

# PERSONA AS KEY COMPONENT IN (CULTURAL) PERSON BRANDING

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines the elements and processes involved in the visual construction of person brands, and their personas as key components of those brands, in pursuit of the research question: What pictorial design strategies make person brands succeed? Key findings of the empirical investigation of the iconic artist brand Madonna allow a focus on Madonna's image and her fans' co-creative image practice through a visual frame analysis and cultural reading of her self-brand. Madonna has created a complex 'worldview world' that is governed by a metanarrative and feeds on the diverse acts of referencing cultural image icons. At the same time, central strategies of her image representations are reflected in the fan artefacts investigated. This article thus focuses not only on the role of the visual in person branding and in a modern-day visual brand culture. It also considers the place and form of such cultural person branding within the persona studies field.*

## KEY WORDS

Cultural Person Branding; Persona; Visual Representation; Madonna; Prosumer Culture; Fanart

## INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL PERSON BRANDING

Brands are pervasive phenomena of our time (Kornberger 2010; Lury 2004; Marshall 2017; Moor 2007) that comprise not just companies, products and services, but increasingly persons. The broadening of the brand concept is promoted by challenging conditions of perception when an image-dominated information society seems to say "esse est percipi": you can't stand out from the crowd unless you show yourself. This visibility requirement emphatically calls for construction of a public persona (Marshall 2015, p. 115). Effective self-presentations thus occupy a central position in the struggle for attention. This struggle is particularly dominant in the "personality market" (Nessmann 2005, p. 20) of media. In competition with established protagonists such as stars, celebrities, and fictional characters (who accumulate often vast amounts of attention capital), social media influencers and people stylized as so-called "micro-celebrities" (Senft 2008, p. 25; 2013) have energetically vied for the attention and consumption of an ever-growing audience. Today, the ability to transfix holds promise for cultural, social, and economic power. In spite of all the cultural diversity arising from a global expansion in and accessibility of information through the media, we can still see homogenisation in visual representations of identity. Often implicit in their effects and oriented around predominantly Western ideals, these trends towards visibilisation favour a normopathy of stylisation. The personality market is increasingly flooded with competing offers from which one must stand out. Resounding and sustained success promises not simply short-term direction of attention but rather a goal-oriented and permanent management of meaning that can engage targeted consumers in the long term and assert itself against competing offers, including other personas.

A “person brand” represents a specific variant of the general brand construct, the reference object of which is a person as a strategically acting “dominant force” (Cohen 2014, p. 2). Celebrities and stars are usually viewed as person brands, as are “[...] any well-known persona who is the subject to marketing communication efforts” (Thomson 2006, p. 104). They enlist public representations and fame for the professional marketing of their services and products:

*Grasping the person as a brand means enlisting the extensive knowledge of modern brand management to make persons known, building up the unique mental concept (image) of his or her achievements in the heads of fans, broadcasters and the press, and shaping this in the long term. (Herbst 2003, p. 9, transl. by author)*

Some person brands attain the status of a cult object within a cultural community. These iconic brands are viewed as bearers of collective values and mythical stories, but also of the fears and longings of members of a particular group. They are also of high symbolic significance (Holt 2004). Pictorial codes render these brand icons ‘instantly recognizable’ to a cultural community (Hollis 2011). The field of cultural branding describes and investigates the conditions under which, and the measures with which, brand icons such as these (typically firms and products) can be created. But to date, few scientific studies have examined person brands from a culturalist point of view (see, for example, Street 2004; Hearn 2008; Schroeder 2010; Kerrigan et al. 2011; Oray 2012; Lieb 2013; Eagar & Lindridge 2014, 2015; Hackley & Hackley 2015, 2017). Consequently, the investigation of iconic person brands is still in the early stages of a scientific direction that is described here as ‘cultural person branding’. Against the backdrop of an economy of cultural meaning, this article uses the example of iconic pop artist Madonna to examine the strategies and design tools that underlie the communication of her public image.

## THE PERSONA AS PUBLISHED IMAGE FIGURE

The persona plays a key role in developing and communicating the brand image of a person brand. As an outwardly oriented presentation of the self (Marshall 2016), the historical origin of the concept of the persona already emphasises that side of an individual that is intended to be noticed by a social or media public. Hence, it is not the real person behind the person brand that lends the product or service offer its intrinsic value and distinctiveness but rather the *persona image* that emerges via public and private presentations, both on- and off-stage and in the real and virtual worlds (off-/online). In principle, the structure of a “brand persona” (Herskovitz & Crystal 2010; Dion & Arnould 2016) is subject to even narrower strategic requirements in an effort to achieve desired ascriptions of meaning and (attention) economy effects. Given the curtailment of the natural multifaceted nature of the personality, the presentation compulsion that this implies can create a tense relationship between a real person, on the one hand, and their persona, on the other (Shepherd 2005, p. 596). Unlike a product brand, the human being as brand is complex. As behaviour is highly variable, it is difficult to manage through day-to-day shifts in mood and the workings of the subconscious (Rein et al. 1987, p. 151; Bendisch et al. 2007, p. 12; Fournier & Eckhardt 2018). This tension poses a considerable challenge for strategic brand management, not unlike the media staging of the complex construct of the persona. Within the context of the management of visual meaning, it is one of the key objects for the brand image of a person brand (Qyll 2019). In brand communication, the *persona as published image figure*, the *marking elements* (like logo, typography, colours, graphical forms, key visuals) and the *product representations* (comprising not just physical goods but also, for example, performances of a person brand) are used in isolation or in combination (Fig. 1). Meaning is managed not just by the brand owner, but by the person brand and the team around

it. In media contexts, external media stakeholders such as journalists, critics, and fans also participate in a brand's impact and dissemination.

