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Introduction

Recent efforts to theorize individuals as institutions provide an excellent opportunity to connect extant research with market phenomena increasingly dominated by YouTube-influencers, celebrities, activist CEOs, and podcast-hosts in the attention economy (Beller 2012). In this issue, Nigam et al. (2025) draw upon Ocasio's (2023) social constructivism to propose that Taylor Swift is an institution. The key idea is that “an individual can become a focal point around which a distinctive and enduring set of roles and repertoire of interactions across roles emerge, enabling and embodying a distinctive set of values” (Nigam et al. 2025, 1). This occurs in a process of: 1) typification, 2) objectification, and 3) sedimentation, which has the celebrity generate a network of “role practitioners,” who see in the person-institution “a blueprint” for living an authentic life (Nigam et al. 2025, 3-4).

Nigam et al.'s (2025) theorization highlights an exciting pathway for mapping how some well-known people can transcend mere fame to become more. Yet, we contend that before becoming person-institutions, influential people like Taylor Swift are first and foremost person-brands, defined as “an entity that is at once a person and a commercial brand offering” (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019, 603). We thus propose that person-institutions are an outcome of branding processes. Considering the dynamics which brands foster in the socio-cultural landscape more broadly, this conceptualization can help inform when a famed person can become a person-institution.

To facilitate interdisciplinarity, i.e. communication and collaboration across academic disciplines (Jacobs and Frickel 2009), we propose that marketing provides a key ingredient to this conversation about person-institutions as it offers a rich ontology that allows organization scholars to identify when and to what extent influential people can mobilize communities and role practitioners to embed themselves in the cultural discourse as institutions. This

scholarship offers valuable tools to assess what we term the ‘institutional potential’ of a person, or whether a person has the ability and key resources to overcome the fallibility of their personhood to become person-institutions. While Taylor Swift might presently seem an ideal case to be labeled a person-institution, zooming in on the dynamics within her branding and its ontology reveals inconsistencies in her self-presentation that impede her full institutionalization. We then propose an agenda for future research into the management of person-institutions highlighting how the role of diachronic or processual perspectives (Cloutier and Langley 2020) and specific contexts of empirical research can lead to insights that provide a fuller taxonomy of different types of person-institutions.

It's an ontological issue...

We follow Fleetwood's (2005) definition that ontology concerns “the way we think the world is,” which in turn structures what we think can be known about it and how we think it can be conceptualized and investigated. From an organizational perspective, Azevedo (2024, 46) defines “organizational ontology as the implicit existential conventions that provide the members of an organization with a shared understanding of what it means *to exist* for that organization.” Accordingly, the ontology of person-institutions refers to those involved in that institution and what it means to exist within that institutional environment. We suggest that marketing theory on the ontology of person-brands offers organization scholars valuable theoretical perspectives. While Nigam et al.’s (2025) conception of person-institutions seeks to reveal “a new mode, individuals, by which institutions, with their attendant values, norms, and understandings, can develop and spread” (Nigam et al. 2025, 1), it overlooks that branded personhood is not monadic, but in fact has a complicated and contested ontology in the market. A person-brand must carefully select, curate and present desirable traits and occlude others, as the self is a “bundle” of traits and responses and

therefore “fragmented, incoherent and highly diffuse” (Sirgy 1982, 287). Therefore, assessing the potential of individuals to become person-institutions warrants the consideration of their ontology as individuals who are also brands.

The implications of this ontological complexity reverberate far beyond hardcore fandoms and into institutional theory as the underlying person-brand is in effect a composite. Drawing on Kantorowicz's (1984) work about medieval theory about the legal status of kings – arguably the original example of person branding and person institutions – Fournier and Eckhardt (2019, 604) distinguish between: 1) “the body natural,” the person him- or herself, which is the part that connects with stakeholders and audiences and drives brand strength; and 2) “the body politic,” which is the constructed brand that is managed—that is, the public persona or “soul,” which is “immortal and thus superior” to the natural body and exists in the mind of the public. The third and final point is that the body-natural and the body-politic are not separate, but interdependent and united in “the body corporate,” which needs both the body natural and the body politic be complete and to sustain itself (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019, 604).

