Guest editorial

Exploring human brands and their authenticity

Introduction

While humans have engaged in identity construction, self-presentation and self-promotion for millennia, the marketing literature has only recently recognized this phenomenon (Shepherd, 2005). Just like how firms and organizations engage in the branding of their goods and services, humans engage in the branding of themselves.

This special issue, "Exploring Human Brands," is devoted to better understanding the intricacies and nuances of what constitutes an effective human brand. Human brands refer to well-known persons who are subject to marketing communication practices (Thomson, 2006). Celebrities, athletes, politicians and academics are a few of the contexts in which human brands have been explored in marketing (Carlson and Donavan, 2013; Close *et al.*, 2011; Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016; Moulard *et al.*, 2015; Zamudio *et al.*, 2013). Other contexts in which human brands have been studied include the visual and performing arts (Fillis, 2015; Moulard *et al.*, 2014).

Nonetheless, the marketing of a person, sometimes referred to as personal branding or self-marketing (Shepherd, 2005), also pertains to "everyday" individuals that are seeking employment or more broadly, seeking to promote themselves or their business. For instance, those offering professional services (e.g. lawyers, physicians) and the self-employed (e.g. hairstylists, small business owners) must also be concerned about building their human brand.

Recent trends, however, have thrust human brands to the forefront. The spread of the internet and social media has taken personal branding to a new level, allowing "everyday" individuals the potential to be well-known human brands. For instance, some social media influencers began as everyday individuals and now have millions of followers (although smaller "micro-influencers" must also prudently manage their human brand to remain viable).

The research in this special issue uncovers different theoretical underpinnings and conceptual models that shed light on how human brands can earn trust of their customers or followers, foster positive attitudes and gain loyalty – all of which contribute to brand equity.

Our following discussion of these special issue articles loosely revolves around concepts presented in a recent paper by Fournier and Eckhardt (2019). Their paper introduces the concept of person-brands – a dual-bodied entity that is both an actual person and a commercialized brand offering (e.g. Tory Burch is both a person and a brand). Given that the same name is used to refer to both the person and the brand offering, the person and brand are "inextricably united" and, thus, interdependent. Rather than focus on the qualities that make a person a brand, Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) focus on the qualities that make a person-brand human (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019). In their case study of Martha Stewart's person-brand, the authors uncover four aspects of the person that make person-brands unique: mortality, hubris (i.e. overconfidence), unpredictability and social embeddedness. They also recognize two person-brand pillar strengths: intimacy and authenticity. We touch on these ideas throughout our discussion.

Following the summary of the special issue articles, we note the importance of authenticity for human brands. We then apply a recent conceptualization of authenticity – the entity-referent correspondence framework of authenticity – to a human brand context.

"Exploring human brands" article summaries

Overview of the human branding literature

Osorio *et al.* (2020) article offers an overview of the human branding area. The paper first assists in differentiating personal branding from human branding, suggesting each represents the opposite ends of one continuum. On the one hand, personal branding's focus is on the marketing of the person, himself or herself, often to potential employers with the goal of increasing one's income. Further, this person possesses full agency of such marketing. On the other hand, human branding entails the marketing of a persona (i.e. brand) and its related market offerings to consumers with the goal of increasing brand equity. Consistent with Fournier and Eckhardt's "two-bodied" conceptualization of person-brands, this persona is distinct from, albeit related to, the person. Further, Osorio *et al.* (2020) contend that the person does not have full control as with personal branding as the person co-constructs the human brand with multiple stakeholders (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019; Centero and Wang, 2016).

Once establishing this distinction, the authors assess the state of the literature focused on human branding. The most studied topics include the following: authenticity as a human brand attribute; the multi-stakeholder approach in creating brand identity; communications, particularly through social media, as the most prevalent marketing mix element; attachment as an antecedent for brand equity; and brand equity sustainment strategies and issues, such as brand extensions, brand activism, brand evolution (including death) and brand transgressions.

