An empirical examination of human brand authenticity as a driver of brand love

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ABSTRACT

The present study compares the impact of perceived human brand authenticity on brand love across six fields—politics, music, movies, sports, business, and social media—using a survey-based quantitative methodology. The results indicate that human brand authenticity is a significant predictor of brand love, although its predictive power varies according to the type of human brand. Authenticity exerts the most influence in the field of politics, followed by music, movies, and sports. In social media and business, human brand authenticity shows no significance toward brand love. Although existing branding scholarship identifies authenticity as a predictor of positive marketing outcomes, the current study's findings uncover a boundary condition concerning the context in which the human brand performs. In addition, brand love can be materialized through increased purchase intention of human brands' self-branded products, allowing the human brand to benefit from passive income and brand-building opportunities.

1. Introduction

Authenticity has become a fundamental human aspiration in today's uncertain times and, thus, a recurrent topic in contemporary marketing (Oh et al., 2020; Moulard et al., 2020; Södergren, 2021). Evidence has shown that authenticity is an antecedent of positive marketing outcomes, including product valuation, word of mouth, purchase intention, affective loyalty, brand identity, and brand attachment (Audrezet et al., 2020; Chatzopoulou & Navazhylava, 2022; Matthews et al., 2020; Napoli et al., 2014; Södergren, 2021). In human branding, authenticity is the most researched construct (Osorio et al., 2020) and has been explored to understand its conceptualization (Preece, 2015; Rose & Wood, 2005), measurement (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Mitsis & Leckie, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015), contestation (Taylor, 2018), and outcomes such as purchase intentions (Huang & Huang, 2016), engagement (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016), and trust (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Consumers develop more favorable attitudes and engagement toward personified brands because these brands elicit consumers' perceptions of similarity to the self (MacInnis & Folkes, 2017). Marketers have developed multiple strategies to encourage consumers to perceive brands in human-like terms to create stronger relationships. By their very nature, human brands already possess the human characteristics that inanimate brands seek, and they enjoy an unparalleled ability to forge strong consumer–brand relationships, including love relationships (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012). Brand love has long been a desirable outcome for product and service brands (Bagozzi et al., 2017; Batra et al., 2012), but it still needs to be empirically studied in the context of human brands.

Human brands have mainly been studied as a homogeneous group denoted as "celebrities." However, there are different types of human brands according to their field of specialization (e.g., athletes, singers, actors, politicians, or businesspeople). Generalizing findings about celebrities can be problematic because what applies to human brands in sports may not apply to human brands in music or politics. Thus, comparative studies among human brand types are warranted to get valuable insights into the intricacies of each field (Huang & Huang, 2016; Keel & Nataraajan, 2012; Kowalczyk & Royne, 2013; Osorio et al., 2020; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Given its prominence in academic and practitioner fields, exploring human brand authenticity is relevant and timely. Therefore, the following research questions were developed: To what extent does human brand authenticity influence brand love? Is this influence the same across human brand types? As human brands are

brands themselves that offer brand extensions, also known as celebrity-branded products (Kowalczyk & Royne, 2013), to what extent does brand love influence the purchase intention of these offerings? We aim to answer the research question using a survey-based methodology that considers consumers' age and gender as covariates.

This research makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, it provides empirical support for brand authenticity as a predictor of brand love in the context of human branding. Second, by linking authenticity to behavioral intentions, it enhances our understanding of successful celebrity-branded products through the materialization of brand love. Finally, even if authenticity is critical for developing a celebrity brand (Kerrigan et al., 2011) and previous research on human brands has collectively focused on authenticity's beneficial effects, this study uncovers a boundary condition concerning the human brand type.

