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INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE PERSONAL BRANDING AS DRIVERS OF ORGANIZATIONAL QUALITY IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES: AN EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE

Abstract: *This study aimed to determine how a manager's attitude influences the likelihood of supporting employee personal brand (PB) development in the creative industries. Twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with CEOs of creative industry organizations, and a hybrid coding approach was applied. Within the framework of narrative identity theory, personal branding plays a significant role in the creative industries by enhancing the value of ideas and projects and reinforcing the authentic image of creative professionals. The ability to develop a PB is highly dependent on the manager's attitude and leadership style. Psychological safety, fostered by employee involvement in decision-making and creative autonomy, is a key element of inclusive leadership that supports both creative potential and PB development. The results confirm the key role of managers in creating an organizational climate that fosters inclusivity. The study also reveals that barriers to PB development may arise not only from the manager's attitude but also from the employee's own stance.*

Keywords: *employee personal brand, inclusive leadership, supervisor attitude, creative industries*

1. Introduction

Creative industries constitute fields of human activity in which the outcome of work is strongly dependent on individual creative competencies. The degree of aestheticization of all communication forms, as well as the extent to which these work outputs are embedded within narratives, is noticeably higher than in other sectors of the economy. Here, the concept of branding is also employed to a significantly greater extent, applied to organizations, products, and the individuals behind them alike. However, the person associated with a product or service is

not always the same as the one representing the organization itself. Organizations built not around a single name but rather on meticulously selected personal brands of designers operating at various levels, such as fashion houses, illustrate this model well. In such contexts, a personal brand functions not only as a promotional asset. Above all, it serves as a source of creative potential that is incorporated into the process of building the organization's brand value through granting creative autonomy, opportunities to shape work processes, and even influence over management philosophy. The personal brand in creative industries is therefore a concept of significance both in terms of the inalienable

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authorship rights to individual creative outputs and in terms of the capacity to co-create the organizational brand within which the personal brand operates. Deliberate personal brand management also increases employability and access to the labor market (Gorbatov et al., 2023; Khedher, 2019; Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020). Yet do employees of various specializations and at different hierarchical levels within creative industry organizations have the same opportunities to build and leverage their personal brands as creative directors of major fashion houses? Or does one's position within the hierarchy, and the attitude of management itself, determine the extent to which an employee's personal brand is integrated into the creation of organizational value? These considerations led to the formulation of the research question: how does the personal attitude of a manager influence the possibility of building a personal brand for an employee in the creative industries?

Despite growing scholarly interest in personal branding, existing research has focused primarily on the perspective of the individual building their personal brand, including their motivations, self-presentation strategies, and the individual benefits of developing professional visibility (Gorbatov et al., 2023; Khedher, 2019). The employer's perspective remains considerably underexplored, and this gap is particularly evident in the context of creative industries. Furthermore, the literature rarely links the concept of employee personal branding with inclusive leadership, even though leadership style may be a decisive factor in determining whether an organization consciously integrates its employees' personal brands into the process of building organizational value. This article addresses this gap by adopting the perspective of employers operating in the creative industries and examining the relationship between managerial attitude and employees' opportunities to develop their personal brands.

One of the co-authors of this article has been professionally involved with the creative industries for over a decade, initially as an employee in sectors such as advertising, marketing, communication, branding, event management, and design processes, and later as a collaborator with non-governmental organizations that offer support to the creative industries. Her professional experience, as well as discussions within creative communities concerning employment conditions, career path planning, and the challenges faced by both creative industry workers and their employers, have inspired a closer and more systematic examination of these two perspectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Creative Industries

The concept of creative industries has been present in public discourse, in a form similar to the contemporary one, since the late 20th century (Australia, Department of Communications and the Arts 1994 as cited in Dziurski, 2015). Nevertheless, the products of human creativity have undoubtedly contributed to both the economy and culture since the very beginnings of civilization. The term creative industries is significant in that it allows for the identification of an economic domain that can be analyzed more systematically. However, this does not mean that such an analysis is an easy task. The creative industries are highly heterogeneous, and their definitions are far from uniform. Under the definition that creative industries encompass professions and organizations whose outputs are predominantly based on creativity, the following subsectors can be distinguished (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2001): the arts and crafts subsector (performing arts, music industry, art and antiques market, artistic crafts), the creative production subsector (publishing industry, radio and television broadcasting, film and video production, video and computer games, fashion industry), and the creative services

subsector (advertising industry, architectural and urban design, software and computer services, design).

Employees in the creative industries perform a wide range of diverse tasks. A significant, though not exhaustive, portion of them pursue creative professions, that is, occupations in which the outcomes of work largely depend on individual knowledge, skills, attitudes, and creativity. These are professions closely tied to a high degree of personal responsibility for the quality and distinctiveness of the delivered results. Emerging research also indicates that individuals in these professions tend to engage in personal brand-building activities more intensively and comprehensively than representatives of other occupational groups (Walczak-Skałeczka & Mieszajkina, 2021; Walczak-Skałeczka, 2023a).

Work within the creative industries is organized in a variety of ways:

- traditional organizations, which employ workers under standard employment contracts or other forms of contractual arrangements (e.g., commission contracts, B2B contracts),
- collectives, in which entities (small organizations or freelancers) are loosely connected, either formally or informally, and may share only a common umbrella brand that they co-create independently of their organizational or personal brands. Such collectives typically have a leader (often assuming an informal CEO role), although the degree of autonomy and independence among collaborating entities is generally unrestricted,
- freelancing, which itself can take multiple forms (cf. Przewoźna-Krzemińska, 2022), ranging from (1) combining full-time employment with freelance work performed after hours, through (2) operating one's own freelance business, to (3)

working as a fully independent contractor for various clients.