The ontology of person-brands reveals that institutionalization of persons requires more than the ability to foster a robust network of role practitioners, as Nigam et al.'s (2025) analysis suggests. As institutionalization is mobilized by taken-for-grantedness, stability, and cognitive and normative legitimacy (Ocasio 2023; Powell and DiMaggio 2012), the ontology of branded persons reveals multiple stumbling points that impede the establishment of taken-for-grantedness and legitimacy.

Next, we unpack insights from marketing theory on people as brands, and outline how a brand-centered ontology exposes impediments to their institutionalization.

What are the Dynamics of Person-Brands?

As an outset, a brand is defined as the sum of an organization's reputation, values, and the perception it creates in the minds of stakeholders, which helps distinguish an organization from its competitors and build a lasting relationship with its audience (Bastos and Levy 2012). However, the ontology of brands reaches beyond organizations and into persons.

First, audiences perceive brands as having human-like characteristics, forms, and personality, and can develop human-like relationships with them (Aaker 1997). In extension, the brand is seen as a friend, acquaintance, or a family member, or audiences can relate to brands according to the extent to which the brand is congruent with or connected with the self (Fournier 1998). “Animism,” or the symbolic use of brands for organizations, becomes possible because audiences imbue brands with human personality traits (Aaker 1997, 347). Think of the Wendy’s Burger, The Jolly Green Giant, or Mr Proper where the brand is treated as-if it is a kind of human. This stresses the bi-directional relationships that exist among constructs such as persons and brands, i.e. that personhood applies to branding just as branding applies to persons (MacInnis and Folkes 2017, 370).

Second, people can also be brands in and of themselves. Thompson (2006, 104) coins human-brands as “a term that refers to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts” (e.g., a celebrity such as Michael Jordan whose name and fame have been used to endorse, promote and sell various products). Studying famous restaurateurs and chefs, Dion and Arnould (2016) for instance show how humans make themselves into brands by taking upon themselves a persona that in franchising can be distributed into different locations, fragmented and disjointed to focus on different facets of the brand persona. Each version of the person-brand restaurateur therefore embodies different versions of the real person. Ultimately, such brands refer to “clusters of images or symbols and may constitute an archetype or a fiction embedded in the consumer imagination” (Dion and Arnould 2016, 3). To that end, developing a human-brand involves a strategic process of

creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive public perception of a human by leveraging unique individual characteristics and presenting a differentiated narrative to a target audience (Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber 2013).

Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) advance this stream of research by drawing a distinction between the human-brands discussed above (e.g., famous persons subject to marketing communication efforts), and what they term “person-brands”—“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” (ibid, 602-603). This distinction is important because it highlights that when it comes to people who are also brands, some transcend mere commercialization because of their fame to become higher-order brand entities where the brand and the person are ontologically interdependent.

Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) exemplify how the “body natural,” the person him- or herself within the brand can negatively impact “the body politic,” which is the constructed brand that is managed in public, and the “the body corporate,” (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019, 604) and hence hinder full development of the brand. This theorization foregrounds how person-brands are an outcome of an interdependent relationship between the real person and the brand, and how this relationship is contingent on certain aspects of the person: 1) the person’s mortality, or specific human frailties such as becoming sick or dying and hence requiring transfers of skill and charisma to successors or franchisees, which assumes that the person and the brand can and should be separate entities; 2) their hubris, or the exaggerated or delusional sense of pride, confidence, infallibility, and security that leads to the celebrity’s downfall and ruin as a brand; 3) unpredictability, whereby the person acts counter to their broadcasted values and fails to coordinate with other corporate stakeholders in their enactment of the brand; and 4) social embeddedness, which captures how a person-brand is not a social atom but is established in a network of family, coworkers, and friends, who are

the inner circle who know the real person, inform the meaning of the branded person and can hence become a liability.