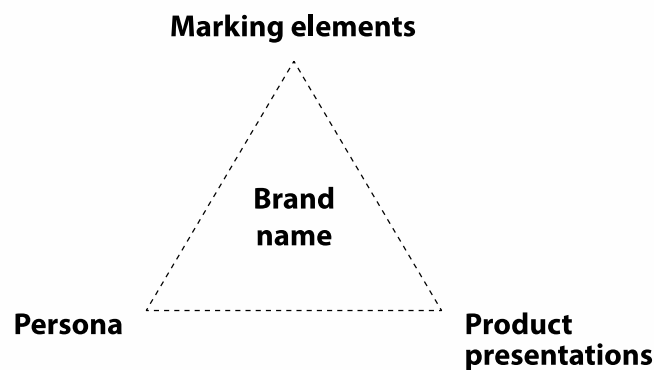


Figure 1: Systematisation of the central brand-image objects of a person brand

As in the case of real-world presentations of self, the basic principle of *framing* is also involved in managing the meaning of a person brand in mediatised settings. Information is used selectively in the effort to evoke a desired impression whilst simultaneously avoiding undesired and for the most part negative impressions (Goffman 1956, p. 69). Moreover, even though they may be satisfied with a particular brand, consumers seek variety and are curious about other brands (“variety seeking”). Brands must constantly stage-manage themselves, if only to counteract a certain demystification and devaluation. Through brand enrichment – communicative linkage with strategically selected entities – a brand can be enhanced or further developed in terms of attention and the constitution of meaning (Keller 2013, p. 261). The “match-up hypothesis” calls for attention to the compatibility of the properties, as their credibility and transfer performance increase with the closeness of fit.

In terms of collective effectiveness, image-based communication of a person brand in the context of its positioning can draw on established topics such as religious parables, myths, symbols and archetypes (Herskovitz & Crystal 2010, p. 21; Mark & Pearson 2001). Where the topics of imagery are concerned, this communication can also follow, oppose or induce discourses in social media (e.g. projects for social responsibility). The elements suitable for this purpose include visual representations of persons (competitors, collaborators, endorsers, et al.), places (country of origin, channels, etc.), objects (events, causes, etc.) or other brands (co-branding, etc.). Displays that feature successful contemporaries – the element of “basking in reflected glory” (Cialdini & Richardson 1980, p. 406) – or that avoid unpopular persons – the “cutting of reflected failure” (Snyder et al. 1986) – are also means of upgrading personas. When selecting image themes, it is crucial for a persona not to move too far away from the actual core of meaning of his or her own person brand (Herbst 2005). Particularly in times of fragmented media interfaces, a central task of media identity and branding is to make strategic use of *storytelling*. As a substantive and formal element of integration, the persona ensures not only continuity in cross-media brand communication (Herskovitz & Crystal 2010, p. 21), but also variety. The persona can even gain new means of expression (“characters”) through variability (Auslander 2004, p. 7). A persona’s image-based topical references can be quite diverse, as can the spectrum of *image styles* employed. Along with the visual appearance of the persona as determined by body, hairstyle, clothing and so on, this also comprises the factors involved in a media display of image. Photographic images are associated with a reality effect that offers the

beholder a seeming proximity to reality (Sachsse 2003, p. 177). Other modes of presentation, such as animation, 3D renderings, etc., may be regarded as phenomena that deviate from the photorealistic standard (Eder 2008, p. 382). These representational styles also remain effective by fostering a parasocial brand relationship with the recipients.

In sum, the brand persona as understood here is a *manifest, symbolic image construct* designed for effect, dynamically existing or arising in the field of tension of continuous production and reception by media audiences. It is initially determined by a reduction of information within the scope of strategic brand identity, on the one hand, and the media transformation of the real person, on the other. As a figure in a highly dynamic and published image, however, the persona gains media complexity over time. With thematic references created through images, and presentations through image styling, collective brand meanings are ascribed to the persona in continuous interaction with and among various stakeholders, particularly in the sphere of action and interaction found online.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

