

## On The Boundary of the Sacred and the Profane: The Author Name

Véronique Collange<sup>1</sup>  
Mathilde Pulh<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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The aim of this research is to determine whether or not the author name is of the same nature as a brand name in readers' eyes, in order to understand whether there is a limit, a bound to the scope of the branding concept. The case of the literary fiction writer is especially interesting since literature is at the frontier of commerce and the arts, and accordingly at the frontier of the profane and the sacred, given the socialization process from which the arts have benefited since the sixteenth century. To this end, two qualitative studies were conducted among respectively 31 and 18 readers in France. The findings of the studies show that, although the author name (the signature) plays the role of a brand name, the author (the writer) is not a brand for consumers, who develop diverse strategies to cope with the commercial aspects of the book industry. The results help to formulate recommendations for authors and publishers, but also for brand managers.

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**Keywords:** brand, writer, author name, publishing industry, brand equity.

### 1. Introduction

Are author names like Miguel de Cervantes, Charles Dickens, Paulo Coelho, J.K. Rowling, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, J.R.R. Tolkien, Agatha Christie, Cao Xueqin or Lewis Carroll– to name just a few of the world's bestselling authors– brand names? The recent phenomenon of “best-sellerization”, i.e. the concentration of sales on ever fewer authors leads writers, publishers, and critics to question themselves (Hecht, 2011). It also places marketing at the heart of an interesting conceptual debate. On the one hand, writers are perceived as artists, and are “set apart” from other producers (Michel & Borraz, 2015). Considering them as a brand constitutes then a “blasphemy” (Bourgeon-Renault & Gombault, 2009). On the other hand, like any other brand, author's name enjoys a certain level of awareness and a certain image (Busson & Evrard, 2013). Levin, Levin, and Heath (1997) even show that authors' names have an added value, a brand equity to consumers' eyes.

This debate opposing “art” to “business” is especially eager for products like books, coming from the cultural and creative's industries, which belong to the field of the arts, but not of the fine arts, and are therefore at the frontier of commerce and the arts (Busson & Evrard, 2013). It is all the more eager than publishing is an important industry, and still the first cultural industry in many countries. For example, with €2.65 billion of turnover in 2014, the book is still the best-selling cultural good in France, and literature the best-selling editorial category (SNE, 2015). In addition, the sector is very dynamic in terms of production. According to the IPA (International Publishers Association), in 2015, China published 470 000 new titles, followed by the US (339 000), UK (173 000) and France (107 000). However, if the debate becomes rapidly highly emotional, it is mainly because publishing is not only an economical issue, but has also important political, legal, sociological, ideological, and ultimately cultural consequences, with the issue of cultural diversity (Peltier, 2011).

The objective of the current research is to understand whether the author name is a brand of the same kind as others to consumers' eye, and especially brands of consumer goods since they are the archetype of brands. The first modern brands were indeed created in this sector by whiskey distillers (Farquhar, 1990). Author will be defined here as a literary fiction writer, i.e. a novelist. The answer to this question is important from a conceptual but also practical point of view.

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<sup>1</sup>IAE Dijon, EA 7317 CREGO, University of Burgundy, 2, Boulevard Gabriel, BP 26611, 21066 Dijon Cedex, France. Tél.: (00.33) 3.80.39.54.32, Corresponding author e-mail address: [veronique.collange@u-bourgogne.fr](mailto:veronique.collange@u-bourgogne.fr)

If the author name is a brand of the same nature as others for consumers, like it was demonstrated for services for instance (de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Reiley, 1999), it means that the management principles established in the field of consumer goods are also applicable in the cultural field, with of course the necessary adaptations to the characteristics of the sector. It also means that there are no boundaries to the “scope of brand” (de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998), that “anything is a brand today” (Kapferer, 2013) in a triumphant neo-liberal perspective. It also questions the copyright, already strongly challenged by the internet, with the practices of peer-to-peer sharing, the claim that the copyright system is at its end, the increase in self-production (e.g., fanfictions), and the development of open and collaborative writing (Busson & Evrard, 2013). If the answer is negative, it will illustrate that the claim of “anything is a brand today” is either just another “manifestation of marketing myopia and of its tendency to reduce the world to its economic dimension” (O’Reilly, 2006), or a new demonstration of the never-ending ability of capitalism to integrate even the elements which contest it (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991).

To the best of our knowledge, this question has not yet been addressed. While research has provided insights regarding how consumers choose books (D’Astous, Colbert, & Mbarek, 2006; Kamphuis, 1991; Leemans & Stockmans, 1991; 1992), on how artists use brands in their work (Kerrigan et al., 2011; Michel & Borraz, 2015; Schroeder, 2005) or market their name (Brown, 2011; 2015; Muniz, Norris & Fine, 2014; Schroeder, 2006; 2010), the marketing literature on how consumers use or consider the artist’s name is relatively limited (Dion & Arnould, 2015; Moulard et al., 2014; 2015). Celebrities (athletes, TV presenters, singers, actors, etc.) have indeed been the subject of many studies (Carson & Donovan, 2013; Randrianosolo & Sala, 2016; Thomson, 2006; Loroz & Braig, 2015; Huang, Lin, & Phau, 2015), but the situation is not similar. When celebrities or artists use the awareness and image they have built up in a field (sport, music, etc.) to endorse a product, there is no doubt that they are brands. For example, David Beckham has deposited his name as a trademark for clothes, Tom Clancy has done the same for video games, and Picasso for cars. But when artists are creating artworks, when they are working in their own field, can they really be regarded as “brands”? Is it there a metonym (the real thing) or an analogy (an image)?