The findings reveal that authenticity poses the most significant influence on brand love in politicians. To a lesser extent, authenticity is significant for singers, actors, and athletes; surprisingly, it is non-significant for businesspeople and social media celebrities. As cultural symbols, human brands' meanings and values are influenced by their field (e.g., politics, music). Their consumer relationships also depend on this field through shared meanings and values (Wohlfeil et al., 2019). As authenticity is not the sole pathway to brand love, human brand management must carefully decide when to foster authenticity and when to opt for fabrication. This study demonstrates that the choice depends on the human brand type.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Human brand authenticity

The study of human brands is gaining traction in management and marketing (Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017). Initially conceptualized as personas with public recognition (Thomson, 2006), human brands are now recognized as both persons and brands. Consequently, a human brand is "an entity that is at once a person and a commercialized brand offering, wherein both the person and the brand are referenced using the same brand naming convention" (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019, p. 2). Both public and private personas of human brands create brand identities (Centeno & Wang, 2017), which become profit-generating intangible assets when professionally managed (Rindova et al., 2006).

Previous research indicates that consumers are drawn to and favor offerings that are perceived as authentic (Napoli et al., 2014). Researchers have examined consumers' search for authenticity in firms (Verhaal & Dobrev, 2022), products (Morhart et al., 2015), services (Matthews et al., 2020), and advertising (Beverland et al., 2008) to understand its influence on achieving positive consequences. Prior research on human brands has highlighted the relevance of authenticity in creating a celebrity brand (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Kerrigan et al., 2011; Preece, 2015) and enhancing its brand value (Beverland et al., 2008; Thomson, 2006). Generally speaking, brand authenticity is a perception that emerges from consumers' exposure to abstract impressions and marketing cues (Napoli et al., 2014; Rose & Wood, 2005). Thus, the concept of authenticity evolves from an attribute to a reflection of consumers' diverse beliefs and perspectives (Brown et al., 2003).

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which considers intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for one's behavior, is frequently used to explain authenticity. Intrinsic motivations lead to authentic behaviors, whereas extrinsic motivations cater to the consequences of one's behavior, either rewards or punishments, which are associated with inauthenticity. Attribution theory (Kelley, 1973) supplements these ideas by investigating how individuals explain the causes of others' behaviors, which may be attributed to intrinsic motivations that produce authentic behaviors or extrinsic pressures that produce inauthentic ones. Human brand authenticity is based on intrinsic motivation that engenders a public performance not perceived as acting (Tolson, 2001), although the human brand's true self and true motivations are not

evident to others. Nevertheless, according to attribution theory, consumers evaluate the authenticity of others based on observable behaviors and relational aspects. Thus, human brands are considered authentic when they appear genuine in their consumer relationships and consistently behave according to upheld values (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015).

2.2. Brand love

Love is crucial to customers' relationships with brands and can be achieved through individual, private, and personal experiences rather than a set of incremental likings (Langner et al., 2016). A loving relationship positively influences affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes (Fournier, 1998; Veloutsou, 2007). Brand love is "the degree of passionate, emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 5). This complex construct includes affect, passion, attachment, positive evaluation, positive emotions, and declarations of love for the brand. More importantly, it involves the integration of the brand into the consumer's identity (Ahuvia, 2005). Brand love is more intense than self-brand connection or brand attachment; it strengthens trust, protects brands from negative emotions, increases brand loyalty, encourages consumer willingness to pay a premium price, and provides motivation for maintaining a relationship (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016; Palusuk et al., 2019).

Prior studies have related authenticity and brand love (Morhart et al., 2015; Safeer et al., 2020), yet little empirical work has tested this relationship with human brands, despite the fact that human brands draw more cultural meanings and have more resonance and differentiation potential to stand out and connect with consumers more profoundly than inanimate brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Human brands' meanings are formed by a blend of impressions and branding initiatives that have varying effects on consumers (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2018), resulting in various consumer–human brand relationships (Banister & Cocker, 2014). Most scholarly work positions brand love within the realm of interpersonal relationships (Palusuk et al., 2019), but it can also be viewed as a one-way or parasocial relationship (Fetscherin, 2014). Parasocial relationships are unidirectional; one party holds unreciprocated emotions toward the other. As such, love relationships with human brands exist (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Palusuk et al., 2019) to the extent of extreme forms (Daniels et al., 2020; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012).