Cultural branding views brand management from a culturalist perspective (Holt 2004). The approach calls for a deeper understanding and a detailed analysis of the social and cultural brand environment. It is considered successful if, through strategic storytelling (myth-making), a product or corporate brand develops into a cultural icon within a particular community. Building on this newer brand paradigm, the specific approach of cultural person branding (CPB) pursued here broaches the specific principles, patterns, and processes that specify the (visual) construction of meaning of an iconic personal brand from different stakeholder perspectives in the sociocultural environment. Within the scope of qualitative case study research, the pop artist Madonna was selected for this purpose. Madonna may be a much-investigated phenomenon of pop culture, but this case study differs from existing studies in that the research question and the focus of the analysis involves holistic consideration of the construction of her visual identity as a prototypical example of a successful cultural person brand. Within the framework of the overall investigation plan of the individual case analysis (Mayring 2002), its empirical consideration involves a separate, three-part analytical structure that has proven expedient in the research process: In the first step, central types of action of her brand persona are reconstructed from data-based contextual information about Madonna drawn from the observation period of 1958–2018.<sup>1</sup> In the second step of the case study, brand images and their semantic offers were analysed from the standpoint not only of Madonna the person brand but also of prosumers, particularly fans and artists. The case-specific image material compiled for this purpose, which can be assigned to the period 1983–2018, was reviewed for significant elements, coded and frame-analytically interpreted.<sup>2</sup> The image analysis identified a comprehensive set of central presentation strategies with regard to the design processes in the case of Madonna. A qualitative sample of  $n = 419$  pieces of user-generated content (UGC) was collected through an extensive Google and Instagram search in an effort to analyse the fan artefacts based on visual superimposition. The fan-art sample revealed central interpretative patterns and pictorial practices that prosumers use to visually interpret Madonna as brand persona. In the third step, more general patterns and processes of Madonna's dynamic and complex brand presentation – I refer to this as the 'worldview world' – were reconstructed by means of case reflection, transcending the results of image analysis. These constructive patterns and processes include the 'principle of cultural transformation' as effects-oriented management of resources, and a 'metanarrative' that ensures the coherence of the communicative content.

## CASE STUDY: MADONNA

*Part of the reason I'm successful is because I'm a good businesswoman, but I don't think it is necessary for people to know that. (Madonna, cited in Morton 2001, p. 17)*

Madonna is fascinating in many respects. Even though she is not one of the best singers or songwriters in her field, for nearly four decades she has managed to remain a relevant and influential figure in the pop music industry. Behind this success and the marketing machinery involved, lies an ambitious woman who has woven business acumen, assertiveness, and perfectionism together with a strategic career approach that is characterised by continuous repositioning of her persona. This relates to musical products, effective transgressions of the bounds of moral taste and gender expectations, and cultural appropriation. Through this approach, she manages to strike a balance between art and commerce, social controversy and mass marketability. She describes this balancing act, which is strongly reminiscent of the ideology behind the work of pop artist Andy Warhol, in an interview with Holden (1989):

*What I do is total commercialism, but it's also art, [...] I like the challenge of doing both, of somehow making art that is accessible and making commerce something artistic. I think I have a very healthy point of view about myself [...].*

The case study reconstructs four key types of action by her persona that constitute the basic structure of the brand persona of Madonna: the *artist persona*, the *entrepreneur persona*, the *philanthropist persona* and the *private persona*. These subtypes of persona and their further breakdown into more specific roles are illustrated in Figure 2 and briefly described below.

The persona subtype of the *artist persona* comprises Madonna's multi-layered, multimedia, performative, and conceptual activities. Appearing on *Larry King Live* (1999), she herself described: "I think of myself as a performance artist, I hate being called a pop star". The roles manifested by this persona subtype include the 'performance artist' (e.g. singer, actress, model), 'producer' (e.g. *I am Because We are*, 2008), 'director' (e.g. *secretprojectrevolution*, 2013) and 'journalist' (e.g. *The English Roses*, 2003). The activity type of the *entrepreneur persona* comes to the fore particularly when Madonna acts as a businesswoman and marketer of her products, and of herself, whether in a media or business setting, as a 'self-promoter' (e.g. *In Bed with Madonna*, 1991), 'shareholder' (e.g. Boy Toy Inc., 1992), 'testimonial' (e.g. Mitsubishi commercial, 1986) and 'co-brand' (e.g. MDG glasses with Dolce & Gabbana, 2010). For Madonna, the assumption of social responsibility known in the corporate context as corporate social responsibility (CSR) is evident at the outset of her career. Based on a politically liberal ethos, she has fought primarily for environmental protection, equal rights for women, educational equality, artistic freedom, in the peace movement, and for AIDS education, and she has repeatedly voiced her opposition to racism, homophobia, sexism, and ageism. The persona subtype of the *philanthropist persona* emerges when her social activities occur as part of organized projects in which she plays concrete roles including those of the 'sponsor' (e.g. The Mercy James Institute, 2017), the 'activist' (e.g. Women's March, 2017) or the 'endorser' (e.g. Greenpeace spot, 1995). Finally, the subtype of the *private persona* links up with the mode of presentation of "published privacy". The disseminated "private images" provide a person brand with relevant tools for attracting attention and managing relationships, as they create an illusion of intimacy towards the viewer and reveal fascinating stories about (allegedly) private glimpses into Madonna's roles as an individual (e.g. Kabbalah since 1996, art lover), as a wife (e.g. Guy Ritchie, 2000 – 2008), as a mother (e.g. family portrait in *People Magazine*, 2017) and as a lover (e.g. Jesus Luz, 2008 – 2010).

