bourgeois legitimacy) and the public (popular legitimacy) (Bourdieu, 1983). By conceptualizing incongruent extensions as sources of legitimacy loss/gain, the aim of our paper is thus to understand the legitimacy mechanisms which are activated by incongruent human brand extensions and which bring a branded individual to evolve from one professional human brand identity type to another. We focus on film director who are key human brands in the film industry (Kerrigan, 2010). We conduct two studies to answer two research questions: What are the professional identities available to human brands? What are the dynamics of professional human brand identities? The first study is based on an analysis of American Western film directors (1909-2011). The second study is based on in-depth interviews conducted among French film directors, critics, producers, and filmgoers.

Study 1

In order to have a comprehensive view of the existence of human brand categories, we chose to analyze American Western film directors by following a “study of context” approach (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011), that is by confronting personal trajectories to historical and institutional trajectories (Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran, 2001). From an analysis of 570 American westerns, we identified four western waves (1909-1928: Silent Western movies; 1929-1962: Classic movie westerns and Golden age; 1963-1980: Era of anti-heroes; 1981-2011: Episodic movie westerns). In light of these cycles, we then analyzed the patterns of the 281 filmographies comprised in our database. We selected 20 film directors representative of the various patterns available and conducted deeper analysis of their filmographies with qualitative data (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Our results confirmed the existence of the two human brand identities present in the literature: (1) The “chameleon conformist” who builds its brand by directing highly commercial films (e.g. Andrew V. McLaglen). He forges his professional image by cultivating strong expertise and by giving evidence of performance. (2) The “archetype” director who makes films that fit into a pre-existing socially inscribed definition of the western genre. He follows the rules by cultivating his expertise but also bends them in a creative, yet legitimate manner (e.g. Ralph Nelson).

Our analysis also unveils two other film director types, supporting our assumption: (1) the archetype niche director whose identity rests entirely on the creative attributes of his atypical films (e.g. Fritz Lang) which appeal to a small public of film lovers; and (2) the film director influencing the social definition of the western genre (e.g. John Ford).

Study 2

We define human brand legitimacy as a sociological attribute through which a human brand is perceived as matching an identity inscribed in a socially constructed system (Weber, 1971; Suchman, 1995; Dion, 2013). We propose that film director human brands exist socially because they benefit mainly from specific, bourgeois and popular legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1983) allocated by producers, critics and the public. These different legitimacy types, and thus each human brand, evolve according to the characteristics and success of the director’s newest film. But film directors often make incongruent extensions (Heckler and Childers, 1992): with an “unexpected extension”, that is a film in a new genre (e.g. a thriller directed by a romance film director) or an “irrelevant extension”, which is a film different from its director’s original identity (e.g. a conformist film directed by a niche auteur film director).

In order to study the dynamics of professional human brand identities, we conducted eight in depth interviews, comprising 2 film directors, 2 producers, 2 critics and 2 film goers. Film directors were asked to give a detailed history of their careers, while other respondents were asked to create film director categories and extensively talk about directors’ filmographies and changes in film director identities. We used the grounded-theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to analyze the data.

The 4-tiered professional human brand categorization emerged again, with the appearance of a new variable: eclecticism. Conformist (high specific legitimacy) and niche (high bourgeois legitimacy) auteur human brands appeared as non eclectic; auteurs for the masses (bourgeois and popular legitimacy) were mostly eclectic, and the consecrated (high specific, bourgeois and popular legitimacy) auteurs were highly eclectic. Respondents highlighted four types of identity dynamics. “Conformist” film directors can evolve towards a niche auteur identity by gaining bourgeois legitimacy with an auteur film (incongruent extension), but they perceive this move as extremely risky for their specific legitimacy. “Niche auteur” directors who attempt to evolve towards the wide public auteur category through incongruent commercial extensions incur low risks on bourgeois legitimacy and can benefit from specific and popular legitimacy gains. “Wide public auteurs” can use risk-free incongruent “commercial” film extensions to reinforce specific and popular legitimacy. But only very successful congruent films may be efficient to also enhance bourgeois legitimacy and attain the “consecrated” human brand category. The “consecrated” human brand type runs the least risk of losing its legitimacy by directing any incongruent film.

In sum, our findings extend Parmentier et al.’s framework (2013) by adding two other viable human brand types (i.e. niche archetype human brand and consecrated human brand) and by showing that human brand identities and evolution depend on the legitimacy forces at play in a given field of practice.
REFERENCES