Greater authenticity enables brands to be more effective in developing strong consumer–brand relationships while increasing brand equity (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Relationships with human brands perceived as authentic are more intense and enduring because consumers more readily associate them with symbolic meanings (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Research on the consequences of brand authenticity has revealed that consumers' authenticity attributions positively affect psychological outcomes and behaviors that produce brand-loving consumers (Guèvremont, 2021; Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019; Verhaal & Dobrev, 2022). As consumer–human brand relationships develop based on personal engagement with public and private personas (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012), the more authentic the celebrity, the more brand love is generated. Accordingly, this study hypothesizes that:

> **H1.** *Human brand authenticity has a positive and direct influence on brand love.*

2.3. Purchase intention of human brand extensions

Brand love leads to positive consequences in terms of profitability and customer lifetime value as consumers integrate the beloved brand into their identity (Japutra et al., 2019; Thomson, 2006). The strong attachment and positive emotions evoked by brand love motivate consumers to interact intensively with the brand and spend more resources

on maintaining the relationship (Huang & Huang, 2016; Thomson, 2006; Veloutsou, 2007). Brand love is also a more robust explanatory construct for predicting consumers' desirable post-consumption behaviors, such as sharing and recommending the brand and its products (Nikhashemi et al., 2019; Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019).

Human brand extensions, also known as celebrity-branded products, are brand-building tools that generate income and publicity (Olenski, 2018). They represent opportunities to connect with consumers and increase brand equity. In industries with high levels of competition, such as entertainment and sports, celebrity-branded products have become a desirable means of differentiation (Kowalczyk & Royne, 2013). Examples include Serena Williams's fashion line and Rihanna's cosmetics, presented in an unprecedented live promotion during her 2023 Superbowl half-time show. Other human brand types also profit from this trend, such as Barack Obama's books and Elon Musk's recently launched line of fragrances.

Brand affect alone does not lead to purchase intention for celebrity-branded products because a more intense emotion is required (Kowalczyk & Royne, 2013; Loroz & Braig, 2015; Osorio et al., 2022). Specifically, brand affect may lead to purchase intentions for the celebrities' core offerings (e.g., a Katy Perry concert), but a more intense form of relationship predicts purchase intentions for their brand extensions (e.g., Katy Perry's cosmetics). Evidence suggests that the stronger the bond with celebrities, the more likely consumers are to embrace celebrities' activities, including cross-buying their derivative products (Guèvremont, 2021; Huang & Huang, 2016). Parasocial relationships foster feelings of connectedness that motivate consumers to imitate the human brand appearance and purchase their offerings (Huang & Huang, 2016; Tran et al., 2019). As such, human brands can materialize brand love by creating their own product lines instead of merely endorsing third-party products. Accordingly, H2 is:

H2. Brand love has a positive and direct influence on the willingness to purchase human brand extensions.

2.4. Human brand types

Perceived authenticity can lead to positive outcomes for many human brand types, including politicians (Banerjee & Chaudhuri, 2020; Speed et al., 2015; Theye & Melling, 2018) and business celebrities (Steckler & Clark, 2019), along with people in creative fields (Svejenova, 2005). Film director Pedro Almodovar stated that "experience has taught me that the more honest and personal my work is, the more successful I am" (Mata, 2003, p. 38). Although these studies point to authenticity as a source of competitive advantage for human brands, it is unknown whether the impact of authenticity varies by human brand type (e.g., business, sports; Ilicic & Webster, 2016). The current research builds on and extends existing research by comparing the impact of perceived human brand authenticity on brand love across six fields—namely, politics, music, movies, sports, business, and social media, for which evidence of the merits of authenticity exists in the expanding literature on human brands.

Political brands or "brandidates" must create distinctive identities perceived as authentic (Harrison et al., 2023). The public expects politicians to be steadfast in their positions and beliefs, but their true selves and motivations are unknown and, at times, questionable. They typically rely on their private personas to demonstrate authenticity and genuine commitment to the political causes they champion (Banerjee & Chaudhuri, 2020). When advocating for policies, authentic politicians are perceived as genuine, sincere, and spontaneous (Speed et al., 2015). Successfully reconciling their true selves with political pressures results in more loving followers (Bennett et al., 2019) whereas a lack of perceived authenticity may harm them as brands.