Personal branding

Jacobson's (2020) article, "You are a brand: social media managers and personal branding," explores the "personal branding" side of Osorio *et al.'s* (2020) continuum. Jacobson's research focuses on social media managers' (SMMs) branding of themselves. Given SMMs' use of social media in their jobs, these individuals "are at the forefront of personal branding and offer a unique perspective to understand [...] personal branding strategies [...]" (Jacobson, 2020). Through an analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews, Jacobson (2020) uncovers several themes. First, SSMs project a personal brand to *future, unknown audiences*. They are acutely aware that their social media accounts are archived indefinitely and are not private and that one's

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"personal" actions cross into one's professional life. As such, SMMs use extreme self-filtering to ensure their posts are appropriate for all future audiences. Second, SMMs present a *curated brand* of themselves via storytelling. They attempt to present an online identity that authentically represents their offline lives by selecting moments, images, videos or vignettes that showcase their accomplishments. Finally, given their unstable job market and that their profession has not yet set guidelines for success, SMMs have an *always-on-the-job-market mentality*, which manifests in their perpetual and constant personal branding.

Human brand unpredictability

Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) note that unpredictability is one aspect of the "person" element of person-brands that differentiate them from traditional brands. Unlike traditional brands, human brands are hard to control and thus are more prone to wrongdoings that may damage their reputations. Yet, why is it that consumers still support a human brand after the person commits an immoral act? Lee *et al.'s* (2020) article focuses on this question, finding that both consumers' preference for the celebrity prior to the transgression and the celebrity's "role model" image (versus "bad boy" image) positively affect consumers' support for the celebrity after a transgression. Yet for consumers who have a high preference for the celebrity, consumers find it easier to accept celebrities with a bad boy image than those with a role model image after a transgression. Further, the authors find that consumers' moral reasoning process (how much moral judgment they pass) partially mediates this effect. In a follow-up study, the authors explore how two types of moral reasoning – moral rationalization versus moral decoupling – interact with celebrity image. Lee *et al.* (2020) find that consumers show stronger support for a role model celebrity when consumers use moral rationalization reasoning, in which the immoral actions are reconstructed as less immoral. On the other hand, consumers show stronger support for a bad boy celebrity when consumers use moral decoupling reasoning, in which consumers dissociate their judgments about the celebrity's morality from their judgments about the celebrity's performance.

Human brand legitimacy and social embeddedness

Pluntz and Pras's (2020) paper assesses the role that legitimacy plays in building human brand identity. Considering the work of film directors and using secondary data, the authors find that the success of an established director's new film (i.e. the director's "brand extension") has a positive impact on the director's brand identity. Importantly, however, they find that this effect is mediated by professional legitimacy. That is, stakeholders in the field must bestow a seal of approval on the film. These internal stakeholders include those that work with the director in producing the film, as well as those elite peers that "consecrate" the director (i.e. via awards) that thereby increase the director's status. These findings are consistent with Fournier and Eckhardt's (2019) work on person-brands that finds one way in which person-brands differ from traditional brands is their increased social embeddedness. The person-brand's meaning is partially determined by his/her entourage of close others that the person-brand cannot escape.

Human brand intimacy

Two of the special issue papers align with one of the two person-brand strength pillars identified by Fournier and Eckhardt (2019): intimacy. Fournier and Eckhardt note the potential for intimacy is much greater for person-brands than traditional brands because of the unique characteristics of humans. Taillon *et al.'s* (2020) is the first of the two papers that consider a characteristic that is analogous to intimacy – closeness. The authors examine consumer perceptions of their social relationship with social media influencers to understand how social media influencers can effectively manage their human brand. In an exploratory study, the authors reveal closeness, attractiveness, likeability and similarity as key elements in terms of understanding why consumers follow social media influencers. Taillon *et al.* (2020) empirically examine these relationships in a follow-up study, exploring the moderating role that closeness has on the relationships between attractiveness, similarity and likability on attitude toward the influencer, intention to spread positive word-of-mouth and purchase intentions. Results demonstrate that closeness does moderate these relationships, with the pattern of results suggesting that when an influencer lacks attractiveness or likeability perceptions of closeness may mitigate negative outcomes.