The form in which work is performed is influenced by multiple factors, some of which are undoubtedly dictated by the preferences of employers and clients. However, considering that creative professions constitute a substantial portion (ranging from 65.4% to 73.3%) of the freelance services market (Freelancing in Poland, 2024; Plakhuta, 2024), this is also likely related to the desire for self-determination among individuals in these occupations. Creative individuals are characterized by greater independence of judgment and autonomy, broad interests, a “strong ego,” confidence in their own abilities, and typically exhibit high levels of energy in their activities. Also characteristic of this group appears to be an aesthetic orientation, a tolerance for internal contradictions and ambiguity of stimuli, as well as a preference for moderate risk (Nęcka, 2000; In making these observations, Nęcka draws on a range of studies conducted in the second half of the 20th century). Moreover, young creative professionals, in narratives concerning their career strategies, frequently emphasize concepts such as independence, autonomy, freedom, agency, and satisfaction (Messyasz, 2022). Such characteristics may also constitute one of the underlying factors driving the intensity of personal brand-building activities among individuals in creative professions.

2.2. Branding in the Creative Industries

The personal brand is not the only type of brand present within the creative industries. Organizational brands (and, less frequently, product brands) develop actively and, notably for this sector, emerge almost from the organization's inception. In many other sectors, conscious and professional brand-building typically begins at a later stage of market activity. The specificity of the creative sectors, and perhaps also of the individuals operating within them, means that a brand, in some form, emerges very early and gradually

acquires meaning and depth through experience. Creative industries are also receptive to changes in organizational brand concepts, including renaming, redesigning visual identity, or creating multiple brand entities corresponding to different areas of practice. Approaches to brand-building in these sectors are as diverse as the creative industries themselves.

Another undoubtedly significant category of brands is the personal brands of the founders of organizations. In the creative industries, this category appears to be so prominent that many organizational brands incorporate the founder's name, particularly evident in architectural studios, but also in design and illustration studios. The CEO's personal brand plays a crucial role in the development and value of the organization (Cottan-Nir, 2019; Fetscherin, 2015; Kruskovic et al., 2023; Scheidt et al., 2018), which is linked both to the trust that audiences place in the CEO and to the CEO's public image (Górska & Mazurek, 2021; Ingenhoff & Sommer, 2010; Love et al., 2017; Abasilim, 2024; Amrouni & Azouaou, 2025).

A third category of brands particularly relevant to the creative industries is that of employees' personal brands, which can strengthen the organizational brand as an *expert brand* (Kucharska, 2019, 2022; Vosloban, 2012). Personal brand has been defined in numerous ways. One of the fundamental distinctions among these definitions lies in whether researchers consider a personal brand to result from actions consciously undertaken by the individual (Evans, 2017; Gorbatov et al., 2018; Hearn, 2008) or whether it can emerge from any actions, regardless of intentionality (Gander, 2014; Omojola, 2008; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Beyond the area of specialization, which appears to influence the distribution of emphasis among the various categories of brands in the creative industries, labor market changes, similar to those in other economic sectors, are also significant. Globalization, the shift toward a knowledge-based economy,

increasing job specialization and competition, as well as the widespread use of social media platforms, have, at least in certain sectors, necessitated new approaches to collaboration strategies and career development management by both employers and employees (Kucharska, 2022; Whitmer, 2019). The diversity of employer–employee relationships in the creative industries can be analyzed through the lens of the Employability Market Orientation (EMO) concept (Pawłowska, 2017). This concept posits that employees treat their employer as a business partner and view themselves as micro-entrepreneurs. The focus is not on the formal nature of this relationship, but rather on the employee's behavioral patterns. This perspective closely aligns with the principles and practices of personal branding. Moreover, changes in the discourse regarding the role of culture and creativity in contemporary reality significantly influence the formation of professional needs and ambitions, as well as how creative professionals pursue them (Franczak, 2015, 2018, 2020).

2.3. Personal branding as a manifestation of narrative identity

Building a personal brand is a process rooted in at least two groups of activities. First, it refers to creating value for a specific audience, and second, communicating that value in a way that attracts that audience. The values underlying a personal brand, along with its development and the methods used to communicate it, will vary depending on the industry and the content of the work for the audience. However, the common denominator of all personal brands is telling one's own story. Self-narrative is a fundamental tool for the development and communication of a personal brand (Walczak-Skalecka, 2022). However, it is also a tool whose role in human life cannot be overstated. Narrative identity theories analyze self-narrative as a fundamental tool for understanding who we are as human

beings. Self-narration is therefore used to analyze our own motives for actions, behaviors, and emotions, and to give them meaning. It helps us to outline scenarios for our personal future, contributing to the development of the individual in various areas of their functioning. It is also often an invaluable tool for coping with challenges and stress. Self-narrative mediates both our relationship with ourselves and how we navigate relationships with others.

In Western societies today, individuals have an unprecedented influence on shaping their own life story. This influence is not unlimited and does not apply equally to all individuals. Never before, however, has the narrative of success driven so many people toward destinations of their own choosing. Shaping one's own life and the ability to write one's personal history in a way that depends mainly on the individual is one of the many dimensions of contemporary freedom. However, it is also a source of anxiety, caused by the need to take responsibility for one's own fate (Giddens 2012). The identity of the individual, as told by them every day through their choices and the regimes to which they submit, is, in Giddens' view, not an unambiguous gift of modernity – it is equally a burden. However, it is the only option for today's individual – the individual has no choice but to keep telling their story. In postmodern societies, my identity is my responsibility. Building a personal brand fits perfectly into the development of this phenomenon – my brand is my responsibility, and today it is hard to discuss career development without engaging with personal branding at all.

What is more, researchers of narrative identity analyze self-narrative not only through the lens of its utility in an individual's life, although this function is undoubtedly paramount (McAdams, 1989, 1993, 2008). Concerning personal branding, situating self-narrative within group narratives and value systems characteristic of these groups seems particularly significant. The values inherited from the communities in which an individual

grows up become the backdrop against which they must construct themselves and their story (MacIntyre, 1996), and this is already a dynamic and reflexive process (Giddens, 2012; Taylor, 2001), requiring the continuous negotiation of meaning and understanding of oneself through cultural codes and in confrontation with others (Ricoeur, 1992, 2003). In all theories of narrative identity, the autonomy of the individual in terms of how and in what direction they build their own story is a key factor. In the case of building a personal brand and shaping one's own story in a professional context, this autonomy depends on the brand-recipient relationship, and in the case of full-time employees, also on the employer-employee relationship.