Meanwhile, businesspeople are human brands that substantially contribute to their firms' perception, reputation, and performance. Their demeanor can shape stakeholders' perceptions, making them a central

component of their firms' communication strategies (Cottan-Nir & Lehman-Wilzig, 2022). Authenticity enables them to act on deep personal values and interact transparently with multiple stakeholders by incorporating personal virtue into corporate decision-making (Steckler & Clark, 2019).

When singers are perceived as authentic, symbolic associations that extend beyond the musical offerings emerge, facilitating strong consumer–brand connections that lead to brand love (Eagar & Lindridge, 2015). Relationships between singers and their audiences are central to the music industry (Hagen, 2022). Fans' shared emotions and experiences create cohesive and distinctive communities that expand parasocial relationships. Although perceived authenticity aids singers in simultaneously standing out among multiple offerings and fitting in their respective genres (Peterson, 2005), brand love can also be achieved through their on-stage capabilities, such as their unique voice, attractive physical presence, and outstanding performance.

Actors embody both their own personas and the characters they play. Media coverage of film premieres, film festivals, and talk shows strengthens consumers' admiration of actors beyond their performing skills and talent. These appearances can offer a comprehensive view of the human brand and reveal the actors' true persona by showing how they behave and interact with others (Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Such insights into actors' demeanor and private lives contribute to authenticity, which should be defended if questioned. For instance, when Australia's media questioned actress Rebel Wilson's authenticity for not behaving as the "average laid-back working-class Australian" she claimed to be when performing comedian roles in Hollywood, her career suffered, leading her to sue and win compensation (Taylor, 2018). However, other salient attributes can drive brand love as well. An example is actors' ability to provide hedonic experiences, as hedonism is associated with greater brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Literature on social media influencers also promotes authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020; Conde & Casais, 2023; Kim & Kim, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2022). However, social media celebrities are predominantly observed in the digital realm and have little connection to the physical world; thus, only some of their personality traits are known, challenging consumers' ability to perceive authenticity (Wallace et al., 2022). As influencer marketing has become more prevalent, brands have sought to collaborate with social media celebrities, leading to a proliferation of sponsored content in their communication with consumers. The rise of fake followers has become another issue affecting social media influencers (Zhou et al., 2023). Both situations raise suspicions that the influencer has extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivations, resulting in perceived inauthenticity.

An athlete's market value (the measurable monetary value of a human brand) is driven by both popularity-based attributes (e.g., attractiveness, temper, distinctive appearance) and performance-based attributes (e.g., reliability, physical ability; Hofmann et al., 2021). Easily measurable accomplishments such as goals or wins can validate the athlete's value and increase brand love (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Mitsis & Leckie, 2016; Thomson, 2006). Consumers may also become attracted to celebrity athletes through their off-field activities, such as endorsements or sponsorship deals (Wong & Hung, 2023). Athletes' perceived authenticity is associated with an increased status as role models (Mitsis & Leckie, 2016).

Relationship theory suggests that consumers develop relationships with brands that provide meaning (Fournier, 1998). As cultural symbols, human brands' consumer appeal can be driven by multiple factors as well as how strongly each factor resonates with the consumer's interests, values, and search for meanings. Brand love stems from the meanings consumers extract through their interactions with human brands' intertwined public and private personas (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012). Although consumers recognize that celebrity is manufactured (Ilicic & Webster, 2016), some prefer to develop parasocial relationships with human brands that appear more authentic and have a more salient private persona.

Carefully curated human brands may cater to consumers' preferences, making the public persona more salient. Consequently, based on consumers' search for meaning, human brands can exist along a continuum, with the salience of the private and the public personas from which meaning is extracted at opposite ends. The human brand type is a contextual factor determining the extent to which consumers' search for meaning leads toward either end of the continuum because "relationships affect and are affected by the contexts in which they are embedded" (Fournier, 1998, p. 346).