To answer this question, after reviewing simultaneous and opposing movements of sacralization of brands and desacralization of artists at work in contemporary society, the methodology and main findings of two complementary qualitative studies will be presented. These studies were conducted respectively among 31 and 18 readers in order to understand the true nature of the author name. The first study adopted an indirect approach, the second a direct one. In the first study, consumers were invited to speak about their buying and reading experiences, and the similarities and differences between an author name and a brand name were reduced by their searchers. In the second study, readers were asked directly if the author name is a brand name, and why. The findings have several notable implications; thus, the paper closes with a discussion, and evokes some limitations and areas for further research.

## **2. Background: the moving boundary between the sacred and the profane**

The question of whether the author name is a brand “like others” is all the more pertinent today because it is at the crossroads of two contradictory phenomena: the sacralization of the brand (for around twenty years) and the desacralization of the artist (for around a century). Sacralization is a social, collective construction, a process of separation of the object or the person that is perceived as conveying a transcendent, supernatural, superhuman force with the profane, i.e. the banal, the familiar, the everyday, that separation being protected by law (Wunenburger, 2009). Traditionally, commerce and brands are associated with the profane while arts and authors are associated with the sacred (Edelman, 2004; Michel & Borraz, 2015). However, as explained by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989), nothing is sacred by itself, and sacredness is in large part an investment process.

### **2.1. The sacralization of brands**

As explained by Farquhar (1990, p. RC1), branding is centuries old. “Brick makers in ancient Egypt placed symbols on their bricks to identify their products. Trade guilds in medieval Europe required ‘trademarks’ on their products to assure the consumer of consistent quality (...). Brand names, however, first appeared in the early sixteenth century. Whiskey distillers shipped their products in wooden barrels with the name of the producer burned or ‘branded’ onto the top of each barrel”. The objective was to prevent substitution with cheaper products by tavern owners. Then with the increased competition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the accent was placed on differentiating the product from its competitors and on strengthening brand awareness and image in order to increase the product’s perceived value (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 1993). These basic purposes of branding, i.e. identifying, authenticating, and differentiating, remain important today,

as illustrated by the most common definition of a brand: “a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller and to differentiate it from those of competitors” (American Marketing Association). As explained by Kapferer (2008), because the quality of most products cannot be assessed visually, each purchase represents a risk, and the main reason for being of the brand is to be a risk reducer by increasing consumer’s trust. The impressive success of the brand in the service industry, with the replacement of many independent shops by retail chains is largely explained by the heterogeneity of quality that characterizes the sector and the need to reassure customers (Berry, 2000; de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1999). The brand appears then to be a “trust contract” that creates value. In parallel, the social dimension of the brand, its role in helping consumers to express their self (either their “true” or “idealized” self), and ultimately to improve their self-esteem, has also been established, in particular in the luxury industry (Lipovetsky & Roux, 2003). In addition, Bourdieu (1984) has shown that the choice of a cultural product is strongly influenced by economic capital (income), cultural capital (education) and social capital (relational network) of the individual. Here, the brand appears to be a “self-confidence contract” that acts as a signal of belonging to a certain social class.

But the brand concept has evolved over the last 20 years. In a context of intensive and global competition in which each innovation is immediately imitated, the purpose and strategies of branding have changed by focusing more on the affective and even “sacred” dimensions of brands. On the one hand, following the seminal article by Fournier (1998), many researchers have established that consumers tend to anthropomorphize the brand, to consider it as a “partner”. They infer traits and personal characteristics about it (Aaker, 1997), they interact with it in ways which are similar to interpersonal and social relationships with feelings of commitment (Sung & Choi, 2010), connectedness (Escalas, 2004), attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), or even love (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Huang and Mitchell (2014) show that imagination plays an important role in building such a brand personification, especially in the case of utilitarian products, with a low symbolic dimension. On the other hand, following Belk et al. (1989), and the explicit recognition of the sacred status of many consumption objects, many researchers have shown that brands play a significant role in re-enchanting the world, after capitalism has done its best to dis-enchant it (Hartmann & Östberg, 2013; Kornberger, 2010). Brands fulfill a quasi-religious role by providing consumers with meaning – tools to interpret the world, values – tools to act in the world, and a community – tools to share goals and experiments, three of the four functions of a religion according to Bourdieu (1987). Indeed, the appearance of consumer-to-consumer groups can be interpreted as the institutionalization of brands, the dimension which they lacked to achieve sacralization (Dufour, 2011). This sacralization also takes the form of increased importance of brand aesthetics (Mazzalovo, 2012). Kornberger (2010) defines the brand as “a combination of magic and logic”, a blend of functionality and meaning, which helps consumers “to perform their identities”. Bourdieu and Delsault (1975), in a study of fashion, speak of the “power of transubstantiation of the brand”, which magically impregnates the product by associating it with a powerful imaginary and symbolic dimension. In this approach, the relationship of the brand and the product is reversed. The brand is not seen as a symbolic value added to the product; rather, the product is seen as the material extension of the brand, the body of this soul that is the brand (Kornberger, 2010). In the same way, the brand is not considered as a means of reassuring consumers, but as a tool to help those taking risks to experience surprise, the unexpected (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). Here, the brand can be defined as a “magician”, who generates feelings of wonder, delight, jubilation, amazement, or as an “icon” (Holt, 2003), a “relic” (Dufour, 2011), who inspires respect, admiration, gratitude, veneration (Wunenburger, 2009). This evolution of brands is summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. The four conceptions of brand (inspired by Kornberger, 2010)**