A personal brand is undoubtedly not synonymous with narrative identity. Rather, it is one of its manifestations in the context of professional activity. However, given the deep need to autonomously shape one's life story and the narrative of success, which is almost ubiquitous in the discourse of professional development and fulfillment in Western cultures, it must be recognized that building a personal brand is today, at least in certain contexts, an important part of the professional life of many people. A personal brand is an individual's story about themselves, about how an individual (e.g., a creator, designer) interprets their professional path, the values they hold and deliver, and the mission they pursue through their work. In the creative industries, it is this personal story that gives value to the work of creators and designers.

2.4. Personal Brand as a (Potential) Tool for Inclusivity

Personal brand has become one of the tools enabling individuals to manage their career development and professional trajectory more consciously and autonomously (Walczak-Skałicka, 2023b). It also plays a significant role in enhancing employability across various sectors and improving access to the labor market (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021;

Bajs & Tomas, 2023; Gorbatov et al., 2019; Khedher, 2019). Personal brand primarily provides individuals with at least partial influence over the employer–employee relationship, not only increasing the likelihood of employment or better working conditions, but sometimes making employment possible at all. Thus, it constitutes one of several factors that can contribute to a more inclusive labor market. In the context of work in the creative industries, which is often realized under a variety of organizational models, personal brand can serve as a crucial mechanism for ensuring at least minimal visibility of the employee (Gorbatov et al., 2023) both within and outside the organization. The process of building a personal brand can be pursued and analyzed with respect to different labor market arenas. One such arena is the job market, where the goal is to gain or maintain high attractiveness to potential employers. A second arena is the services market, where the objective is to gain or maintain appeal to potential clients. The third arena is the organization itself, where the employee is situated; here, the aim may be to gain or maintain attractiveness to the current employer, direct supervisor, and colleagues. Personal brand can permeate all of these arenas, depending on the individual's particular situation. Undoubtedly, however, managing organizations in which employees actively build personal brands can present significant challenges (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2016). At the same time, it can serve as an integral component of employer branding strategies, such as employee advocacy. It can also strengthen the organizational brand and contribute to its broader value and competitive advantage. Thus, personal branding becomes a tool that provides the individual with greater influence over their own professional trajectory, and sometimes even over the trajectory of the organization with which they are affiliated. It integrates the individual into discussions about their role and significance within the labor market or organization and, at least in some cases,

allows them to reshape the rules of the game. It is important to note the limitations of this understanding of personal brand. Despite its potential to enhance inclusivity in the labor market, personal brand is a concept that demands considerable resources, including cultural, social, and often economic capital (Walczak-Skałeczka, 2023a; Walczak-Skałeczka & Mieszajkina, 2021), as well as time and sustained effort. Moreover, it involves numerous challenges, particularly the need to balance what is authentic to the individual with what is appealing to audiences (Heriberta et al., 2024; Pooley, 2010; Pruchniewska, 2018; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018; Whitmer, 2021). Thus, personal brand is not a tool that an individual can employ without incurring any costs, including psychological ones. Furthermore, if one fully succumbs to market-driven pressures, these costs may become excessive (Giddens, 2012; Whitmer, 2019). Nevertheless, considering the current labor market and the possibilities for individually communicating the value of one's work, the concept of personal brand offers individuals a meaningful opportunity to shape and navigate their own professional trajectories.

2.5. Inclusive Leadership as a Determinant of Employee Personal Brand in the Creative Industries

Each of the aforementioned arenas, due to the actors operating within them, offers slightly different opportunities for developing a personal brand. The degree of freedom in choosing actions is decidedly greater for independent contractors. In contrast, individuals working within teams or organizations have easier access to larger projects, which can serve as elements of a "Sinatra Test" (Heath & Heath, 2008). However, the freedom to build an employee's personal brand is, to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on whether and to what extent the organization has regulations in this area, as well as on how supervisors at various organizational levels perceive this process.

Creativity is the fundamental value that employees in creative industries bring to their organizations. One of the key conditions for developing and expressing creativity in an organization is the level of psychological safety. Psychological safety recognizes that seeking feedback, sharing ideas, or expressing doubts can be a source of stress for team members. Employees who feel secure in their relationships with colleagues and superiors navigate these interactions with greater ease and are more likely to fulfill their intellectual potential, including creativity (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2004). The courage to share ideas and the assurance that those ideas can be voiced safely are therefore natural prerequisites for creative industries to function effectively. Of all leadership models, inclusive leadership is most conducive to cultivating such an environment.

It is understood as a multi-level, multidimensional construct composed of interconnected elements:

- valuing and leveraging individual differences within the team (Ferdman, 2020; van Knippenberg & van Ginkel, 2022; Liu, 2024; Randel et al., 2018; Roberson & Perry, 2021; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022),
- fostering a sense of belonging (Ferdman, 2020; Hollander, 2009; Nishii & Leroy, 2020; Randel et al., 2018; Roberson & Perry, 2021; Shore et al., 2011; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022)
- openness to subordinates and accessibility of supervisors (Carmeli et al., 2010; Liu, 2024; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022)
- recognizing contributions and engagement, empowering employees, and encouraging participation (Bradley, 2020; Ferdman, 2020; Liu, 2024; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Roberson & Perry 2021; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022),
- emphasizing integrity, equality,

fairness, and trust; relational behaviors; and promoting inclusion and integration efforts (Ferdman, 2020; Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; Nishii & Leroy 2020; Roberson & Perry, 2021; Tiwari, 2025; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022).

Inclusive leadership can bring numerous benefits to organizations - ranging from higher productivity and improved task performance (Al-Atwi & Al-Hassani, 2021; X. Li 2022; Mitchell et al., 2015; Naseer et al., 2023; Tiwari, 2025; Xiaotao et al., 2018), to greater job satisfaction and a stronger sense of purpose, enhanced feelings of safety and belonging (Javed et al., 2017, 2018; Naseer et al., 2023; Randel et al., 2018; Shafaei & Nejati, 2024; Veli Korkmaz et al., 2022), and increased recognition as well as reduced employee turnover (Ashmawy, 2023; Kim et al., 2026.; X. Li et al., 2024), improved team adaptability, and more effective decision-making (van Knippenberg & van Ginkel, 2022; Tiwari, 2025). Particularly relevant for the creative industries, inclusive leadership can also enhance creativity and innovation (Carmeli et al., 2010; Javed et al., 2017; Leroy et al., 2022; Li & Tang, 2022; Li, 2022; Li et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2020).