Consumers seek meaning and strong connections with their brands (Fournier, 1998), yet it would be incorrect to assert that authenticity is the only way to convey this meaning (Brown et al., 2003; Napoli et al., 2014). The level of importance placed on authenticity varies across domains (Kovács, 2019), and the underlying traits inherent to the human brand type influence consumers' extraction and integration of meaning into their lives, thereby elevating or diminishing the role of authenticity as a predictor of brand love. As brand love can be formed through various attributes and trajectories (Langner et al., 2016; Palusuk et al., 2019), distinctive trajectories may occur according to human brand type, for which human brand authenticity has varying influence. Thus, H3 is proposed as follows:

H3. The relevance of human brand authenticity as a predictor of brand love varies by human brand type. Specifically, it is stronger in those types where the private versus the public persona is more salient for extracting and integrating meaning into consumers' parasocial relationships with human brands.

2.5. Method

An anonymous and confidential survey was used to collect data. Respondents were first asked to identify their favorite celebrity. As this study investigated the strength of consumers' relationships with human brands, using celebrities who already enjoy brand affect seemed appropriate. The term "celebrity" was used rather than "human brand" due to its familiarity. The survey defined celebrity as "any public figure that stands out in fields such as, but not limited to, sports, entertainment, culture, politics, and social media." The respondents were asked to keep their favorite celebrity in mind while completing the online questionnaire. The survey concluded with the collection of demographic data.

A marketing research agency assisted in collecting 800 valid responses, which were then categorized by the celebrity's field (i.e., politics, music, movies, sports, business, and social media). Celebrities who perform in multiple fields were included in the one in which they are mainly known. Fields with fewer than 25 observations were excluded. After scrutiny, the sample consisted of 668 observations, as shown in Table 1. This study relied on well-established scales: human brand authenticity (Ilicic & Webster, 2016), brand love (Bagozzi et al., 2017), and purchase intentions (Dodds et al., 1991). Items were measured using 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; see Table 2).

Table 2
Scale's items.

Human brand authenticity (Ilicic & Webster, 2016).
1. [Celebrity] tries to act in a manner that is consistent with his held values, even if others criticize or reject them for doing so.
2. [Celebrity] cares about openness and honesty in close relationships with others.
3. In general, [celebrity] places a good deal of importance on others understanding who he/she truly is.
4. People can count on [celebrity] being who he/she is regardless of the situation.

Brand love (adapted from Bagozzi et al., 2017).
1. Admiring [celebrity] says something deep and true about me.
2. Sometimes I feel I miss [celebrity].
3. I feel emotionally connected to [celebrity].
4. I believe that [celebrity] will be part of my life for a long time.
5. I would resent it if [celebrity] dies or retires.
6. My overall feelings and evaluations toward [celebrity] are favorable.

Purchase intentions (adapted from Dodds et al., 1991).
1. I would consider buying [celebrity]'s branded products.
2. My willingness to buy [celebrity]'s branded products is high.
3. It is very likely that I would purchase a product launched by [celebrity].

3. Results

Structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation, using AMOS 27.0 and SPSS, was used to test the proposed relationships. The measurement model was evaluated first, followed by the structural model. Table 3 shows that both models met standard validity and reliability requirements. Cronbach's alphas are all within acceptable levels above 0.8, and the composite reliability and the average variance extracted (AVE) are both above their respective recommended thresholds of 0.70 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1998) and 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

To minimize potential common method bias, respondents' data were gathered anonymously, the purpose of the survey was not disclosed to respondents, and existing scales with counterbalanced order of measurement variables were used (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Common method bias can also occur when the correlations between the exogenous and endogenous variables are greater than 0.90 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1998). Table 3 shows that no correlations exceeded the suggested threshold. Multicollinearity among the indicators was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF). The obtained VIF values ranged from 1.20 to 1.71, falling below the suggested threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2017). Thus, the multicollinearity assumption is not violated, and common method bias is not a concern in this study.