	<b>Individual orientation</b>	<b>Social orientation</b>
<b>Transactional orientation</b>	The brand as a trust contract (cognitive perspective)	The brand as a signal (social perspective)
<b>Relational orientation</b>	The brand as a friend (affective perspective)	The brand as a magician (spiritual perspective)

## 2.2. The desacralization of authors

In parallel to the sacralization of brands, another process is at work in contemporary society –the desacralization of artists and authors.

As explained by Edelman (2004), the process of sacralization of authors has taken centuries since the Renaissance and culminated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the conjunction of legal recognition (copyright), institutional recognition (multiplication of literary prizes), and social recognition (the stereotype of the starving genius). According to the romantic stereotype, the writer is perceived as a being totally devoted to the creation process, living not in the here and now of the everyday life, but in the enlarged space and temporality of literary history, a creator totally detached from worldly values, and especially material profits (Heinich, 2000). Three recent studies show that the idealized image of the writer – and more generally the artist – has not disappeared yet. In her study of a book fair in 2010, Clerc finds that 80% of the interviewees chosen at random idealize the writer. In their work on the representation of the “chef de haute cuisine”, Dion and Arnould (2015) show that the stereotypical image of the chef (an alchemist, an artist generating admiration and even fascination) is deeply embodied in the imagination of consumers. And Moulard et al. (2014) show that the perceived authenticity of artists, their artistic integrity, remains at the heart of what makes their value. In an additional study, Moulard et al. (2015) identify the six antecedents of authenticity: talent (special skills), discretion (limited exposure), originality (independent, creative way of thinking), consistency (stability over time), candidness (straightforward personality) and morality (strong values). But this sacred conception of art has been shaken by contemporary artists and their transgression of codes. Duchamp with his “Fountain” urinal caused a scandal in 1917. If a common object can become a piece of art just by the adjunction of a signature, what does art stand for? (Heinich, 2008) Other artists like Picasso and Andy Warhol also contributed to the commodification of arts. Picasso managed his career and his name as a brand (Muniz, Norris, & Fine, 2014). Andy Warhol included celebrities and brands in his artworks, blurring the lines between consumer culture and art (Kerrigan et al., 2011; Schroeder, 2005). Regarding writers specifically, Brown (2015) shows that T.S. Eliot was also an adroit “authorpreneur” who knew how to exploit his name and was not reluctant to do so. The confusion is also increased by the fact that some authors claim to be artisans and not artists (e.g., Guillaume Musso, the best-selling author in France), while others use their name as a franchise (e.g., Tom Clancy, who signs video games). The desacralization of authors also comes from the transformations of the publishing industry. This industry has not escaped the global trends observed in the world for around 20 years now, with increased competition, consolidation of publishers, concentration of distribution channels, and the striking development of the celebration of celebrity (Brown, 2006). And the marketing techniques used by publishers (promotions, sampling, end-of-aisles, etc.) are the same as for consumer goods. As explained by Brown (2006), this commodification of books is not a new phenomenon as the book industry has always been customer-oriented and submitted to marketing imperatives. No “pre-lapsarian era of aboriginal authenticity” ever existed (p. 43), and the concept of authenticity itself was not built without commercial intents (Dettmar & Watt, 1996; Jensen, 1994). But the phenomenon is probably more perceptible by consumers today with the increased sales of bookstore chains and supermarkets. Author names stand then at the crossroad of these two tendencies. On the one hand, brands aspire to the condition of authors (Brown, 2006): personification, sacralization, creation of immersive consumer experiences, i.e. “artification” (Kapferer, 2014). On the other hand, authors are promoted and sold like consumer goods, and celebrated like the other celebrities of the entertainment industry. Brands imitate artists, who imitate brands in a circular and complex relationship. The lines between commerce and art, sacred and profane, are blurred. But one voice is missing from this debate, that of consumers.

### 3. The first study: the indirect approach

The objective of the first study is to understand whether the author name plays the role of a brand when consumers buy and read literature. And, if the answer is positive, to identify the specificities of this author brand. For this, a qualitative, inductive study with 31 readers of novels was conducted in France, and what readers said was compared with the theories about the brand. Adopting a qualitative approach meant that the reasons behind consumers’ attitudes and choices could be thoroughly investigated. And the case of France is particularly interesting because it is the country where the sacralization of authors has been carried the furthest, with the addition of non-transferable and inalienable moral rights to Anglo-Saxon copyright (Edelman, 2004).