Liu *et al.'s* (2020) article also considers a concept related to Fournier and Eckhardt's (2019) pillar strength of intimacy – interactivity between an online celebrity (i.e. social media influencer) and his/her followers. While Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) suggest that intimacy is developed through revelations about the human brand by his/her entourage (i.e. close friends), one can argue that high degrees of interactivity between the human brand and his/her followers will also lead to increased disclosures by the online celebrity. Liu *et al.* (2020) examine the role that virtual interactivity and consumers' perceived self-congruity have on building online celebrities' brand equity. Virtual interactivity refers to the online celebrities interacting with the consumer on social media platforms in the form of posts, pictures and videos. In a survey-based study, Liu *et al.* (2020) demonstrate that perceptions of virtual interactivity and self-congruity have a positive impact on online celebrity brand equity through increased brand awareness and a more favorable brand image. While prior work has uncovered a positive relationship between self-congruity and positive brand outcomes, this work accentuates the importance of virtual interactivity.

Human brand authenticity

As noted, authenticity emerged as the most commonly studied human brand attribute in Osorio *et al.'s* (2020) human branding literature review. This finding aligns with Fournier and Eckhardt's (2019) research, which identifies authenticity as the second person-brand strength pillar (along with intimacy). It is no surprise, then, that authenticity was the most commonly studied attribute of the papers within this special issue, with three papers addressing the topic.

Jun and Yi (2020) examine a conceptual model to determine how interactivity (also considered in the Liu *et al.'s* (2020) just-mentioned study), authenticity and emotional

attachment impact brand trust and loyalty. The results from a cross-sectional study demonstrate that influencer authenticity mediates the effect of interactivity on emotional attachment. Thus, stronger perceptions of interactivity result in stronger perceptions of authenticity, which results in a strong attachment. Further, influencer interactivity is directly related to brand trust. Results also show that followers' emotional attachment to influencer brands increases brand loyalty through brand trust. This work complements prior research that has shown that both an emotional connection and authenticity are momentous in understanding effective/successful human brands.

Kucharska *et al.* (2020) examine human brands in the context of football. More specifically, this work sheds light on the significance of personal brand authenticity and personal brand identification in understanding loyalty outcomes. When consumers perceive a football player to be authentic, this perception enhances consumer personal brand identification with that football player, which increases both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty to the field of football. Additionally, this work considers a typology of spectators: supporters, followers, fans and flâneurs as potential moderators.

Finally, Eng and Jarvis (2020) use transportation theory to investigate how celebrity narratives can build strong consumer-brand attachment. The authors consider how a celebrity's persona narrative (professional versus professional) influences attachment and find that personal narratives produce stronger communal norms, which leads to stronger consumer-brand attachment. In other words, communal norms mediate the relationship between persona narratives and attachment. In two subsequent experiments, Eng and Jarvis (2020) examine what types of celebrity brand narratives build the strongest consumer-brand attachment. They find that both type of celebrity and type of brand narrative moderate the relationship between persona narrative and consumer-brand attachment. Personal persona narratives are particularly important for celebrities who have achieved their fame through their performance, such as musicians or athletes, compared to celebrities who are attributed their fame, such as reality television stars. Finally, Eng and Jarvis (2020) find that personal persona narratives for achieved celebrity brands produce strong attachment levels when they are perceived as more authentic or "on-brand" (compared to less authentic or off-brand).

The entity-reference correspondence framework of authenticity and its application to human brands

Despite that authenticity is one of the most notable features of human brands, authenticity in a human brand context is not clearly understood, as it has multiple meanings. In fact, the conceptualization and measurement of human brand authenticity in the three above-mentioned papers (Jun and Yi, 2020; Kucharska *et al.*, 2020; Eng and Jarvis, 2020) is highly inconsistent, with each addressing a different meaning. Likewise, the meanings of brand authenticity in a traditional brand context have also been debated (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Nonetheless, Moulard *et al.* (2020) offer a new conceptualization of brand authenticity that provides clarity to the brand authenticity literature and will likely be useful in understanding a human brand's authenticity.