The outcome of the interdependence between “body natural”, “body politic” and “body corporate” as ontological components of the brand depends on two factors. Firstly, whether one side (the person or the brand) dominates the relationship or if they’re balanced. Secondly, whether the person’s values and meanings align with the brand’s values and meanings or not. Overall, the person-brand is shaped by whether the person or the brand has more influence in the relationship and how well their respective identities match up (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019, 606). While mortality and hubris are key drivers of imbalance (with mortality giving the brand more influence over the person and hubris giving the person more influence over the brand), unpredictability and social embeddedness can create harmful inconsistency, but also sometimes enhance brand value by adding intimacy and authenticity (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019). This work is important as it centers the person in the brand, unpacking interdependencies between person and brand rather than just “fit,” influence or audience appeal (Nigam et al. 2025, 4). It illuminates the coordinating role of “body corporate” to establish a strategically managed projection of authenticity and intimacy, that are then leveraged to build brand value.

These insights from marketing theory immediately reveal an equivalency between person-brands and Nigam et al.’s (2025, 1) contention that a person’s “attendant values, norms, and understandings” provide the organizing impetus for institutionalization. However, marketing also aptly demonstrates the inherent changeability, volatility and risk to person-institutions in the making. This has notable implications for re-diagnosing Taylor Swift as a person-brand, which brings to light her limited potential as a person-institution.

Taylor Swift: Not Quite a Person-Institution, Yet!

We leverage the ontology of person-brands to argue that Nigam et al. (2025) romanticize and simplify Swift's standing, overlooking the complex conflicts and contradictions that characterize her development towards institutionalization. The interpretive focus on fan communities and practices derived from authenticity value systems misses the inherent risks that are revealed in the fuller person ontology revealed in brand theory. Dynamics that appear between "body natural," "body politics," and "corporate body" ontological dimensions grate and creak when stress-tested within a person-institution framing. That is, the individual herself and the constructed brand framed within broader systems of other lawyers, copy rights, management, banking and wealth accumulation, employees and so forth are often caught in a profound tension that deny taken-for-grantedness needed for full institutionalization.

The notion that Talyor Swift "rules the world" (Nigam et al. 2025, 1) makes sense because she has been a meticulously and purposefully managed person-brand. We argue that Swift's success stems from deliberate strategic *brand* choices that balance different ontological components of her brand, not just institutional reproduction. Because of this, Swift, and person-brands like her, are often prone to resist full institutionalization due to ongoing curation of projected image. Building on the conceptualizing of person-brands, we unpack the processes and factors that explain the why, how, and when person-brands resist full institutionalization.

Instability Due to Hubris

While branding and institutionalization build on predictability and order, the hubristic overconfidence of successful artists often leads to disruption and contestation in the cultural landscape. Beyond the carefully curated image (Jones 2024), a closer look at Swift's long career reveals destabilizing controversies which often exhibit a fair amount of hubris.

Numerous feuds with other celebrities, marketing gambits, and media overexposure, all transpire in what musical journalist Rob Sheffield (2024, 3) describes as a “wide range of visceral reactions she brings out in people ... Taylor’s hubris, her way-too-muchness, her narcissism disguised as even more narcissism, her inability to Not Be Taylor for a microsecond — it’s a lot.” Taylor Swift and Nicki Minaj for instance engaged in a 2015 public argument on Twitter following Minaj’s criticism of the MTV VMA nominations, which overlooked her "Anaconda" video. Swift mistakenly believed Minaj was criticizing her. After a terse public exchange, Swift was forced to apologize for misinterpreting Minaj’s comments (Sheffield 2024). This ongoing renegotiation of the balance between person and desired and projected brand image reveals underlying volatility to the valence of Swift’s presence in public life. In other words, being wrong undermines taken-for-grantedness and challenges her institutionalization.

Institutions are generated and reproduced by committed networks of role practitioners, and sedimentation requires establishing such networks, including external stakeholders (Ocasio 2013). In the case of Swift, however, as with other person-brands, the formation of stable, committed practitioner networks is impeded. Individuals that coalesce around person-institutions include uncontrollable role practitioners, such as fans, communities, and related stakeholders who can destabilize the entity, preventing the establishment of the reliable, aligned networks necessary for institutional sedimentation. For example, Swift’s much publicized battle with Spotify and Apple Music, together with her decision to re-record all her master tapes, resulted in an internal division of her fan base. While most supported the release of “Taylor’s Version” of her entire back catalogue, others interpreted it as greedy, noting that Swift’s more mature vocals at the time of re-recording jeopardized the youthful and authentic sound of the originals. Despite criticisms being labeled by Swift as “toxic,” the original recordings carried important symbolic meaning for

many listeners, which was eroded by the appearance of the new versions (Goh 2021). This is a key example of the multiple conflicting corporate and public Taylor Swifts that have existed over the years (Correspondent 2025).