#### 3.1. Methodology

The first study consisted of conducting semi-structured individual interviews with readers of various ages, socio-demographic characteristics, and reading frequencies, in order to obtain richness of content, depth, diversity, and quality (Evrard, Pras, & Roux, 2000). This convenience sample of 31 respondents is not representative of readership in the statistical sense of the term, but its main characteristics are in line with the typical profile of the French reader (Ipsos, 2017): female (65%), middle-aged (39% of 35–64 years),

rather wealthy (58% middle and higher managerial). It is divided equally into regular readers (more than 20 books a year) and occasional readers. A telephone recruitment procedure asked potential respondents to “speak about the novels and authors they like” and relied on personal networks and snowball sampling techniques. The interviews took place at the respondents’ home and began with a question about the last purchase made: “What was the last novel you bought for yourself? Did you like it? Why?” This put them at ease and established trust. Then, the guided interview began, with a progressive approach to the topic. It included five open-ended questions (1) Can you tell me about your reading habits (genre, frequency, etc.)? (2) What are your motivations and your barriers for reading? (3) How do you proceed when you buy a book (criteria of choice)? (4) Who are the authors you like? Why do you like them (criteria of evaluation)? (5) Are you loyal to the authors you like? Except for probing questions used by the interviewers to clarify and elicit more details from the respondents, no other questions followed. This minimal prompt enabled each interviewee to talk about the topic any way they chose. The interviews were carried out until semantic saturation was obtained (Huberman & Miles, 1991). They lasted between 20 minutes and one hour and were fully recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Next, a thematic content analysis was carried out manually by two independent coders. Template analysis was employed to detect key themes and sub-themes emerging from the interviews (Huberman & Miles, 1991). Comparison between the two analyses revealed that the results were very homogeneous, and the few divergences were resolved by discussion. Then, the emergent themes were compared with a priori themes from theories of brand in order to analyze and interpret the results.

### 3.2. Analysis and interpretation

#### 3.2.1. The author name as a trust contract

The verbatim of the respondents about their criteria of choice while buying a novel show that the author name fulfills the two basic purposes of branding, i.e. identification and risk reduction (Kapferer, 2008). First, the major role played by the author name in comparison to other criteria like book title, cover, price, place, literary prize, or critics is confirmed. The author name is the criterion most frequently quoted (80% of respondents), a result that matches the findings of the 2017 IPSOS survey. Second, the author name seems all the more important to readers because they feel overwhelmed by the superabundant offer, the “tsunami of new books” that characterizes the publishing industry (Brown, 2006). Aline expresses her distress as follows: “When I go to the Fnac, I feel ill! There are too many books! So I take one of the authors I know.” Guilhen details: “Personally, I need to have heard about the author before buying, in one way or another. Because there are so many choices! They keep on turning them out! With every literary season, there are even more titles than the year before, it’s totally crazy!” So, for them, the author name is a “tag”, a signal that allows them to identify and categorize the book they have in front of them. The author name seems also all the more important as reading books is a time consuming activity (Bourgeon-Renault and Gombault, 2009). As explained by Yvette and Pierre: “You never really know what you have in a book”; “You cannot know if you will like a book until you’ve finished it”. In fact, a novel combines the two facets of a risky choice (Volle, 1995): a high probability of making a mistake – given the superabundant offer, and relatively substantial consequences in the event of a poor choice – given the time invested. In this context, respondents point out that the author name limits the risks in terms of book content. For them, the author is the guarantee of a style, a way of writing, even if the story is different each time. Isabelle explains: “I know it will be fine. For example, Jean-Christophe Ruffin, he writes on very different stuff. But whatever he writes, you know that the style is good, that the characters will be detailed, that there will be inspiration.” The author name appears to increase consumers’ trust in the purchase.

#### 3.2.2. The author name as a leverage effect

The analysis of the discourse of the respondents about their loyalty to the authors they like shows that a strong author name has a substantial leverage effect on marketing actions, i.e. a consumer-based equity (Keller, 1993).

The consequences of a well-known name are the same as those of a brand with strong equity, i.e. greater consumer loyalty, willingness to pay more or to search for longer, and communication efficiency (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Farquhar, 1990; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 1993). First, favorable beliefs and attitudes for the author name are manifested in repeat buying behavior. They increase not only the probability of purchase of the next title, but also of previous works by the author. Mickaël explains: “I read as a priority the works of the authors I like, either the old ones, those they did before, or the new ones, those they have done since.”

Anyway, I will have a look.” This consumer loyalty is of special importance on a market like that for books characterized by a high level of uncertainty in terms of income (Busson & Evrard, 2013). For some interviewees like Guilhen, this need to collect is almost compulsive: “Authors are universes in which you get caught up. Finally, it is almost a necessity to read, you have no choice: I must buy the next book.” These readers explain that if they have “been hooked” with a first title, it is not unusual for them to read “all” the titles of the author, or at least a large number, in order to deepen their knowledge of the author. This addictive behavior is a distinctive characteristic of the creative and cultural industries (Bourgeon-Renault & Gombault, 2009; Busson & Evrard, 2013). Second, a positive image of the author name results in consumers being increasingly willing to pay a premium price. In France, where book prices have been set since the Loi Lang of 1981 and depend on the collection the book belongs to, this willingness is manifested by the buying of a hard cover (around €20-22) instead of a paperback (€8-10). For Matthieu: “Elisabeth George, Maxime Chattam, [...] I follow them. As soon as they release a new book, I buy it right away. I do not even wait for them to be published in paperback, I buy them in hardcover.” Similarly, a positive image results in increased consumers’ search efforts with, for example, the willingness to seek out the date of the next release. Finally, a favorable attitude towards the author name generates greater communication efficiency through positive word-of-mouth. Some readers like Lisemention their intention to recommend the author whom they appreciate to their entourage (family, friends or colleagues): “I have passed on my passion to my sister. I gave her the Harlan Coben, she devoured it and now, she is even more a fan than I am.” Here again, this manifestation of customer loyalty is of special importance on a market where criticism—either from readers or experts—plays a very important role (Ashworth, Heyndels, & Werck, 2010; Beck, 2007; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Clement, Proppe, & Rott, 2007).