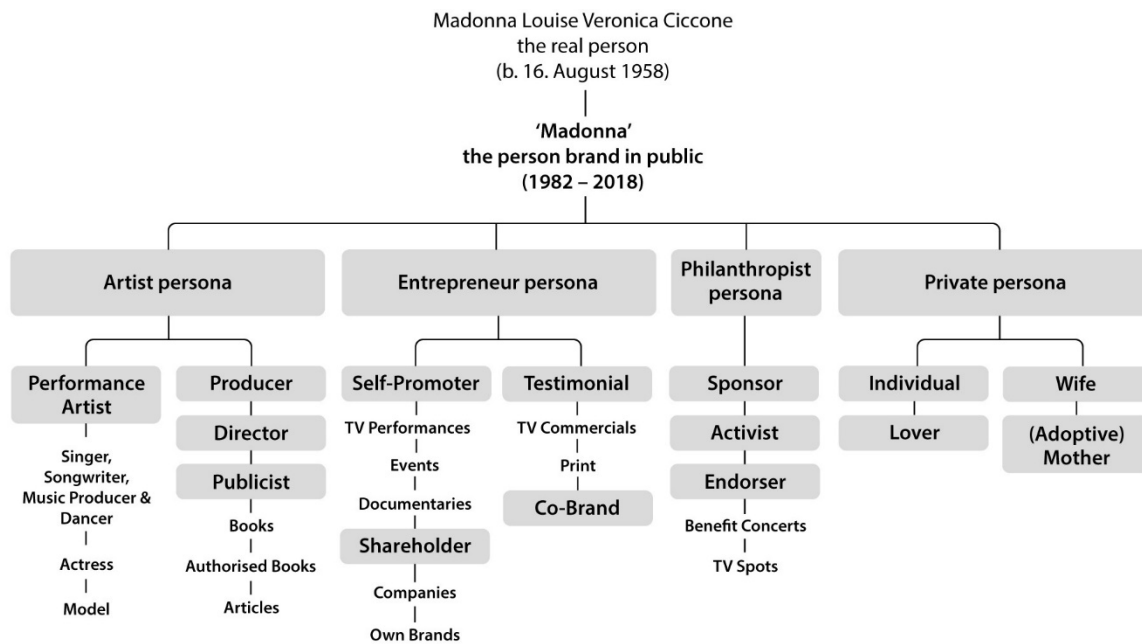


Figure 2: Basic structure of Madonna's brand persona

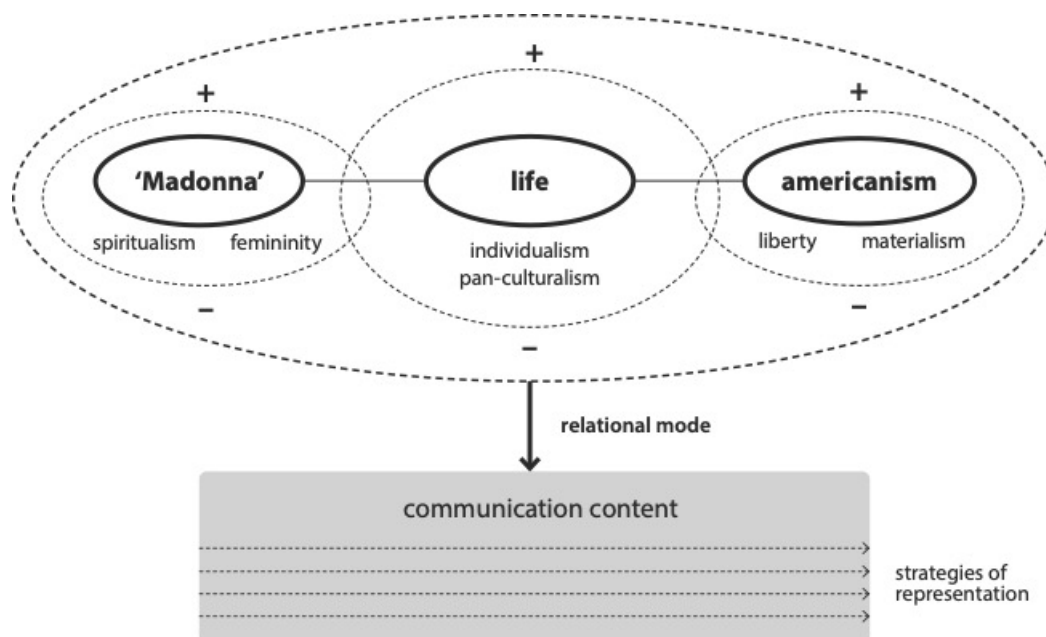
## Madonna's complex "worldview" world

The qualitative analysis of the brand images and their range of meanings succeeded in reconstructing a set of central types of Madonna's pictorial representations. One of the key types of visual strategies of representation is the initial stylisation of Madonna. During this early stage of her career, marked as it was by currents of American culture including the hip-hop movement (graffiti), the ballroom scene, and pop art, Madonna developed her signature look of the "post-punk girlie" in the absence of a comprehensive strategic preconception (cf. Scaggs 2009). This phase already marks the creation of the basic patterns that remain the pervasive hallmark of Madonna to this day and have become condensed into independent strategies. These include pictorial symbolism, marking ("Initial M"), polymorphisation including the sub-strategy of idolisation, (para)social relationships, (synergistic) aesthetisation, pan-culturalisation/politicisation, pictorial self-referencing of the person brand, and the strategy, as examined in more detail here, of royalisation.