Moulard *et al.'s* (2020) Entity-Reference Correspondence (ERC) framework of authenticity provides a general definition of authenticity. Authenticity, in a general sense, is *a consumer's perception of the extent to which an entity corresponds to a referent* (Moulard *et al.*, 2020). For instance, a consumer may think a Jamaican jerk chicken dish (entity) is authentic if it is perceived to correspond to or be *true to* a traditional Jamaican jerk recipe (referent). Further, Moulard *et al.* (2020) suggest three types of authenticity – true-to-ideal (TTI), true-to-fact (TTF) and true-to-self (TTS) – that are consistent with the general definition yet distinct because of their different referents (i.e. ideal, fact and self). The authors also note the complexity of brand authenticity, as each of the three authenticity types manifests in several ways within a brand context. We contend that these three types also manifest in numerous ways within a human brand context (Figure 1), as we detail below.

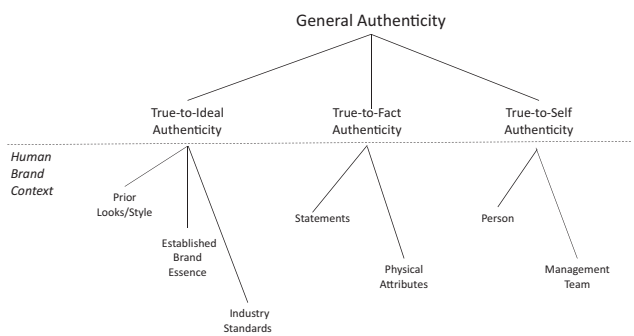
True-to-ideal authenticity

TTI authenticity is defined as *a consumer's perception of the extent to which an entity's attributes correspond with a socially determined standard* (Moulard *et al.*, 2020). A standard is socially constructed (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Leigh *et al.*, 2006) and may be debated and may change over time. As such, an ideal is dependent on human thought and does not exist outside of human consciousness. A traditional Jamaican jerk chicken recipe is an ideal because it is "man-made" and socially determined. Further, individuals may argue about what constitutes the ideal Jamaican jerk chicken recipe.

As with traditional brands, multiple manifestations of TTI authenticity exist within a human brand context, illustrated in Figure 1. At the most concrete level, a person's appearance may be perceived as TTI authentic if it corresponds with his/her *prior look or style* (i.e. ideal). For instance, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was likely perceived as authentic since her chic, classic style remained the same over the years. However, when a human brand drastically deviates from his/her known look or style, he/she may be perceived as not the "real" person. For example, many fans were taken aback by Adele's dramatic weight loss, with one fan stating, "I want the old Adele. Chubbier prettier" (Drexler, 2020).

At a more abstract level, a human brand may be perceived as TTI authentic if his/her current image corresponds to his/

Figure 1 Applying the entity-referent correspondence framework of authenticity to a human brand context



her *established brand essence* (i.e. ideal; Moulard *et al.*, 2020; Spiggle *et al.*, 2012). Brand essence entails "the most important aspects of the brand as a whole; reducing what the brand is all about to its bare essentials" (Chandler and Owen, 2002, p. 56). For instance, a "bad boy" image may constitute a human brand's essence and deviating from this image may lead to perceptions of TTI inauthenticity. Eng and Jarvis's (2020) special issue article deals with this level of TTI authenticity, noting that an "on stage" narrative is consistent with the human brand's essence and, thus, is authentic, whereas an "off stage" narrative is inconsistent with the human brand's essence and, thus, is inauthentic.

Finally, at the most abstract level, a person may be perceived as TTI authentic if he/she conforms with what is expected within their profession – *industry standards*. Pluntz and Pras's (2020) article on movie directors addresses this type of authenticity, which they label human brand legitimacy. Human brand legitimacy is "a sociological attribute through which a human brand is perceived as matching a (professional) identity inscribed in a socially constructed system" (Pluntz and Pars, 2020; Parmentier *et al.*, 2013 on "fitting in" one's profession). For instance, one of the reasons the 1960s pop rock group The Monkees (also a television show) was not perceived as an authentic band by music critics was due to the group being formed by television executives as opposed to evolving organically through the members' own relationships.