### 3.2.3. The author as a friend

The analysis of the discourse of the respondents about their loyalty to the authors they like also shows that a strong author name generates a strong emotional relationship with the writer (Fournier, 1998). This relationship is manifested in commitment, attachment, and trust (Chaudhury & Holbrook, 2001), three feelings that readers themselves associate with friendship. First, commitment results in increased resilience in the event of dissatisfaction. Interviewees explain that sometimes a title pleases them less than others but that they will show indulgence towards the author and give him/her another chance. Céline says: “Harlan Coben, I give him the benefit of the doubt when I come across one of his books which pleases me less. Patricia MacDonald, I have read some books which disappointed me, but that did not prevent me from going back to her.” However, it should be noticed that consumers’ commitment is not “blind”. Indeed, some readers explain that if they are ready to forgive a deceptive book, they are not ready to forgive a lack of creativity, and that a lack of renewal is usually the main reason for them to give up an author. Second, attachment appears through an attitudinal loyalty that resists the passage of time. As explained by Yvette: “An author is someone we follow over time, that we see evolving. We age together; it’s a bit like the pleasure in finding an old friend”.

But, maybe because the author is considered a friend by the reader, a strong expectation of affinity results – like friendship in real life (Alberoni, 1995). Indeed, when readers talk about their reasons for liking an author, they frequently mention the author’s ability to propose a “vision of the world” shared with the reader. The term covers the feeling of having affinities with the author through the sharing of certain values, aspirations, or preoccupations about life, the world or the human condition. For Francis: “It is obvious that there are authors that I don’t like. I don’t like their writing because I feel it doesn’t fit or doesn’t accord with my own values. On the contrary, Jean-François Parot, for example, he puts humanistic values across.” This “shared vision of the world” reflects the degree to which the reader identifies with the author in terms of cognition (themes, preoccupations) as well as affects (aspirations, values). The importance of the “personal fit” of the consumer with the producer has also been established in the case of a product brand (Johnson, Hermann, & Huber, 2006) or a human brand (Carson & Donovan, 2013; Loroz & Braig, 2015; Thomson, 2006).

However, a closer look at the verbatim of respondents shows that – in the case of writers – consumers rely heavily on the figure of the author to build their image of him/her, and not on the person of the author. The figure of the author is defined in literature as the image that the reader has of the author through his/her work (Couturier, 1995). The person of the author is the human being that readers may encounter at a book festival or see in the media. Indeed, when interviewees are asked: “Why do you like this author?” they almost never answer “because I like him/her” but advance genre, story-telling, characters, style and creativity, i.e. intrinsic attributes of the author’s work. And the readers use these attributes to make inferences and build the figure of the author exactly in the same way a product brand is personified (Huang & Mitchell, 2014).

Yvette explains that: “Through the characteristics of the characters, I can guess what the author is like. For example, Ken Follet, I see him as very young, well-educated and knowledgeable, friendly, bright too.” The prominent role of the figure of the author in comparison to the person of the author can be explained by the prominent role of experience in the purchase and consumption of a book (Kamphuis, 1991).

### 3.2.4. The author as a magician

The verbatim of the respondents about their criteria for liking an author show also that the readers valorize the god-like, magic, artistic dimension of the author. Of course, readers require a certain number of “technical” qualities from the author like a solid plot, interesting characters, and a fluid style. The author must be able to build a coherent story, to capture and hold the reader’s attention until the end of the book. He/she also has to create credible, interesting, and/or endearing characters. For some readers, it is about giving them insights to understand the motivations of the characters and feel close to them. For others, it is on the contrary not to say too much so as to arouse curiosity and make them want to learn more. Regarding style, expectations vary according to the readers, some of them looking for sophistication in the writing and literary qualities, while others prefer a style that is easy to read. But the main reasons for truly liking an author are all linked to his/her ability to innovate and to surprise the reader. Some interviewees insist on the ability of the best writers to create a unique “universe”. Universe is a term that describes a mix of genre, favorite themes, story-telling, characterization, style or angle of attack of the subject. Marie-Claude says: “Anne Perry, it always takes place at the time of Queen Victoria. Robert Van Gulik, it’s Tang China. Arthur Upfield writes ethnographic crime novels in Australia.” Other respondents like Blandine or Maud admire the ability of the writer to surprise, astonish, or move them thanks to his/her imagination: “Arturo Perez Reverde, it’s always very well constructed, with a twist at the end. He always manages to surprise the reader! I’m like, wow”, “Eric Orsenna, Virginie Despentes, they are authors who have moved me by one or more of their books. [...] You cannot copy and paste Orsenna or Despentes, they are truly unique.” And the regular readers insist on a third dimension – the ability to renew themselves. For Aline: “A good author must be sufficiently varied. He must not always do the same thing. There must be a surprise. I want to find things I’ve read, that I’ve enjoyed, plus new surprises in the same vein.” For regular readers, an ability to renew him/herself is the sign that the writer is a real artist, and not a skilled craftsman just using “recipes” and “tricks”. It’s the sign that he/she is truly creative and innovative.