Taking as her point of departure the name-based association as the "Queen of Heaven" and the external attribution of "Queen of Pop", Madonna consistently stages herself as a "queen" in the effort to underscore her claim to uniqueness and leadership in the pop music world. The elements used in the Queen frame include the crown, diadem, ermine, the sun, the throne, and the sword, as well as royal figures such as Marie Antoinette (1990), the archaic god-queen at Super Bowl XLVI (2012), and the gothic queen at the MET gala (2018). For example, on 7 September 2016, Madonna posted an [image on Instagram](#) with the lettering "Queen" and a stylised four-notched crown. The subtitle to the image reads: "And be treated like a 👑". She uses the royalisation strategy not only for social media, but also on stage and this strategy has solidified into a quasi-obligatory form of artist staging. Although she was described as a "Queen" in her early days<sup>3</sup>, Madonna is quite strategic in her effort to stand out from this royal monotony. She places some of her musical competitors in the role of faithful vassals in an effort to consolidate her status as the legitimate monarch of pop. During the *MDNA Tour* of 2012, for example, Nicki Minaj, who herself bears the nickname "Queen of Rap", appears in the [video backdrop sitting on a golden throne in a nun's habit](#), rapping to the audience: "There is only one

queen – and that’s Madonna, bitch”. Madonna’s image of the “Queen” appears as anamorphic. It navigates between the exalted and the salacious. For example, she sits on the throne, her legs spread apart, and curses “Nobody fucks with the queen”, or wears a jacket with “The Queen” in graffiti lettering, creating a connection to street culture and the early years of her career. The Queen frame serves to position the Madonna brand in terms of status, tradition, ambition, and her pioneering role, and proves an effective narrative for commanding attention in the face of the difficult conditions of a fluctuating entertainment market.

In the course of the analysis, it was initially possible to identify what makes Madonna a “Queen of Cultural Transformation” or “Cultural Material Girl”. This references the selective transfer of meaning for the enrichment of Madonna’s own brand meanings through integration of such historical and popular culture symbolic resources as image motifs, rituals, gestures, persons, figures, objects, and currents, mostly with iconic status. Madonna also integrates discursive attributions by external stakeholders, as well as iconic persona images of her own. In her interview with Grigoriadis (2015), she explains “I reference many things in pop culture, and I’ve written so many songs and had such a long career, that I end up referencing myself, too. If I can rip anybody off, I can rip me off”. This statement confirms the findings by other studies on external referencing (for example Guilbert 2002; Krützen 2002; Schuhen 2012) and particularly on the “iconizing” (Gernalzick 2010, p. 212) of Madonna. In contrast to the supposedly arbitrary openness that the principle of cultural transformation suggests, there is a complex metanarrative that continuously governs the coherence of the communicative content and fundamental effectiveness of Madonna’s imagery. Through the three central metaframes of *‘Madonna’* (*Holy Mother*), *Americanism*, and *Life*, this forms a networked semantic space through which cultural schemes and archetypal patterns are activated (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Metanarrative of Madonna the brand

The first metaframe in visual communication is (implicitly) called up via the brand name 'Madonna' as a consistent linguistic bracket. On the one hand, her name with the Italian meaning of "my lady" refers to the honorary designation of the Virgin Mary, a central figure of Christianity. On the other, it relates to a general form of representation of the image of the Madonna in art. The image of Mary has remained one of the most common objects of Christian iconography since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Lechner 1968, p. 155), while Madonna Ciccone represents one of the most popular female figures in contemporary media. Taking as a point of departure the doctrines in Roman Catholic dogmatics about Mary, what results is an illustration of the archetypes of femininity, the diverse manifestations and implicit references of which Madonna, the pop artist, constantly achieves. Key among these manifestations are those of the mother, the virgin, the saint, the Queen of Heaven (regina coeli), spiritual leader, and the Bride of Christ or of the Holy Spirit. Madonna is well aware of the integrative effect of her name and its cultural significance, based on the watchword "Nomen est Omen". In an interview with Holden (1986), she said: "[...] I think people are named names for certain reasons, and I feel that I was given a special name for a reason. In a way, maybe I wanted to live up to my name." In this metaframe, Madonna exhibits the positive and negative aspects of the role of femininity, invoking her personal approach to a divine spirituality, and criticising the fundamentalist observance of faith seen in different religious communities.