2.6. Formulating The Research Question

The creative industries are primarily characterized by a focus on individual and team creativity as the key drivers of the value that an organization can deliver to its audiences. The individual contributions of creative industry employees represent a critical factor in the business success of the organizations they work for. These contributions are shaped by each employee's personal knowledge, skills, and attitudes. However, whether this translates into greater opportunities than in other sectors to shape one's own career path, or otherwise directs it, cannot be taken for granted. Employment structures, defined here as the balance between self-employment and organizational employment, show a higher share of self-

employed individuals in the creative industries, who are, by necessity, responsible for managing their own careers and personal brands. What remains to be examined is the scope of possibilities available to employees within creative industry organizations and the factors that determine this scope. Accordingly, the research problem is formulated as follows: how does the personal attitude of managers influence the ability of creative industry employees to build their personal brand?

3. Research Methodology

To address this research question, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted. This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of managers in creative industry organizations regarding the role of their employees in creating the value delivered to clients, the development of employees' personal brands, and the managers' own role in this process. A quantitative approach alone could not have yielded such a comprehensive picture of these relationships and interactions, particularly given the lack of prior research in this area (Graebner et al., 2012).

This study represents the second investigation aimed at examining the attitudes of creative industry representatives toward the

development of employees' personal brands. In the first study, the focus was on exploring the attitudes and experiences of creative industry employees. The study presented here, however, centers on the perspective of managers leading creative industry organizations.

3.1. Characteristics of Respondents

The research sample was selected purposively. Participants were recruited via the LinkedIn platform. The public profile of each invited individual allowed verification of both their role within the organization and the organization's area of specialization. A third selection criterion was the size of the organization, understood as the number of permanent collaborators. The specific nature of financial or contractual arrangements was treated as a secondary criterion; however, permanent collaboration was defined as dedicating at least 90% of one's working time to a single organization. Consequently, the managers included in the study led organizations that employed staff directly, as well as organizations that worked with individuals under B2B contracts. The decision to include both employment forms was motivated primarily by the prevalence of mixed models in the creative industries, as confirmed by accounts from both managers and employees in prior studies.

Table 1. Detailed data on the surveyed group of managers of an organization in the creative industries

Code	Position	Gender	Number of employees	Sector
Id1	CEO, owner	M	2-10	Branding and Art
Id2	CEO, owner	M	2-10	Event production
Id3	CEO, owner	M	11-50	Interactive and performance marketing
Id4	CEO, owner	M	2-10	Architectural design
Id5	CEO, partner	M	2-10	Branding and Graphics
Id6	CEO, co-owner	M	11-50	Marketing creative agency
Id7	CEO	F	2-10	Branding and Graphics
Id8	CEO, co-owner	M	11-50	Interactive and performance marketing
Id9	CEO, owner	M	2-10	Branding and UX
Id10	CEO, owner	M	2-10	Web design and branding
Id11	CEO, co-owner	F	2-10	Product Design
Id12	CEO, co-owner	M	2-10	Branding, digital, product design

A total of 38 invitations to participate in the study were sent, of which 12 individuals accepted. Participants held formal CEO roles within their organizations; in one case, the participant functioned as de facto CEO without holding the formal title. Their tenure in these roles varied widely, ranging from 2 to 27 years. Each interview was assigned a unique identification number (ID). Detailed information is provided in Table 1.

3.2. Characteristics of Respondents

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, with priority given to open-ended questions that allowed respondents to express themselves freely (Punluekdej, 2020) and provided a more accurate representation of their individual perspectives on the communication of completed projects, the manner of their execution, and the associated opportunities for developing employees' personal brands in the creative industries (Kvale, 2012). A unified interview structure enabled systematic comparison of data obtained from individual participants (Glinka & Czakon, 2021). The interviews were conducted using electronic communication tools and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. When scheduling interviews, participants were invited to choose a time and setting in which they would feel comfortable speaking freely. The conversations were held via the Google Meet platform from July to August 2025. To assess participants' familiarity with the concept of personal brand and their attitudes toward it, they were asked: "How do you understand personal brand?" and "How important is personal brand in the creative industries?" To explore attitudes regarding their leadership style, questions focused on project or assignment execution, specifically: "To what extent are employees involved in making project-related decisions?" and "Where and how is project authorship communicated?" To determine the extent to which participants support the development of their employees' personal brands, participants were asked a series of questions,

including: "To what extent do employees in your organization develop their personal brands?" and "Under what conditions can employees build their portfolios?" Participants were also asked about potential benefits and risks associated with supporting employees' personal brand development, as well as: "What expectations would you need to establish to confidently support the development of your employees' personal brands?"

Additionally, the websites and social media channels of participants' organizations were analyzed to examine how those organizations communicate about their employees' personal brands.

3.3. Characteristics of Respondents

The participants consented to the recording of the interviews, which were subsequently transcribed. To ensure full anonymity, all identifiable information, including personal data and organization names, was removed. The collected empirical material was then analyzed and synthesized using MAXQDA software.

A hybrid coding approach was applied (Glinka & Czakon, 2021). Predefined codes were developed based on the research question and literature review, while additional codes emerged inductively from the collected empirical material.

The material was coded in Polish.

Preliminary findings were presented to a subset of participants to verify the accuracy and validity of the interpretations.