Contention in Values and Meaning-making Due to Unpredictability and Social Embedding

Nigam et al. (2025, 3) propose that individual people can become an institution when they offer a “blueprint that is infused with values.” A person-brand perspective agrees that consistency in the meanings of the person versus the brand is key in fostering enduring and positive values associated with the person-brand (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019). Swift has been largely successful in fostering a predictable and consistent image. Much of her brand value and appeal are in fact derived from the “bare it all” approach evident in her music and lyrics about relationships, personal life and emotional struggles. Yet, this very humanity in her person-brand can undermine her institutional potential for it dictates and often limits the extent to which the value systems which she inspires can endure and take hold in the socio-cultural imaginary. Excessive unpredictability and tensions with regard to her social embedding (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019) are key factors that impede objectification and sedimentation, and thus full institutionalization.

Examples of Swift’s often strained relationships with collaborators, the media, her label, publicist, and others abound. For instance, failure to coordinate album release schedules between Swift and “close friend and longtime collaborator” Ed Sheeran, revealed that behind the feel-good concerts there is a “Cut-Throat Music Business” run by “senior music industry insiders” (Acton 2025). As a result, thinking of Taylor Swift herself as an institution requires the problematic acceptance that the institution is indeed just her – the person, rather than a depersonalized corporate entity. Practitioner networks are not contingent

only on her personal decisions, relationships, and life trajectory, but consist of a menagerie of back-office stakeholders with other values than hers. This complexity prevents the formation of stable networks in the fan-base and impedes fully taken-for-granted institutional sedimentation when the curtain is pulled back on operational decision-making.

Swift's authenticity is regularly questioned as both a brand and as a person since even admirers posit that "Taylor isn't a 'real person,'" but what we have been conditioned to buy as a "real person" that has been "presented to us by the entertainment industry" (Musings 2018). Take for example her polarizing status as a feminist icon, to which Evans (2015) notes: "Swift isn't here to help women — she's here to make bank. Seeing her on stage cavorting with World Cup winners and supermodels was not a win for feminism, but a win for Taylor Swift. Her plan — to be as famous and as rich as she can possibly be — is working, and by using other women as tools of her self-promotion, she is distilling feminism for her own benefit."

Even if Swift's appeal has not waned in terms of sales numbers, waves of similar discontent and backlashes against her person have repeatedly split not only the public, but also her devoted Swifties (Jones 2024). This is a typical risk for person-brands, which requires ongoing and careful management, as it destabilizes the full "body corporate" entity (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019). Recently, Swift has been criticized for staying silent on the Trump administration's use of her music on social media posts and for generally choosing to stay silent on current political issues (Kheraj 2025). This is in stark contrast with her previous projected image as someone determined to always stay "on the right side of history" (Kheraj 2025), so much so that the intention to defend her political views dominated the narrative of the entire Miss Americana documentary (Netflix, 2020), Fans therefore struggle to reconcile this with her earlier image (Grady 2017). Her extensive use of "Easter eggs" and clues has also been criticized as a hyper-calculated effort to control the narrative around her art and her

brand, reminding that Swift is a product of meticulous management of her brand image (Khanal 2024).

We thus caution that if we are to consider Swift as a person-institution, Nigam et al.'s (2025) focus on Swifties should be assessed with a view of the longevity of Swift's appeal for them and for the wider audience. The parasocial character of her fans' attachment to the musician where the illusion of friendship with a public persona motivates fan behavior can evolve into a liability and become an impediment to a full implementation of institutional status (Goldberg 2025; Stever 2017). It is also worth noting that her core fandom has generational turnover and her listeners' commitment can shift in time.