After confirming the reliability and validity of the constructs' measures, the structural model's results, including the proposed hypotheses and the model's predictive capabilities, were evaluated. The fit statistics indicated that the model fit was acceptable (χ^2 = 320.34, df = 80, p < 0.000; χ^2/df = 4.004, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, IFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.06). All path coefficients except for respondents' gender were significant (see Fig. 1), indicating the structural model's quality. H1 and H2 were confirmed at the 0.001 level of significance, indicating that human brand authenticity is a significant predictor of brand love (β = 0.596, *p* < 0.005) and brand love is a significant predictor of purchase intention

Table 1
Sample composition.

Field	Description	Count	%	Number by respondents' gender and age				
				Female	18–29	30–44	45–59	>60
Sports	Active and retired athletes	227	34%	43	79	60	57	31
Music	Singers and performers	214	32%	147	78	72	48	16
Movies	Actors and film directors	132	20%	75	47	58	18	9
Social Media	Bloggers, influencers & YouTubers	36	5%	30	23	13	0	0
Politics	Current and former presidents & political party leaders	35	5%	17	4	13	13	5
Business	CEOs & company founders	24	4%	8	6	8	7	3
Total		668		320	237	224	143	64

Table 3
Reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity.

Scale	Mean	Standard deviation	Reliability		AVE and Square Correlations		
			Cronbach's alfa	Composite reliability	Human brand authenticity	Brand love	Purchase intention
Human brand authenticity	5.90	1.17	0.88	0.879	0.648		
Brand love	4.13	1.5	0.85	0.876	0.130	0.514	
Purchase intention	4.65	1.81	0.86	0.864	0.107	0.275	0.683

Notes: Elements in the diagonal show the AVE, and off-diagonal elements show the square correlation between each construct pair.
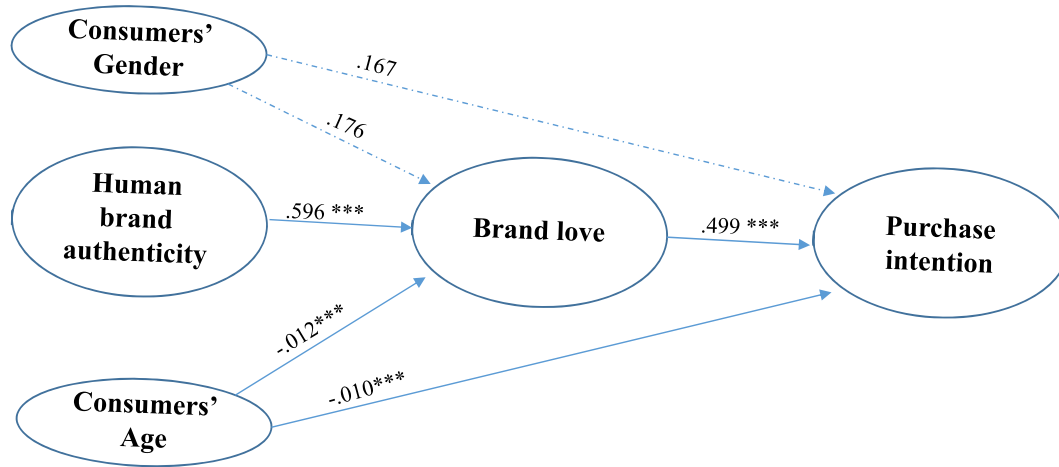

Fig. 1. Structural equation model and standardized coefficients for testing hypotheses. *Note*: Dotted line represents a non-significant effect. ***Significant at the 0.005 level based on 5,000 bootstraps.

($\beta = 0.499$, $p < 0.005$). In both relationships, consumers' age is a significant covariate ($\beta = -0.012$, $p < 0.005$ and $\beta = -0.010$, $p < 0.005$, respectively), but consumers' gender is not ($p > 0.05$).