4. Findings

4.1. Personal brand – necessity or an add-on in the creative industries?

The respondents understand personal branding in two ways. On the one hand, they see it as a set of associations and perceptions a specific person, regardless of whether that person is actually involved in managing their

personal brand or whether that opinion is an outcome arising resulting solely from uncoordinated and not necessarily intentional interactions between the individual and their environment. On the other hand, the respondents consider a personal brand to be the result of deliberate and consistently implemented actions. A personal brand, therefore turns out to be a difficult concept to define, although its importance and its relevance to virtually every professional domain was mentioned in all the statements. It is also a story about searching for one's own professional identity and consistency, about

building authority. Undoubtedly, personal branding is a tool for achieving specific goals. Respondents see personal branding as something that must have an element of uniqueness, but it is also defined by a fairly universal set of values, including competence, experience, and belief in one's product or service. Two distinct layers of the personal branding process were identified. One is related to the value actually delivered to the audience, the other to communication. Examples of respondents' statements in the areas discussed are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Conceptualizations of personal branding among respondents

Feature/component	Examples in the collected data
PB permeates everything	'Every email, every quotation, every conversation with a client, every completed project... well, all of that is, in a way, working on one's personal brand' [Id1]
Professional identity, authority	'An expert in a given field, who presents themselves, whether charming or not, but certainly with full authenticity, earns the trust of [...] the group of people who are their audience, and in this way is able to sell them something, anything' [Id3].
A tool for achieving goals	'People pay you more than the average market price for a service because you inspire a certain kind of trust or evoke emotions that make them believe it's worth it, they want to work with you, with your brand' [Id4]
Uniqueness	'it has to be something distinctive, something unique' [Id7]
Promise of value	'some kind of promise of quality in terms of collaboration, reliability, or loyalty of the individual' [Id5]
Two layers of the PB building process	'Fake it until you make it,' however we call it - I think that if someone is a great marketer of themselves, so to speak, then even without a portfolio of projects, experience, or real skills, they can definitely build a personal brand strong enough to sell their good or not-so-good services - essentially themselves [...]. So, I believe that a stronger personal brand is one built on real achievements and values and later supported by skills that go beyond the world of design and creativity, entering the realm of marketing and self-presentation, talking about oneself, and shaping one's image. From experience, I know that for designers or creatives, these are two completely different things' [Id9]

According to the respondents, the significance of a personal brand in the creative industries is considerable and focuses on:

- the uniqueness of the solutions that a particular individual can offer,
- trust in their competencies and craft,
- facilitating the decision to collaborate - a strong brand shortens this process, which respondents found especially important given the overwhelming information

overload,

- enhancing the credibility of the solution itself – thanks to the designer, an impersonal proposal becomes understandable to the recipient, who may lack the competence to properly assess it; through the designer's brand, the service or product becomes something more.

Moreover, being a co-creator of a project or work is, on the one hand, one of the primary aspirations of a creative professional, while on the other hand, public recognition of authorship serves as an expression of belonging to the creative community.

According to the respondents, a personal brand was not always as important as it is today. Those who established their careers years ago may not need to invest as heavily in PB today, whereas newcomers have considerably less choice in this regard. Respondents noted that the form of employment (freelancing, full-time

employment, running a business) influences the necessity of engaging in this process. Equally interesting, however, are statements emphasizing that a personal brand without substance is not a viable solution. Assuming, however, that delivered value is the core component of a personal brand, it is precisely those whose work speaks for itself arguably possess the strongest personal brands. They do not necessarily need to engage as intensively in the communicative and promotional activities related to their services. Selected excerpts from the respondents' statements illustrating the issues discussed are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Perceived importance of personal branding in the creative industries

Feature/component	Examples in the collected data
The significance of personal brand	'in our industry, it's a total must-have' [Id3] 'the creator is more important than the creation at this moment' [Id2]
Sign of belonging to a community of creators	'In the end, when you collaborate with many people, signing off on a project or specifying who was responsible for what is also extremely important. So that everyone feels like an important part of each project, because, you know, as designers we are obsessed with these things, and overlooking someone in the process is painful for those people later' [Id1]
The value delivered is more important than the "packaging"	'I would say that a portfolio, skills, and completed projects are still more important than a personal brand and the various activities associated with it. [...] I know many of us, many creative designers and creators, who don't really have a personal brand, but through many years of simply excellent projects and work for clients, well, they don't need to' [Id9].

4.2. Portfolio and Public Recognition of Authorship

In the creative industries, a portfolio is the primary tool for showcasing an individual's body of work. Its presentation is essential when applying for a job, seeking membership in professional associations, or participating in certain competitions. *'Well, every designer builds their own portfolio. Every designer, when changing jobs, takes something from the company they previously worked for. I don't stress about them taking the projects they worked on, because, in my opinion, that's like tilting at windmills'* [Id5]. It is also a tool for building a personal brand. Portfolios take various forms: closed (a prepared file with projects and descriptions) or open (a personal website or a profile on a relevant

portal). Other tools used by creative industry employees to develop their personal brand, such as maintaining a LinkedIn or other social media profile, speaking at conferences, or participating in competitions, typically reference or incorporate elements of the portfolio in some way.

The emerging picture from the collected material is a complex and uncertain landscape that poses challenges for employers. Among the described experiences, there were real cases of misuse, for example, an employee's contribution being misrepresented in a project presented in their portfolio, or even the unjustified appropriation of an entire team's work. Some employers have genuine concerns and, as a precaution, attempt to monitor, or at least try to keep track of, what employees include in their personal portfolios

and in what context. Other employers seem not to know at all about whether their employees are building portfolios. *'I don't know, no, I don't have any knowledge that they are physically creating a portfolio, in the sense of developing their own project-based portfolio'* [Id2].

For most organizations, the rules in this area are either unspoken or established individually as needed. Where the issue of portfolios has been regulated in some way, two basic rules prevail:

- priority for public presentation belongs to the organization,
- the employee must clearly and truthfully describe their role in a given project.

There are also organizations where, simultaneously maintaining portfolios, under the organization's brand as well as under the personal brands of the creators, is considered natural. *'We have a collective brand [...] and it communicates the projects that each of us [...] works on. [...] Each of us also communicates our personal brand separately, where we present our individual portfolios. So, we have both our personal portfolios and a collective one'* [Id7].

Public presentation is only possible when the client agreement permits it, and confidentiality agreements are commonplace in the creative industries. When such a presentation is allowed, organizations adopt different policies. Some projects are presented with the full names of all creators, while others only display the organization's brand. A situational approach is also common, with presentation channels chosen according to available opportunities. Some presentations appear on the organization's own website, others on social media platforms, and yet others in brief media statements.