The second meta-framework, that of 'Americanism', is rooted, on the one hand, in Madonna's biographical roots in the Midwest of the USA and, on the other hand, in the diverse references to American culture within her world of brand imagery. Madonna, whom Guilbert (2002) described as "America's Mirror", corresponds with ideals of the 'American Way of Life', including individual self-actualisation and personal responsibility, as well as competition, the love of freedom, and the pursuit of happiness and prosperity. Moreover, the American lifestyle is closely linked to the collective ideal of the American dream under which every person, regardless of his or her origins and current situation, can achieve a higher standard of living solely through determination and hard work. The meritocratic logic of the "from rags to riches" narrative thus rests on the principle of continuous optimisation and transformation of the individual. Madonna, who evolved – based solely on her iron will and hard work – from a "small town girl from Detroit" (Ciccone 2016b) into one of the richest in popular music, can be regarded as a female personification of the "American dream". The effect of the universal basic pattern of human yearning and the dream of a better future that Madonna embodies is put to commercial use by traditional American brand companies in advertising spots such as *Make A Wish* by Pepsi (1989) and *Long Live Dreams* by American Express (2003), but also by Mitsubishi, the Japanese firm, which advertised with a testimonial by Madonna in its 1987 advertising campaign with the slogan "Dreams Come True". But Madonna would not be Madonna if, in addition to the romantic transfiguration of the "American Way of Life", she did not highlight its schizophrenic undersides, such as excessive consumption, pollution of the environment, exploitation of human labor, and the waste of raw materials. As Giles (1997, p. 127) observes, Madonna uses "[...] her capacity to mirror some of the most cherished American values – fame, money, success, self-promotion – while at the same time reflecting them in a hyperbolic, surreal, and disturbingly alien manner." This confirms the same axiom of the cultural branding approach under which iconic brands always seize upon a society's yearnings and concerns in their myth-making (Holt 2004, p. 7).

Suspended in the field of tension between the two cultural value systems of the "Holy Mother" and "Americanism" is the third meta-framework of the overarching brand narrative, referencing nothing less than the representation of 'Life' through specific instantiations of (sub)cultural everyday topics but also topics of universal human relevance, such as time, love, sexuality, play, ego, war, faith, fashion, and the psyche. In an interview on *Good Morning America*



with Steve Fox (1991), Madonna claimed: “I’m only presenting life to people. I’m not presenting anything that they are not exposed to in everyday life”. In her staging, however, she does not simply create a parallel figurative construction of reality, but instead transposes this into an ideologically coloured, critically assessed, and partially ironised worldview in the figurative sense. In this own “worldview world”, in the centre and periphery, Madonna’s persona acts as a polymorphic, unifying figure between the extremes – simultaneously as creator and creature, framer and framed. Given its dynamic complexity, life can never be fully represented. Only current or generic topics can be broached as the content of brand communication. This elusiveness, unpredictability, and uncontrollability of life is transmitted and feeds the myth of the Madonna brand as a culturally unifying and world-constructing phenomenon.

Madonna’s continuous variance and her communicative activities as a person brand in the media, on stage and in the self-referential presentation of the quotidian are thus governed by the cultural value systems of the metanarrative, which can always occur in different ways. The ‘relational mode’ that exists between the meta-level and the specific contents of communication generates further levels of meaning on the basis of criticism, irony, parody, subversion, exaggeration, alienation, allusion, citation, combination, plagiarism, and imitation. The aim here is to employ increased reflection in an effort to inspire the audience to heightened awareness and critical questioning. Thus, Madonna embodies a special type of person brand. On the one hand, she enlists traditional “cross-media” measures of strategic brand management, such as sales events, product placement, co-branding, experience design, advertising, and public relations. In the visual branding of her products, her persona, and the construction of her world of brand imagery, however, she also sets herself significantly apart from classic product brands. The person brand is comparable to an open-ended, self-similar brand platform in which the brand persona functions as an integrating figure and pursues a *philosophy of calculated complexification* at the visual and semantic levels. Yet this branding approach harbours a risk of a semantic blurring of the concentrated messages. Hence, the question of what Madonna stands for can be answered only with difficulty, if at all. This is precisely why classic brand management strives to achieve a standard simplification of the elements of visual communication in an effort to ensure uninterrupted brand recognition, and retention of consistent messages amongst stakeholder groups. For a brand like Madonna, however, the principle of visual variability shows that visual branding is authentic and effective if it derives from the person, their personality and history, and their representational approach. Madonna used her extraordinary branding, extensive artistic oeuvre, and business acumen to ascend to an American lifestyle brand of global mass entertainment. Along the same lines as Madonna’s ideological and visual thematic overlaps with the artist figure Andy Warhol (1975, p. 92), and in keeping with his motto that “Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art”, her incredible success in business can be deemed art in its own right.