To test H3, the moderation effect of celebrity context was investigated using a bootstrapping analysis with the PROCESS SPSS macro (Model 1, n = 5000 resamples; Hayes, 2017). The means of each construct were calculated using the model's items. The variables were mean-centered to avoid potentially problematic high multicollinearity with the interaction term. The model is significant at $F(11,676) = 13.71$, $p < 0.001$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.1870$. The interaction term between human brand authenticity and human brand type accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in brand love, $\Delta R^2 = 0.0340$, $p < 0.001$. As Table 4 indicates, the standardized coefficient for the effect of human brand authenticity was significant ($p < 0.05$) for politics ($\beta = 0.9310$), music ($\beta = 0.4662$), movies ($\beta = 0.4554$), and sports ($\beta = 0.1885$), but not for business ($\beta = 0.4573$) or social media ($\beta = -0.0149$). Thus, H3 was partially confirmed.

Table 4
Moderation effect of human brand type.

Conditional effect of human brand authenticity	Standardized coefficient	*se*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Politics	0.9310	0.2296	0.0001	0.4801	1.3819
Music	0.4662	0.0608	0.0000	0.3468	0.5856
Movies	0.4554	0.0773	0.0000	0.3037	0.6071
Sports	0.1885	0.0662	0.0046	0.0585	0.3185
Business	0.4573	0.2603	0.0794	−0.0538	0.9684
Social Media	−0.0149	0.1192	0.9002	−0.2489	0.219

Notes: LLCI: lower-level class interval; ULCI: upper-level class interval.

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical implications

This study's findings offer several theoretical implications for human branding literature. First, the study expands the understanding of human brands beyond endorsements and explores different human brand types simultaneously, contributing to the literature's theoretical framework (Huang & Huang, 2016; Keel & Nataraajan, 2012; Kowalczyk & Royne, 2013; Osorio et al., 2020; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Second, this study provides quantitative empirical support for the assumption that human brands perceived to be authentic develop stronger bonds with their audiences, thereby confirming past qualitative research (Audrezet et al., 2020; Centeno & Wang, 2017; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012).

However, the results also demonstrate that authenticity does not drive brand love equally across human brand types. For instance, authenticity influences brand love most in politics whereas the impact is most negligible in sports. Thus, the need for authenticity in consumer--human brand relationships varies across human brand types as relationships are built on the specific field's shared meaning and values (Wohlfeil et al., 2019), confirming that the context in which the relationship is embedded influences brand love (Fournier, 1998). Therefore, this study contributes to the human branding literature by identifying limitations to the beneficial effects of authenticity.

This study did not find significance for social media celebrities, which is unexpected albeit consistent with preliminary research suggesting that followers with stronger relationships are less influenced by human brand authenticity (Kim & Kim, 2021). Consumers who prefer social media celebrities probably extract more meaning and accept and enjoy the fabricated spectacle these celebrities provide, similar to what happened with reality television celebrities in the past (Rose & Wood, 2005). Although maintaining authenticity should be a priority for social media celebrities (Erz & Heeris Christensen, 2018), the systematic pursuit of affect and popularity, which is distinctive of this field and

measured by the number of engaged followers and likes, has likely relegated authenticity to a secondary position.

Another unanticipated finding was that authenticity is not a significant predictor of businesspersons' brand love. One possible explanation is that their image, reputation, and consumer relationships are contingent on extraordinary organizational outcomes and vice versa (Scheidt et al., 2018). As a result, human brand authenticity's effectiveness in generating brand love can be constrained. Consumers who prefer celebrity businesspeople are likely to extract greater meaning from staged public appearances, carefully curated social media, and exceptional corporate success.

In politics, brand love is most significantly influenced by authenticity, confirming that politicians perceived as authentic are more likely to capture voters' preferences (Banerjee & Chaudhuri, 2020; Harrison et al., 2023). For example, Donald Trump's political incorrectness during the 2016 US presidential election made him appear more authentic than his opponent, Hillary Clinton, whose brand management was too guarded (Theye & Melling, 2018). Authenticity also rewards creative careers (Svejenova, 2005), helping actors and singers navigate the divide between their private and public personas, which becomes more relevant when the real persona shapes the fictional character, as with comedians (Taylor, 2018). Nevertheless, singers' and actors' hedonic experiences—more so than their authenticity—can be sufficient to establish strong brand relationships.