The ability of some writers to deeply move the readers, or even to make them change their way of looking at life, generates feelings of esteem, respect, admiration, gratitude, or veneration towards the person of the writer, beyond the mere attachment to the figure of the author. For Francis: “J.K. Rowling is a hell of a woman! She is much more than a good writer. She has a strong personality and an interesting story. She impresses me and I really admire her.” Here, the reader moves from the attitude of an amateur to that of a fan. The amateur is interested in the work and the fan in the person who produced it (Clerc, 2010). And, in the process, the writer is set apart from ordinary mortals and sacralized (Wunenburger, 2009).

### 3.3. Provisional conclusion

If the research is stopped here, the conclusion seems to be that the author’s name fulfills all the role of a brand, except one (the social role). Indeed, the findings of the first study show that the author name plays the role of a trust contract in terms of identification and quality assurance on a market characterized by a plethora of offers. It also generates the same positive leverage effects: greater loyalty, willingness to pay more, and effective communication. More than that, it is able to create feelings of commitment, trust, and attachment among readers, to the point that the author is regarded as a friend. A friend who is also a magician and reenchants the world with his/her ability to innovate and surprise the reader. Whatever the brand approach that is mobilized, the author name totally fits with the definition and role of a brand.

And the surprising silence about the social role of the author’s name (the signal of social status) can be explained because speaking of such a trivial use of the artist (show off) may not be regarded as socially acceptable, even in an individual interview. But is it really the end of the story?

## 4. Second study : direct approach

The objective of the second study is to determine whether the author name is a brand in consumers' eyes. And, if the answer is positive/negative, to understand why. For this, a qualitative, inductive study with 18 regular readers of novels was conducted.

This focus on regular readers is motivated by the fact that they are at the heart of market development (Ipsos, 2017). The second study is focused on the representations of brands and authors held by the readers, and on their opinion on the topic. The first study was about what consumers do, while the second is about what they think or believe. Research on persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994) has shown that people have personal knowledge about marketing and marketing tactics, and by extension about brands and branding (Brown et al., 2003). In the same way, people develop beliefs about an author name (Clerc, 2010). The second study takes also into account the fact that the author –as the brand– is a concept that is socially constructed and embedded in a cultural context (Hartmann & Östberg, 2013). Consumers, by their practices and discourses, co-construct author and brand meaning (O'Reilly, 2006).

#### 4.1 Methodology

The second study was conducted in exactly the same way as the first with a new sample of 18 respondents. The main characteristics of the sample are also in line with the typical profile of French regular readers: female (67%), middle-aged (50% of 35–64 years), and rather wealthy (66% middle and higher managerial). The recruitment procedure and the interview guide were the same as in the first study, except for the two last questions: (4) What is a brand for you? How do you define it? And (5) is the author name a brand name? Why? Here again, the prompts were kept to a minimum to enable each interviewee to talk about the topic any way they chose. The interviews were carried out until semantic saturation was obtained. They lasted between 20 and 75 minutes and were fully recorded and transcribed for analysis. The themes used for template analysis came from the interviews. Then, the emergent themes were compared with a priori themes from the few studies on the human/artist brand in order to group the themes together and structure the presentation of the results.

#### 4.2. Analysis and interpretation

##### 4.2.1. To be or not to be a brand

When they are asked directly if the author name is a brand, most respondents answer that the author name (the signature) plays the role of a brand, and is therefore like a brand, or even is a brand. Indeed, it fulfills the two basic purposes of branding, identifying and reducing risk, thanks to awareness of it and image (Kapferer, 2008). The cover of a book plays the same role as the packaging of a consumer good (Leemans & Stockmans, 1991; 1992). And satisfaction generates greater consumer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Aureore, a secretary, summarizes this point of view: “An author name is not that different from a brand. If I had not heard of Musso, if he was not famous, I might not have bought it. And there would be no loyalty either. In addition, the aesthetics of the cover is not so different either. The book has to have a beautiful cover that attracts readers ...so the difference isn't that great!” As explained by Philippe, a computer scientist, the best proof that the author name is a brand is the fact that writers need to change their pseudonym when they want to change genre. And, to his eyes, it is clear that some writers behave like brands: “They appears on as many TV or radio shows as possible”.

But immediately after the respondents acknowledge they use author names as brand names or that author names are brands, they clearly and vehemently add that the author (the writer) is not a brand or, at least, that the “true” writer is not a brand. To be precise, the interviewees do not really distinguish between the “author name” (the signature) and “the author” (the writer). This is a reconstruction made by the researchers for analysis. For consumers, the name on the book and the person who wrote it are the same; they cannot be separated, which is normal in a regime of singularity (Heinich, 2000). This is probably why most respondents express that the very idea of saying that the author may be a brand shocks them, is “horrible” to use the words of Aureore or “awful” (Chantal) or “not normal” (Nawal). Even the consumers who manifest a very positive attitude towards brands (reliable, trustworthy, of good quality) consider that the writer is not a brand. Globally, respondents can be divided in two groups: the “idealists” who consider that the writer is never a brand, whatever his/her genre, style, etc. and the “elitists” who consider that the “true” author is not a brand, even if there are some “commercial” authors who are.