### **Prosumer culture: “J’adore fanart!!!”**

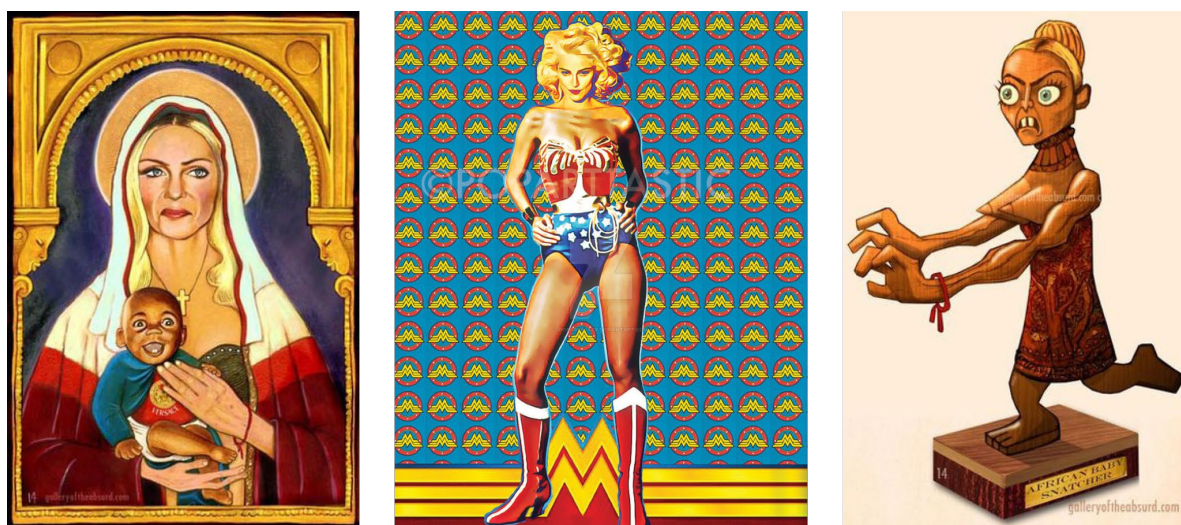
At present, the mediatisation of the everyday living environment gives consumers far more opportunities than they have ever had before to participate co-creatively in the emergence of a brand. Brand meanings are thus no longer subject to the absolute control of the brand owners alone – “brand co-creation takes place between the brand and consumers and between consumers and consumers” (Shao et al. 2015, p. 417). In the virtual space of the Internet, “prosumers” (Toffler 1980) and “produsers” (Bruns 2010) can sway overall public perception of a person brand through their media artefacts, which are referred to as “brand-related user-generated content (UGC)” (Arnhold 2010, p. 33). Consequently, this case study is not limited to an analysis of the strategic image representations of the brand owner Madonna, but also concentrates on the co-creative meaning practices as occur in fan’s visual artefacts.

Madonna not only takes a positive view of fan artefacts, as her tweet [“J’adore Fanart!!!”](#) (Ciccone 2015a) illustrates, but also strategically integrates these into her own brand communication in an effort to highlight desired brand meanings. Examples of this include the fan-made cover for the single release *Bitch, I’m Madonna* – which was designed by hardcore fan Aldo Diaz of Brazil and personally selected by Madonna – and a “live digital gallery” produced by director Danny Tull that featured fan art and was displayed on stage during the *Rebel Heart Tour* (2015–2016). The latter showcased the best works by “Rebel Heart Artists” who had been invited to create them through a competition at Madonna’s website. Madonna also constantly shares and reposts fan content about herself on her own social media channels, and uses this strategy of inclusion to provoke creative engagement with fans. Fans are encouraged to increase the shareability of their artefacts in relation to easy-to-imitate and dynamically applicable image schemata, such as the “visual ribbon” of the *Rebel Heart* album. Based on this cover, not only did Madonna fans [wrap their faces with cables](#) (Ciccone 2014), but also imposed the cables on an array of cultural figures including Jesus, Marilyn Monroe, and civil rights activists Nelson Mandela and [Martin Luther King](#) (Ciccone 2015b). The controversy of this campaign ultimately benefits Madonna. More recently, Madonna – within the framework of her 14<sup>th</sup> studio album, *Madame X* (2019) – wore an eye patch with a glittering silver “X” as an image schema that fans and fellow celebrities readily took up in the form of selfies, as can be seen in the image [“Madame X and Monsieur J”](#) (Fallon 2019) taken with Jimmy Fallon. These strategies of pictorial appropriation work towards viral dissemination of Madonna-related content in the digital space.

To briefly explain the central interpretative patterns or creative pictorial practices of fan art, fan-generated works based on *sacralisation* include superimpositions of Madonna with holy persons and supernatural entities of various religions (e.g. Mother Mary, Lakshmi, angels). Figure 4, for instance, shows Madonna as a Marian icon, holding her African adoptive son David Banda in front of her breast, rather than the Christ child. This references the Christian-Byzantine icon type of *Νικοποια*, characterising the enthroned Madonna with Jesus in her arms as “bringer of victory”. Images of Madonna superimposed with the British monarch Elizabeth II are dominant among *royalising* fan images. In the context of *pop culturalisation* and *heroisation*, Madonna is superimposed with icons of art and (heroic) figures of popular contemporary culture. An example of this is the iconic comic book figure Wonder Woman, one of the earliest superheroes of US-based publisher DC Comics. Figure 5 shows the superimposition of Madonna with this symbol of a “strong woman”. This fan artist has creatively inverted Wonder Woman’s actual “W” logo to create an “M” logo. In contrast to the idolatrous-benevolent worship of Madonna dominant in the representational practices of her fans, as discussed above, image artefacts can also be found here that are enlisted in public media discourses with a *critical-satirical* effect. These revolve, among other things, around Madonna-specific topics such as ‘fitness craze’, ‘compulsion to be attractive in old age’, ‘Illuminati conspiracy’ or her ‘lasciviousness for men’. Figure 6, for instance, reflects the criticism of her child adoption, with Madonna depicted as a hand-hewn wooden sculpture of an African tribe superimposed with the inscription “African Baby Snatcher”. The power of such statues is actually meant to keep marauding tribal invaders – evil, in other words – at bay.