True-to-fact authenticity

The second type of authenticity identified in Moulard *et al.*'s (2020) ERC framework is true-to-fact (TTF) authenticity, which they define as "a consumer's perception of the extent to which information communicated about an entity corresponds with the actual state of affairs." These actual states of affairs – or facts – are not socially constructed (as are TTI's ideals) and exist "independent of the mind." Unlike fluctuating ideals, facts are static. In a brand context, a brand is TTF authentic if its claims about the brand's products and activities are perceived as truthful and sincere. One the other hand, a brand is TTF inauthentic if such claims are perceived as deceitful or manipulative.

In the context of human brands, TTF authenticity may manifest in at least two ways, as illustrated in Figure 1. First, TTF authenticity entails whether a human brand's *statements* about their life events (e.g. origins, endeavors) are consistent with what actually has occurred or what is actually the case. Human brands' statements are TTF authentic when they are perceived as truthful or honest, whereas their statements are TTF inauthentic when they are perceived as lying or deceitful. Cookbook author and model Chrissy Teigen is perceived as TTF authentic due to her candor and openness about her postpartum depression and motherhood in her social media posts (Muller, 2019). On the other hand, Lance Armstrong was perceived as TTF inauthentic after the media revealed his use of performance enhancing drugs (i.e. doping) during the height of his career. Likewise, many believe actor and singer Jussie Smollett lied about being attacked outside his Chicago apartment. (While such events may or may not be true, TTF authenticity focuses on consumers' *perceptions* regarding whether such events are true.)

A second way in which TTF authenticity manifests within a human brand context relates to the human brand's *physical attributes*. Information regarding a human brand's TTF authenticity is not only *explicitly* communicated via statements (as noted above) but may also be *implied* via its physical appearance (Moulard *et al.*, 2020). This manifestation of TTF authenticity entails whether a person's *physical attributes* are what they appear to be. Physical attributes perceived as real or natural are TTF authentic, whereas those perceived as fake or unnatural are TTF inauthentic. For example, Gweneth Paltrow was likely perceived as TTF authentic when she hosted a no-makeup party that included celebrity guests such as Kate Hudson and Demi Moore (Sarkisian, 2020). Her transparency was also evidenced in her Tweet about the event: "No makeup. No filter." Similarly, some celebrities, such as plus-size model Ashley Graham, often post untouched photos of themselves on Instagram. On the other hand, the 1990s duo Milli Vanilli was found to be TTF inauthentic when the media revealed that the duo lip synced their songs, resulting in the revoking of their 1990 Grammy for Best New Artist (Warner, 2014).

Note that a human brand's TTF authenticity may refer to the person's physical attributes and their statements regarding those *same* attributes (Moulard *et al.*, 2020). For instance, Sharon Osbourne openly admitted that she had plastic surgery. Thus, her physical attributes are TTF inauthentic (her refreshed face due to surgery), yet her statement about her TTF inauthentic appearance is TTF authentic (honest).

True-to-self authenticity

Finally, the ERC framework of authenticity (Moulard *et al.*, 2020) suggests a third authenticity type. TTS authenticity is defined as "a consumer's perception of the extent to which an entity's behavior corresponds with its intrinsic motivations as opposed to extrinsic motivations" (Moulard *et al.*, 2020). TTS authenticity entails a brand (or more specifically, the brand's creators, producers, managers, etc.) being perceived as passionate and committed to the brand's offerings (i.e. intrinsically motivated) rather than being perceived as being motivated by pleasing others, thereby increasing market share and profits (i.e. extrinsically motivated). TTS authentic brands are fueled by their excitement and inner desires concerning their offering, whereas TTS inauthentic brands are primarily motivated by money.

TTS authenticity manifests in two ways in human brands, as displayed in Figure 1. First, TTS authenticity obviously manifests in the *person* himself/herself. For instance, artists are perceived as authentic if their artwork is perceived to emanate from matters "close to their hearts" (Moulard *et al.*, 2014). TTS authentic artists fulfill such endeavours for their own satisfaction (i.e. intrinsically motivated) – what Hirschman (1983) refers to as marketing to one's self. On the other hand, TTS inauthentic artists may create works to please a broad audience (i.e. extrinsically motivated). Such artists may be perceived as overly commercial or "sell outs."