Lichtenberg (2025) covers a "Taylor Swift backlash," noting how "some fans feel jilted by the star's unpredictable tradwife, almost MAGA-coded turn" in her marriage with American football star Travis Kelce. From the ambitious underdog persona of earlier years, Swift's transition to "tea-length dresses, pearls, muted floral prints, and soft curls" and "trad-wife aesthetic, which many found to be reminiscent of mid-century domesticity," split the fanbase along political lines (Lichtenberg 2025). When assessing the potential of celebrities to become institutions, it is thus necessary to consider the extent to which their value-imbuing qualities and meaning-making potential are intertwined with the person themselves, or if they can be productively abstracted sufficiently away from their output and daily life. We caution that in the case of Taylor Swift, such abstraction can pose a challenge.

Non-transcendence Due to Mortality

In the case of person-institutions, the person and the brand are highly interdependent, since that person is "constitutive of, and simultaneously represents, a community and an associated set of values that define what is sacred for people" (Nigam et al. 2025, 12). However, from a person-brand ontology perspective that linkage between the person and the

audience is extremely tenuous and malleable over time (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019). From a branding perspective, once institutionalization happens, the organizing impetus of the metaphysical and corporeal person dissipates. The history of branding is riddled with examples of brands that were dependent on an actual person for their value to simply becoming brands without any direct reference to the originating individual. Heinz, Diesel, Dr Oetker, McDonalds, or Kroger's, are all examples of this. In political branding De Gaulle became Gaullism, Peron became Peronism and so forth. In his book "Bill and Dave: How Hewlett and Packard Built the World's Greatest Company," Malone (2007, 2) for instance captures how the company lost all connection with the original founders, their identities and business practices, to such a degree that "even the name Hewlett-Packard largely disappeared from company signage and collateral, replaced by the simpler and supposedly hipper HP." Without Swift's person-brand presence and influence, what she stands for and represents individually will dissipate over time, weakening the institutional effect of the person.

It is worth noting that in other person-institutions non-transcendence dynamics can be radical, leading to a total break between fans and celebrity, even as the person-brand endures. This may happen if the person behind the institution rebrands to seek a new type of fans or is caught in a product harm crisis or scandal (Cleeren, Dekimpe, and Helsen 2008). Fans of Morrissey, the former front man of the British indie-rock band The Smiths, for instance largely divorced themselves from Morrissey due to his political support for far-right ideologies in Britain. "Bigmouth Strikes Again" as Jonze (2019) points out, referring to one of the band's songs, since "he's betraying those fans, betraying his legacy and empowering the very people Smiths fans were brought into being to oppose." In the case of Morrissey the institutionalizing potential endures through fans institutionalizing a fictive version of the artist that simply does not exist. The key here is that the actual person of Taylor Swift must constantly fight to be part of her own institution until, in time, she cannot. And then, when

she has been replaced by a fully fictive version of herself the full institutionalization will have happened or her oeuvre takes on a life of its own.

Overall, our conceptualization of the inherent tensions and contradictions in person-brands lead us to a different comparative assessment of Taylor Swift and Oprah Winfrey. Nigam et al. (2025) assert that Swift is a better exemplar of person-institutions than Oprah Winfrey, because Winfrey has not managed to garner the same organic and self-managed fan base as Swift. From our perspective, however, Oprah has arguably been more successful in transcending her personhood toward full institutionalization, having become a global icon that stands for more than her personal story and characteristics (Thompson 2007), where Swift's project is arguably still incomplete. Much of Winfrey's brand is built on her ability to mobilize vulnerability in others (e.g. through her signature style of candid interviews with guests in her talk show), rather than exploiting her own life narrative (Thompson 2007). In this regard Swift is often criticized for overreliance on self-referential work (Matthew 2024). Both have built highly influential communities rooted in storytelling, but there are notable differences due to their respective mediums, generations, and the very nature of their fame as shaped by their respective socio-technological environment. Oprah's audience is largely based on a 20th-century broadcast model, while the Swiftie community is a highly active, digital-native fandom. From an organizational ontology point of view, we cannot expect them to behave in the same way, and an analysis of how membership in a socially constructed fan community is enacted (Nigam et al. 2025) should be contextually embedded. Person-brands cannot universally achieve transcendence or stable taken-for-grantedness, for inconsistency is inherent to human nature, and thus inevitable (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019).