##### 4.2.2. The “idealists” and the cultural exception

These respondents believe that it is extremely simplistic to consider the author as a brand for two reasons: the freedom of the author and the extraordinary aspect of the reading experience. The first argument interviewees give



against the idea that the writer could be considered as a brand is the fact that he/she is a human being, a living creature, and not the signature of an organization on an object, either a good or a service. Therefore, he/she is much more unpredictable. As Chantal says: “No, the author is not an object. He is not a brand because he evolves. Herenews, surprises, he is not fixed. He has the right to take the reader unawares.

He is alive where as a brand is frozen in a representation. Seeing the author as a brand is extremely reductive. Certainly, there are authors who turn out a book a year like Amélie Nothomb. But they are not brands for all that. A book always brings something new, alive, and rich”. For Jimmy, considering authors as brands lock them up, deprives them of their freedom, and ultimately reduces them to slavery. And a world in which the writer is a brand would be dull, sad and boring. For those readers, a writer is much more than just a brand.

The second argument respondents use to explain why the writer is not a brand is the fact that the reading experience is totally different from consumption of other products. First, it needs a high level of involvement from the reader. For Nawal, reading is in reality a co-creation of the writer and the reader. Unlike a consumer product or a movie, the book is not a given, the reader has to participate in building it. He/she must imagine the places, the characters, the scenes. But the counterpart of this personal work is a feeling of freedom, as the reader may imagine things anyway he/she wants: “Images are imposed on you, words leave you free”. Second, literature has an emotional and transformative power that consumer products do not. Anne explains: “Reading involves the whole person, body and soul, in a way consumer goods cannot. A pair of jeans will not transform my personality; a writer can.”

The verbatim of the interviewees show that the archetype of the author remains deeply embedded in the consumer’s imagination (Clerc, 2010; Heinich, 2000). The writer is perceived as a recluse and eccentric genius, working alone with a pen or computer. Marion, a 23 years-old student, summarizes this point of view: “For me, an author is often someone who has initially nothing but his imagination. I find it incredible, that there are people capable of transporting us like that, and that it all comes from up there, from their neuronal connections. I also see them as somewhat reclusive people. I find it fascinating to think that these people have nothing materially but, with paper or a computer, they bring us something awesome! They are magicians and also a little crazy, eccentric, a little warped. Often they are not very happy in their lives and they write their dream life, like Jane Austen for example.”

This special ability of writers generate admiration, as explained by Solène: “I admire them. I think they are doing something I cannot do. You might hit upon an idea for a good novel. But between the vague idea that you can have, and actually putting in words, there is a difference! Creating the characters, filling out a text to make it interesting, it’s a real quality, it’s no easy thing to do. It’s not the same as writing a professional report!” Stephanie specifies that nowadays, it is easier to meet authors, and that writers have lost part of their magical aura. It is easier to realize that they are people like the others, that they are not superhuman. But the admiration remains. For Nawal, this feeling of admiration is even one of the things that makes the writer different from a brand. For her, it is impossible to admire a brand in the way you admire a person. In the case of Apple, in reality, people admire Steve Jobs, not the company. But, as a counterpart to this idealized image, the publisher is described in a rather negative way. As Marcel explains, a publisher is out to sell, and there is nothing wrong with that. A publisher has the same constraints as any other company and has to advertise. It is normal therefore that it treats the author like a brand and encourages him/her to make as many media appearances as possible. But, the author “must not sell his/her soul to the publisher”. His/her best interest is not necessarily the same as the publisher’s. For Marcel, there is an objective alliance between, on the one hand, the publishers and the chain bookstores and, on the other hand, the authors and the independent librarians. The goal of the first is to sell the maximum, while the others have more freedom. Of course, they have to sell a minimum to live, but it is not their main objective. Their main goal is to express themselves, to make their voice heard. Chantal shares the same idea: “It’s the publisher who forces the author to make his/her show. Moreover, some writers refuse. Or they accept, but not wholeheartedly.” Through all these discourses, it appears that, to cope with the fact that the writer has to sell his/her novels, the “idealist” readers elaborate story in which the author plays the role of the hero, and the publisher is in the role of the villain. The cooperative character of artwork is denied in favor of the traditional romantic vision of the artist (Becker, 1982).

#### 4.2.3. The “elitists” and the register of authenticity

These respondents make a distinction between “authentic” authors and “commercial” authors. The first write to satisfy an inner necessity, while the second exercise their talent to meet with the expectations of others, to become

famous, or to earn money (Heinich, 2000; Moulard et al. 2014; 2015). The analysis of the verbatim of the interviewees shows that they use five criteria to evaluate the degree to which an author is “authentic” or not.

The first indicator is the individual or collective dimension of the work. For the interviewees, the author should work alone. The novel should be their own personal creation, not the result of a collective collaboration. This is why the practices of collective writing under the same pseudonym, the resumption of a series by another writer (like the *Millenium* series), or the association of a well-known author with a designated successor (like Mary Higgins-Clark and her daughter) are not appreciated. Olivier testifies to his disappointment when he discovered that Caroline Quine, the author of the famous *Alice* series (*Nancy Drew* in the US), was in fact a collective of authors recruited by competition.