4.3. My Team – Personal Brands

The managers of creative industry organizations who participated in the study did not observe much activity among their

employees in building their personal brands. They do, however, recognize the challenge for employees of balancing personal brand development with compliance with employer expectations.

Their accounts also indicate that employees undertake side projects, some of which partially overlap with the services they provide for their employer; some build their own websites, while others pursue intensive professional development. When evaluating whether employees engage in building their personal brand, employers clearly focus on the tangible outcomes of these activities rather than the process itself. In some statements, employers even expressed appreciation for employees' additional activities that did not conflict with their work, and in some cases supported them by sharing information about these activities through the organization's own channels.

The experiences and observations of managers in creative industry organizations reveal the complexity of the situation faced by their employees. Among the undesired aspects of employees building their personal brand, employers mainly mentioned:

- the risk of losing an employee to a competitor or to self-employment, *'You know how it ends - if I promote someone, they'll be snatched away'* [Id8],
- a potential decline in engagement with work performed for the employer.

Whether an employee has the opportunity to communicate their work, build a portfolio, or promote their personal competencies in various areas often depends on the attitude and working conditions set by the employer. Employees may also have reservations about supporting the employer's brand with their own image. A similar situation can arise even when the organization's brand is not directly tied to the owner's personal brand. The issue is not so much about money, but rather about the perceived value of the benefits of endorsing the employer's brand with one's

personal image, and perhaps even strategic management of one's personal brand. Managers are aware of the potential benefits that an employee's personal brand can bring to the organization. In their statements, they mentioned reputational benefits, attracting clients, and increasing the organization's visibility. Most managers allow for the possibility, and some already support their teams' personal brand potential in various ways. This occurs, among other things, through:

- highlighting individual employees' names and roles in communications,
- promoting their side projects,
- referring clients to them when the organization cannot or does not wish to take on a particular assignment,
- providing financial incentives for brand-related engagement on behalf of the organization,
- granting creative autonomy, which supports the development of an expert position in a given specialization,

- delegating responsibility for specific stages of the client collaboration process,
- not only taking project-related decisions into account but also respecting them as significantly contributing to the organization's value.

However, opposing views regarding supporting employees' personal brands are also clearly articulated. Here, both the employer's negative experiences with employees and the transposition of instrumentalization dynamics onto the employer–employee relationship are evident. The observations of the participants extend beyond what they consider local organizations. Their accounts suggest that the stronger the organization's brand or the manager's personal brand, the harder it is for employees to develop their own personal brand. Selected excerpts from the respondents' statements addressing these issues are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Determinants of personal brand building by employees

Feature/component	Examples in the collected data
Barriers to personal brand development (employee-side)	'They work in the company, the company provides the projects, and that's how they make a living. They may not see the need to create or build their own image, I don't know, as an expert in a given field. [...] They can list things on their CV and demonstrate their skills through projects, and perhaps they don't feel the need to showcase this' [Id2] 'They aren't even interested in publishing their own image. We've encountered this several times, despite the employment contract allowing us to use their image, for example, on an 'About Us' page, people forbid it and tell us not to do it, [...] they care about their own image. You know, we're also in an industry that's a bit corrupt. Right? They may fear that it could leak, that we'd be promoting ourselves using their face. [...] And here it's clearly about money [...] They believe their personal brand is worth much more than the salary they receive, even though these aren't small salaries' [Id3] 'If I were an employee, I would think the same way. [...] I wouldn't agree to the use of my personal brand without very significant benefits, because, you know, you only have one personal brand, and nothing disappears on the Internet' [Id3] 'Building a team around the personal brand [of the owner] is, in my opinion, unfeasible, because people want to learn from you, but they don't want to build your name' [Id4]

Barriers to personal brand development (organizational / managerial side)	‘I think it’s also very difficult to build a personal brand when you’re employed full-time, to find a way to communicate with your employer at all, so that there isn’t any friction’ [Id1] ‘The default setup of owners of companies based on their personal brand [the owner’s] is to block any development of anyone’s [employee’s] personal brand’ [Id4] ‘This is the worst thing you can do. The difference is when I [poach] another employee from a good company, with a large portfolio they can showcase. Then I can boast, because I’m selling their service through us. [...] But if I train someone, so to speak, and then let them go to the market, then I’m basically a free training company [...] I’ve been treated like this several times already’ [Id8] ‘And when we talk about global or world-class brands, there’s simply nothing like that. You’re just an executor. You deliver everything and be glad you have the opportunity. [...] You absolutely cannot say anything. [...] The experience you gain here is so valuable that you should be glad to be here. If you don’t have a desire to build a personal brand, you can work with me; but if you do, then I guess we won’t get along’ [Id4]
Potential risks associated with employees' personal brand development	‘This personal brand means that they either work two full-time jobs in companies, or they stay in one company to keep their employment contract and insurance, while freelancing on the side and finding clients. At some point, they reach a breaking point, either they don’t even know what to call themselves because they sleep only five hours, or they quit and become full-time freelancers’ [Id3]
Benefits of a strong employee personal brand for the employer	‘Certainly, for the company itself, a positive aspect in terms of reputation is that our employees, our designers, are being recognized somewhere, so it also somewhat benefits our [organization’s] brand’ [Id10]

4.4. Organizational Value as a Function of Employee Contributions and Managerial Attitude

The previously mentioned practices, such as sharing or even delegating responsibility for project decisions, involving employees at various stages of client interaction, and supporting their expert position in a given specialization, can contribute to and actively support the creation of both organizational value and the employee’s personal brand. It is not solely a matter of image. The way a manager structures the company’s offerings and manages the service portfolio can be closely tied to specific employees. Managers are also aware that employees’ strong personal brands can attract clients, enhance the organization’s brand, and translate into tangible financial gains. However, what seems most crucial in the context of the creative industries is precisely the creative potential that an employee brings to the

organization.