Conclusion

In this commentary we argue that person-institutions, as proposed by Nigam et al. (2025), are first and foremost person-brands (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019). Through reviewing the ontology of person-brands, we highlight why and when person-brands might resist full institutionalization as they often carry inconsistencies between their ontological components that require ongoing management, which disrupts taken-for-grantedness. This insight allows scholars to identify the composite ontological nature of public personas as institutions and to acknowledge that person and brand characteristics co-exist in a vulnerable balance that evolves over time.

We contend that Taylor Swift is a person with institutional potential that is not fully realized. While she has been leveraging palpable brand power for decades—fostering brand communities and publics, building equity through powerful storytelling, and meticulous control of her brand image—focusing on the behaviors of her fandom alone as a central pillar in theorizing her as an institution (Nigam et al. 2025) leaves out of sight the complex dynamics that challenge her institutional standing. Our analysis advances that Swift is not a singular, self-contained entity imbued with values which fan communities reproduce, but rather has a complex ontological structure, where agency and strategic brand management are at forefront, and thus foster, shape, or even impede institutional logics over time.

Both Ocasio (2023) and Nigam et al. (2025) stress the role of interaction order and moral order in the social construction of person-institutions. While this approach highlights how participants in a person-institution may constantly work to express and maintain a shared definition of the interaction situation, our more complex ontology drawing on brand theory suggests that person-brands are in fact sites of profound contention. They are semantic battlefields, the meaning of which evolve over time. From this enriched ontology we propose that the main power of person-brands stems from their capacity for cultural arbitrations, which if able to carefully host and negotiate broader dissonance in an ongoing balancing act

that maintains their relevance, might evolve into a person-institutions. Future research is well positioned to explore the drivers and inhibitors of the social construction of people-institutions focusing on hubris, meaning-making, social embedding and mortality.

From the harmony hinted to be at the core of person institutions by Nigam et al. (2025), we propose that person-institutional analysis further explores the dynamic tensions that tend to form across the various ontological components of person-brands. The outcome is a greater focus on longitudinal analysis of contestations over time (Giesler 2012) and the conflicting forms of legitimacy at play at various stages (Robinson 2024). To that end, we have argued that theorizing around the robustness of a celebrity's brand community and its actions as institutional role practitioners needs to be contextually embedded and critically assessed. This is another fruitful avenue for future research to explore and delineate the specific boundary conditions that render a person-brand an institutional entity, above and beyond fandoms—considering issues of stability, consistency, transcendence and meaning-making, which we have foregrounded in our analysis. Organizational and institutional scholars are well placed to focus on important discursive ruptures in the mapping of person-institution evolution over time with a view to how person-institutions are embedded in and contextualized within broader normative, cultural, legislative, and technological developments (Humphreys 2010).

We propose that the study of person-institutions with a view to person brand ontology can lead to a more complete typology of the phenomenon. What we have developed with regard to the ontology of person-brands can be transferred to an ontology of person-institutions, which highlights longitudinal processes. To assess the institutional strategies, it therefore becomes necessary to determine the stage of person institutionalization. Our analysis hints at four stages of development: 1) person, 2) person-brand, 3) proto-person-institution, and 4) full person-institution. However, these are still preliminary findings, and

such a four-stage process, and possible variations, need empirical validation. What are the critical criteria for transitioning across stages? Under what conditions are transitions smooth or discreet? Is the process always uni-directional or can it run in reverse?

Answering these questions could happen by systematically sampling person-institutionalization across a wide range of contexts. For instance, how do the complicated dynamics of person ontology at the heart of person institutions differ by the celebrity's social or economic class, gender, generational cohort, or spatial embedding in urban and rural contexts? Person-institution dynamics may also vary across contexts and domains. Politicians, online influencers, and CEOs operate in domains that are clearly different from Taylor Swift as a pop music celebrity. Scale may also be relevant to a more comprehensive typology of person institutions. While mega-celebrities seem obvious candidates for person-institution status, we wonder if smaller settings such as workplaces, local associations, or extended family businesses can have micro-institutionalization of personhood where the organizational ontology of person-brands comes into play in completely unexpected ways.

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