Finally, as expected, human brand authenticity has the most negligible impact on brand love among athletes. This finding implies that additional factors, such as performance, prestige, and distinctiveness, contribute to brand love (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Furthermore, female athletes' self-recognition as brands and limited brand-building efforts—reflections of gender inequality in sports (Mogaji et al., 2022)—may have resulted in participants not including them as their favorite celebrity in the current study.

A novel empirical finding that links human brand authenticity to behavioral intentions and extends our understanding of successful human brand extensions is the capacity to cross-sell derivative products. Authenticity can increase trials and revenues (Moulard et al., 2015; Thomson, 2006), and brand love drives consumers' purchase intentions related to celebrity-branded products (Guèvremont, 2021; Huang & Huang, 2016; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). These commercial offerings use brand love as a heuristic to avoid rational evaluations of the products, thereby motivating emotional purchases. However, evidence suggests that the product's functionality or hedonism, its fit with the human brand, and its own authenticity also contribute to purchase intention (Osorio et al., 2022).

4.2. Managerial implications

In a marketplace oversaturated by fabrication, authenticity has emerged as a crucial component for establishing consumer–brand relationships and a potent indicator of brand health, particularly for human brands. Despite the notion that celebrity is manufactured (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Kerrigan et al., 2011), this study's findings suggest that, to generate brand love, human brands in politics and—to a lesser extent—music, movies, and sports should prioritize authenticity over the production of a well-curated brand. The opposite applies to human brands in business and social media, where perfection is expected, meaning carefully curated brands would be more compelling.

The narrower the gap between the private and the public personas, the easier it is for the human brand to convey authenticity and deliver a public performance that is not misinterpreted as acting (Tolson, 2001). Human brand authenticity is communicated through both behavioral and relational aspects (Ilicic & Webster, 2016). In the former case, human brands must be forthright about who they are and what they stand for and behave accordingly. Over time, building on narratives that uphold the same values provides the legitimacy, stability, and consistency required for achieving perceptions of authenticity (Moulard et al.,

2015). Although unpredictability is discouraged for product brands, some unpredictability may convey human brand authenticity through humanness as long as it does not contradict the held values (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Openness and honesty about achievements, as well as failures, strengthen the belief that a genuine person exists behind the human brand (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019).

In terms of relational aspects, interpersonal interactions must project a genuine and transparent image with which consumers can form a relationship. Allowing audiences access to their inner selves can cultivate perceptions of authenticity (Peterson, 2005) and satisfy loving consumers' need for connection. Being accessible, interacting with consumers in a personal and approachable tone, and occasionally venturing outside of usual topics or displaying candid moments can demonstrate that a human brand is a real person with whom consumers can relate. For example, one consumer interested in the actress Jena Malone because of her talent on stage became attracted "to the smart, interesting, beautiful and nice woman she appears to be in her private life" (Wohlfeil et al., 2019, p. 2033). Therefore, a well-organized social media presence should purposefully deliver authenticity cues while balancing personal, professional, and commercial content.

4.3. Limitations and directions for future research

This study is not without limitations. This study is one of the few studies that compared multiple human brand types, but it considered only six types due to the insufficient sample size. Previous research has demonstrated that consumers value authenticity and its multiple positive effects whereas this study revealed the boundaries of authenticity. Therefore, future research should explore factors other than authenticity that contribute to brand love. In addition, as culture influences brand authenticity evaluations and brand love drivers (Napoli et al., 2014; Zhu et al., 2019), cross-cultural studies will likely provide valuable insights into the merits and limits of human brand authenticity, thereby helping brand managers develop the most appropriate authenticity strategies for specific target audiences.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Maria Lucila Osorio: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Visualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Software. **Edgar Centeno:** Validation, Supervision, Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **Jesus Cambra-Fierro:** Validation, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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