The crucial point here is that the interpretative patterns and pictorial practices reconstructed in the fan-generated works of the sample – of *pop culturalisation/heroisation*, *sacralisation* and *royalisation* – reflect dominant strategies that the Madonna brand also uses to construe meaning. The central, recognisable image elements that play a key role in creating these products include Madonna’s face along with some of her iconic outfits, gestures, and hairstyles. In the case of the effective artefacts, visual superimposition is always enhanced by a semantic overlap at the conceptual level, comprising, for example, common characteristics.

Finally, it can be noted that, except for the critical user content and memes that any strong (person) brand must be in a position to withstand, the dominant proportion of the fan creations in circulation ultimately help, implicitly or explicitly, to reinforce the brand's intended meanings and their presence in the global consumer culture of the internet.



**Figures 4-6:** Fan artefacts: Sacralisation, pop culturalisation/heroisation and criticism

*(Image sources: Fig. 4: Artist 14 2007; Fig. 5: Woods 2016; Fig. 6: Artist 14 2009)*

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary media society reveals an increased tendency to apply branding measures to people. Long-term, successful persona brands in particular draw upon goal-oriented management of broad-based meanings in order to maintain their market position over the long term. This paper proposes the research approach of cultural person branding (CPB) based on the culturalist brand paradigm identified by Holt (2004), which examines the means and strategies of the constructions of meaning of iconic person brands in sociocultural environments from the points of view of different stakeholders. Since Madonna is a prototypical example of a cultural person brand, the methodological approach used in this analysis can serve as an example for other studies. Madonna's polymorphic persona was first analysed on the basis of the key brand-image objects of a person brand, such as persona, products and marking. Text- and data-based contextual information was used to reconstruct central types of action by the persona that constitute the basic structure of its brand identity. This forms the interpretive framework for the qualitative frame analysis of Madonna's image communication. Three levels of abstraction of brand meanings with a universal claim were systematically elaborated through case-internal reflections and cross-case comparisons. The meta-level regulates the profound overall significance of the brand and exists in a relationship with the contents of all communication. The level of strategy is based on strategies of representation for the brand-image objects and the imagery through which intended partial meanings of the brand are generated. Specific image meanings of the brand are generated at the operational level by means of visual schematic work on the brand-image objects and on the images employed. Where iconic person brands are concerned, the image-based management of meaning is not only geared towards short-term direction of the target group's attention but also employs cultural meanings at the various levels. These meanings are based on the brand identity and the individual design approach of a person brand (Madonna's polymorphism), but also generate a wide-ranging resonance and hence maximum involvement amongst followers, especially in the

co-creation of additional (desired) meanings. Madonna's polymorphic persona in particular serves as an iconic reference and inspiration for fan artists in whose products the central image strategies of the person brand are clearly reflected. Madonna skilfully returns these fan artefacts to her own brand communication in an effort to underscore desired brand meanings, by, for example, reposting relevant fan content on Instagram, thus unleashing a controversial discourse or encouraging other prosumers to produce additional fan art. The framework conditions of contemporary media technology have significantly favoured the co-creative possibilities of influence on a brand by its consumers. Beyond this case study, it can be seen that the pictorial practices and interpretative frameworks such as sacralisation, royalisation, criticism and pop culturalisation – here specifically the visualisation as a star, hero or villain – represent basic cultural patterns that visually represent iconic personas within the creative prosumer culture of the internet. Ultimately, the main finding of this article is that the persona – particularly as a published pictorial figure – represents the central integration instance of a person brand and, as a 'common thread', simultaneously ensures continuity and dynamism at the semantic, narrative, and visual levels of communication. The research approach of cultural person branding deals with both the strategic structure and the cultural analysis of iconic person brands. Best case examples of iconic personal brands, such as Madonna, reveal significant insights into successful strategies. These strategies, in turn, can be useful in building and managing brands. Accordingly, the findings of this article can serve as a suggestion not only for the practice of design and brand management but also for the scientific investigation of other iconic person brands. The great relevance of iconic person brands in our global media culture also facilitates the cultural person branding approach pursued here within the research field of persona studies, which is devoted primarily to the construction of the public self in a variety of contexts, such as online, star and everyday culture (cf. Marshall et al. 2019).

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These types of action are the result of a qualitative coding that investigated the behaviours of the persona in the public media field. To this end, typical information about Madonna found in the collected online texts such as biographies, articles, overviews, self-descriptions, etc., was first thematically filtered and then, at a higher level of abstraction, condensed into the four subtypes of persona.

<sup>2</sup> The method of qualitative evaluation employed in the case study is a visual frame analysis. It is triangulated from thematic analysis according to Braun & Clark (2006), visual semiotics pursuant to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) and critical visual analysis based on Schroeder (2006). The image data were compiled on the basis of an extensive search of Google and social media and were collected circularly. Theme-specific image sets with a total of  $n = 3,082$  images were extracted from the entire body of images ( $n = 9,727$ ).

<sup>3</sup> Already at the first MTV Music Video Awards in 1984, the actor Dan Aykroyd announced Madonna's controversial performance as a lascivious post-punk bride with the words "Queen of Music and Motion". The magazine *Super Stars* (1985) writes of "Queen of Rock", and the 1989 issue of *Smash Hits* magazine concisely entitles Madonna the "Queen of Pop".

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