Second, TTS authenticity may also manifest in the person's *management team*. As Fournier and Eckhardt's (2019) note, person-brands are often managed with other stakeholders (Osorio *et al.*, 2020). Consumers may perceive that a human brand may be partially controlled by these other stakeholders

and that such stakeholders' motivations may be at odds with the person's motivations. For instance, rock band Queen spent nearly three weeks recording "Bohemian Rhapsody." Despite the group's excitement about and commitment to the song (i.e. intrinsic motivation), record executives refused to release the nearly-six-minute song as they believed it was too long for radio airplay and, thus, would not be a commercial success (i.e. extrinsic motivation). Thus, the motivations (i.e. intrinsic versus extrinsic) of the person and their management/stakeholders should be considered separately, as the two may be divergent.

Closing remarks on the entity-referent correspondence framework of authenticity in human branding

The above discussion of authenticity in a human brand context focuses on the human. While various manifestations of the three authenticity types are presented, other manifestations may exist. Further, and consistent with Fournier and Eckhardt's (2019) two-bodied conceptualization of person-brands, not only can the "person" be evaluated on his/her authenticity, so can his/her "brand," including his/her branded, commercial offerings (i.e. products, songs, movies, content). For example, plagiarized works can be considered TTF inauthentic as the human brand presents the work as their own when the work, in fact, can be attributed to someone else. Vanilla Ice's song "Ice Ice Baby" was accused of copyright infringement. The song was based on the tune "Under Pressure," a collaboration between rock band Queen and singer David Bowie, yet neither Queen nor Bowie received credit or royalties for "Ice Ice Baby."

Given the interdependence between the person and their brand/market offerings, the two are often difficult to separate (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019). For instance, Vanilla Ice's voice (i.e. person) is heard in "Ice Ice Baby" (i.e. marketing offering). Yet separation is possible in certain instances. Taylor Swift's perfume – Taylor by Taylor Swift – is physically distinct from the singer. Thus, both the person's own characteristics (i.e. image, physical characteristics) and the human brand's market offerings should be considered when considering a human brand's authenticity.

In addition to specifying three types of authenticity, Moulard *et al.'s* (2020) ERC framework proposes that each authenticity type has its own conceptual model with distinct antecedents and consequences. As such, the authors stress that brand authenticity should not be treated as a higher-order concept. Their framework offers numerous propositions that could be applied to a human brand context. Nonetheless, Moulard *et al.* (2020) encourage an expansion of each of the authenticity types' conceptual models. Further, given the distinctions between human brands and traditional brands (e.g. unpredictability, hubris, etc.) as identified by Fournier and Eckhardt (2019), aspects of these three models may need to be adapted to a human brand context.

Overall, human brand authenticity has many meanings. For research to progress in this area, future research should identify the specific type of authenticity to be studied (TTI, TTF or TTS), as well as the particular manifestation of the type within a human brand context.

About the authors

Dr Julie Guidry Moulard (PhD, Texas A&M University) is an Associate Professor and the Balsley-Whitmore Endowed Professor in Business at Louisiana Tech University. Her primary research interests include brand authenticity, human brands, consumption emotions and wine marketing. Julie's research has been published in journals such as *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Business Research* and *Psychology and Marketing*. She is an editorial review board member for *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* and *Journal of Business Research*. She is currently serving a two-year term (2020–2022) as president of the Academy of Marketing Science.

Dr Kathrynn Pounders (PhD, Lousiana State University) is an Associate Professor in the Stan Richards School of Advertising and PR at The University of Texas at Austin. Her primary research interests include persuasion, consumption emotions, motivation and human brands. Kathrynn's research has been published in journals such as *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Business Research* and *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Advertising Research* and *Psychology and Marketing*. She currently serves on the editorial review board member for the *Journal of Adver*tising, the *Journal of Advertising Resea*rch and *the Journal of Business Research*.

Julie Guidry Moulard
Department of Marketing and Analysis, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, Louisiana, USA, and

Kathrynn Pounders
University of Texas, Austin, Texas, USA

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