The process of executing a project varies somewhat across different organizations. In some organizations, workshops with the client are organized, involving either the entire team or only the person responsible for the project. In other cases, the initial arrangements are made by the manager with the client and then passed on to the team. Client contact also differs: in some organizations, it is limited to a single person, while in others it depends on the project stage and the role each individual plays at that stage. Each model results from multiple factors, some related to the manager’s approach and others, undoubtedly, reflecting the professional maturity of the employee. The level of creative freedom, the shared vision, or verifying adherence to agreed-upon objectives can take place in many different ways.

Awareness of these risks does not prevent all managers from supporting such initiatives. Some accounts demonstrate a deep understanding of the team's needs and the aspirations of individuals working in creative professions. The interpretive framework imposed by the manager on the employer–employee relationship is crucial for shaping the organizational climate and the opportunities available to the employee

within a given workplace. Table 5 presents selected excerpts from the respondents' statements illustrating the themes discussed.

The illustration of factors essential for the development of employees' personal brands in the creative industries, based on the accounts of managers of creative organizations, is presented in Figure 1.

Table 5. Sources of organizational value related to employee personal branding and managerial attitude

Feature/component	Examples in the collected data
The organization's brand as a cumulation of employees' personal brands	'It's a kind of accumulation of personal brands [...] and this is an added value that we, in a way, also sell' [Id6]
Building the service offering based on employees' personal brand specializations	'If it suddenly turned out that [employee X] wasn't there, I think I would probably just stop doing that [referring to a certain part of the business]' [Id1]
Employees' creative potential as core value for clients	'I absolutely hate collaborating with people who don't contribute. I think it's fundamental in this industry that the people we work with, well, as the very name of this field suggests, must be creative and must bring their own value to the table' [Id5] 'In our organization, I would say it's in our DNA that we like to discuss and offer suggestions. Generally, we try to instill in our employees and collaborators the idea that if there's a problem, you don't just come and say there's a problem, you come and signal that there's a problem and how you would solve it in this or that way. And that's kind of the target model we aim for' [Id6]
Creative freedom combined with teamwork	'We operate somewhat as a team, but each designer or other contributor also has quite a bit of freedom in terms of how they interpret the assumptions we established at the beginning' [Id5] 'I think [the employees] have enough client contact and a sense of being able to make their own decisions. However, before sending anything to the client, there is a filter in the form of the most experienced person in the team, and in our case, that's me. [...] If there is a good idea that comes from an employee, especially one who has had the most contact with the client and is an expert, it needs to be respected' [Id9] 'I really like it when team members have a lot of freedom within their scope and simply come and say – I did this, right? Let's take a look and discuss it. And then we bounce ideas off each other, and maybe something even better comes out of it, right? [...] I don't like being that kind of art director who comes in and says, move this here, move that there, and basically, I've already done the project for you - you just have to shuffle the blocks around. Because what's the point of that, right?' [Id12]

Managerial attitude	‘Despite these concerns, if such a person were on our team, I would definitely support it. Regardless of whether they eventually leave [the organization] or not, because I believe it’s simply fair. So humanly, in a friendly way. [...] I also give my all to make sure these people want to stay with us as long as possible. And usually, they do stay with us for a long time. But I’m also aware that people need change, regardless of working conditions or financial situation’ [Id5] ‘In the case of [X], [...] I know that he also needs a certain level of independence in his design work, meaning he also takes on some projects outside of [organization Y]. And, for example, there are some employers who don’t agree to that at all [...]. I can see that he has that need, and that for his sense of independence and of being a self-reliant designer, it’s really important to him’ [Id1] ‘And that’s what it’s all about - just mutually strengthening and developing each other, rather than digging holes for one another’” [Id7] ‘I also have this feeling that, you know, if they’ve learned something from me, because they actually joined [organization Z] right after finishing their studies, at the very beginning of their careers, then that’s just great. It’s really, really nice. And now I can just watch and be happy that they’re doing cooler and cooler things’ [Id12]
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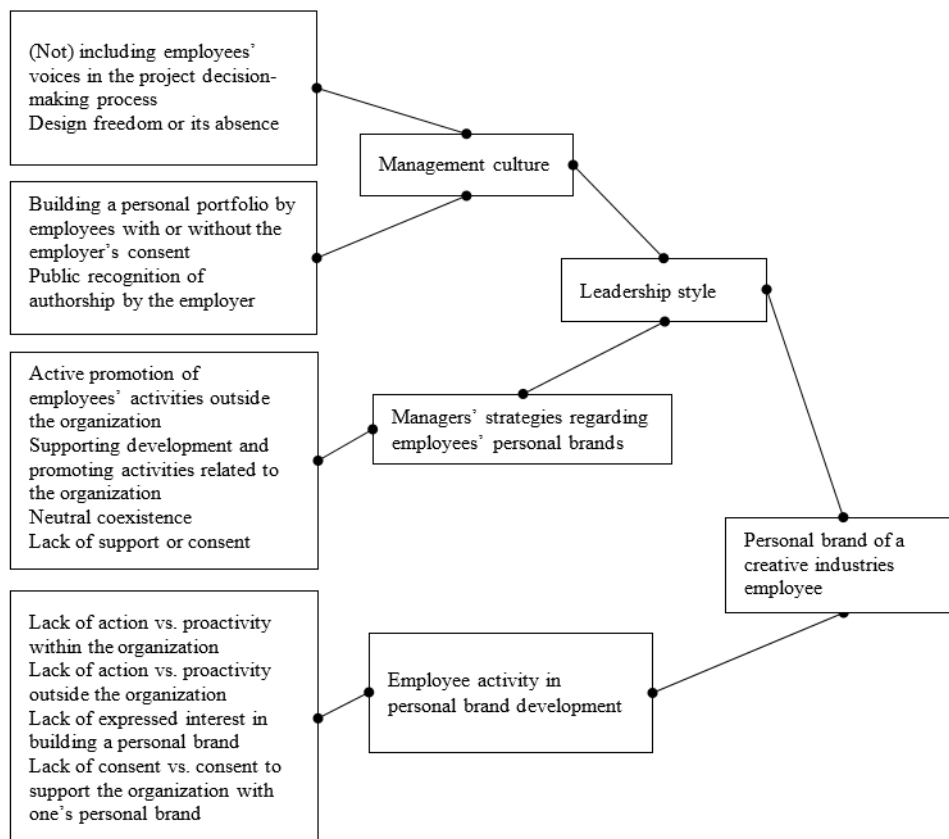


Figure 1. Conceptualization of the factors influencing the development of an employee's personal brand in creative industry organizations based on employer perspectives

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

Defining personal brand is not an easy task. Both in the literature (Evans 2017; Gander 2014; Gorbato et al., 2019; Hearn, 2008; Omojola, 2008; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012), and in the statements of the respondents, there are notable discrepancies in how this concept is understood and in the perceived importance of its individual elements. What consistently emerged across most narratives, however, is the emphasis on authority based on expertise, knowledge, or experience, the associated trust and credibility, and active self-promotional activities, predominantly on social media. Therefore, the possibilities for building the personal brand of employees in the creative industries should be analyzed mainly within these two dimensions. It becomes crucial to consider both the extent to which an employee can develop their skills, knowledge, and experience, and the degree to which they can promote the outcomes of their work.

Employee development can be pursued in many different ways, but building expertise requires the cultivation of both interactive and contributory expert knowledge, as well as access to tacit expert knowledge. This is not possible without active participation in project processes and gradually assuming increasing responsibility for the decisions made (Collins, 2018). Whether an employee is merely executing instructions or acting as a creative contributor largely depends on the level of inclusiveness in the project and decision-making processes within the employing organization. Inclusion in decision-making processes is the most critical factor of organizational climate, which, combined with the leader's demonstrated inclusive behaviors and attitudes, leads to the development of Organization-Based Self-Esteem (OBSE) (Kuknor et al., 2025). Employees' creative and innovative behaviors are linked both to perceived organizational support (POS) and to leaders'

inclusive behaviors (Qi et al., 2019). Moreover, the opportunity to learn from mistakes, which is natural and necessary in a designer's development, is possible in organizations where an inclusive leader ensures psychological safety. In such organizations, employees experience a stronger sense of purpose in their work (Shafaei & Nejati, 2024). Therefore, if a designer is merely an executor of a project rather than a co-creator making decisions, they lack the space both to perform their core tasks (creating innovative solutions) and to develop their expertise, which strengthens the organization's brand value while simultaneously building their personal brand. The results of the present study confirm the importance of the manager's role in creating an organizational climate that either integrates inclusiveness as a core organizational principle or, conversely, imposes rigid frameworks that, while facilitating operational efficiency, prevent employees from fully realizing their potential. The second pillar of building a personal brand for employees in the creative industries, namely, activities promoting the results of one's own work, is, for employees working within organizations, dependent on two main factors. On one hand, it is influenced by the contracts the organization has with clients (e.g., confidentiality clauses); on the other, by the employer's attitude toward sharing work produced within the organization. The transfer of economic rights under copyright law does not deprive the creator of their moral right to authorship, but the manner in which they communicate this information outside the organization can be restricted by the employer. The results of the present study suggest that some managers consciously involve employees in communicating the organization's brand value to broaden audience reach, attract clients, and attract talent. Others limit this by deliberately avoiding employee visibility, while yet others struggle to encourage employees to lend their names to the organization's brand. The present study did not identify the reasons

underlying this phenomenon. In the remaining cases, the employer's beliefs and prior experiences with employees played the most significant role.

One of the most commonly applied models of personal branding is the expert model, which relies heavily on knowledge sharing and demonstrating skills within a specific area of expertise (Walczak-Skalecka, 2022). Such activities, particularly in a knowledge-based economy, stimulate innovation and enhance the value of the brand associated with the employee (Kucharska, 2022). Therefore, the employer should encourage, or at least not create barriers to this process. Although the perspectives of managers in creative industries appear to be diverse, a paradox becomes apparent: the employee's willingness to engage in personal branding does not always align with the employer's willingness, and vice versa. The situation is thus more complex than previous studies have suggested.

5.2. Practical implications

The presented results primarily highlight the need to establish transparent rules regarding the coexistence of employees' personal brands and organizational brands. Given the potential benefits arising from collaboration at this level, managers should involve employees in discussions about the final form of this coexistence, taking into account the specific nature and operations of the organization in question. The areas that should be considered when creating a transparent system of collaboration may include rules regarding:

- the creation of individual portfolios, both in terms of format and content,
- documenting or sharing the work process on social media prior to its completion,
- supporting the employer's brand,
- providing support from the employer in building the employee's personal brand and protecting the interests of both parties involved.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

A limitation of the present study is the small sample size. Creative industries are highly diverse, and the specificity of individual specializations may influence managers' attitudes toward employees' personal brand development. Variations in attitudes were already visible in this study; however, it remains to be examined whether these differences stem from individual experiences and preferences of the respondents or from other factors. Promising avenues for future research include exploring employees' perspectives across different specializations and levels of work experience within the creative industries. The interviews also indicated that the situation may vary significantly depending on the region of Poland, which could serve as an interesting starting point for further analysis. Verifying the findings on a larger sample would also be important to strengthen their reliability. Another intriguing and somewhat surprising finding in this study is the reluctance of younger employees in particular to develop their personal brand in alignment with their employer's brand. This raises questions about whether this is related to the specific employer and the employee's circumstances, or whether it reflects a broader trend common among the younger generation in the creative industries.

6. Conclusion

The attitude of the manager is one of the key factors influencing an employee's ability to develop a personal brand within a creative industries organization. However, an open and inclusive approach by the leader does not always align with the employee's willingness to lend their personal brand to support the organization's brand development. The nature of the creative industries makes it essential to establish transparent rules regarding the coexistence of the organization's brand and the employee's personal brand. Synergistic effects are

possible, but only where there is space for an inclusive discussion about the principles of collaboration. The creative sector, in which human capital and the creative potential of employees form the core of organizational value, presents managers with particular challenges. Managing in this context goes beyond classical managerial functions and requires the ability to build an environment in which the individual expression and professional identity of employees can coexist with the strategic goals of the organization. This calls for the development of a new leadership model, one that is sensitive to the nature of creative work and

aware of the long-term benefits of investing in the personal brands of employees.

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