The second criterion is the ability to surprise and/or renew. The writing of the author should not be standardized and predictable. Solène mocks the stereotyped writing of the *Harlequin* novels: “You have automatic literature tricks. You cast a character, then another, and you throw the dice to define their personality traits! At the end of x pages, you make the rival appear etc. And there, watch out! You’re going to innovate because this time, the rival will be a homosexual! But don’t worry, he will not be unemployed! He will be rich!” The analogy with the fashion industry is frequently made to describe the degree of expected renewal by an author. The general idea is that writers should keep their style but change the frame, pattern, or at minimum the storyline. Solène explains: “In fashion, you cannot offer the same thing every year. It must be renewed, challenged, not copied and pasted. It must be astonishing, surprising. You also expect that from an artist.”

Another important signal of non-standardization is irregular output. Regularity of output (like one book a year) casts doubts on the talent of the writer as inspiration cannot be controlled. For Chantal: “An author is not a robot. One cannot write on command, at least not a real novel. Inspiration does not come on command. Moreover, all the writers know the anguish of the blank page”. As illustrated by Manon: “What shocks me is the regularity of publication of certain authors. It does not make them appear to be artists; it’s business, money, it’s not artistic. It ruins their image. So, it does not make me want to read them. Artists must take their time; they cannot produce books with the regularity of a pendulum”.

The fourth criterion is discretion, rarity. The authentic author should not appear too much in the media but let his/work speak for him/her. The interviewees insist on the fact that a writer is not a star, and should not be mistaken for an actor, or a musician. He/she is not a performer. The equivalent of the actors is the characters in the book, not the writer. Manon synthesizes the ideas and the discourses of many readers: “I am shocked by the fact that some authors are on television. Even the fact that there is the photo of the author on the back of some books shocks me. The author should not put himself forward. For me, writers are not stars. They must not be stars. The star is glamor, it’s superficial, it’s surf. The author is not like that, so he has nothing to do with the stars. Writing is an area that has nothing to do with show business; it must remain apart. An author should not be highly publicized because it places a doubt on his artistic value or on the quality of his book.”

The fifth indicator is the degree of commercial success. Even if some interviewees admit that commercial success can be the legitimate reward for talent, many think that the more successful writers are, the less authentic they are because they are then suspected of writing for money, and not pleasure. As a consequence, their work is viewed as less valuable. For Anne, “since he has become a brand, Eric Emmanuel Schmitt has become disappointing while 20 years ago what he wrote was much more exciting. Nowadays, as soon as he releases a new book, he is displayed in the metro. The author may have a commercial purpose, but not only a commercial purpose”. However, they tend to excuse the authors they like by saying that they have been overwhelmed by success.

#### 4.3. Another provisional conclusion

The representation of the writer is still grounded in the stereotypical representation of the authentic artist (disinterested, discreet, free, and creative). And, through all their discourses, it appears that the readers cope with the commercial aspect of the publishing industry by either tracing a line between art (the writer) and commerce (the publisher) or by tracing a line between art (the “true” writer) and entertainment (the “commercial” writer). In the first case, the boundary is “objective” and clearly delimited by the traditional definition of what belongs to art (literature, painting, sculpture, music...) and what does not, while in the second,

The boundary is “subjective” and depends on consumer taste (what is “artistic” for one reader may be regarded as “commercial” by another). But, whatever the case, it clearly appears that the representation of the writer is

in fact built against the representation of the brand. The author (brand) name is the signature of an individual (organization) on an artisanal (industrial) product created to express oneself (earn money).

This dual construction cannot be a coincidence and manifests a clear willingness to set art apart from ordinary life (commerce and/or entertainment).

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

The main purpose of the research was to achieve a better understanding of whether or not the author name is just another brand, or a brand of a different nature than the others. Taken together, the findings of the two studies show that consumers exhibit the same ambiguities, or even contradictions than the experts who debate on the relationship between “art” and “commerce” (Becker, 1982; Bourgeon-Renault & Gombault, 2009; Michel & Borraz, 2015). It is clear that there is a large discrepancy between what readers say and what they do. On the one hand, readers use author names as brands to choose a book. The findings of the first study clearly indicate that the author name plays the role of a “trust contract” in terms of identification and quality insurance on a market characterized by plethora offer (Farquhar, 1990; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 1993). It also plays the role of a “friend”, who generate feelings of commitment, trust, and attachment (Fournier, 1998). And, ultimately, it appears as a “magician”, who reenchant the reader’s world (Brown et al., 2003; Kornberger, 2010). But, on the other hand, readers heavily stick to the stereotype of the writer, i.e. being totally devoted to creation and detached from worldly values (Clerc, 2010; Heinich, 2000). For them, the author (the writer) is not a brand because he/she is an artist, or the “true” author is not a brand, even if they are some who are because they have “sold their soul” to the commerce. Given that authenticity is not directly observable (Moulard et al. 2015), readers infer it from four indicators: personal, creative, irregular production, and discretion in the marketing. But, in any case, it appears that consumers trace a line, a boundary, to put art apart from ordinary life and make it “sacred”.

### 5.1. Implications for understanding and managing author names

Taken together, the findings of the two studies suggest that managing the author name is a complex affair given the paradoxical nature of this “brand”. Despite the evident development of best-sellerization, a phenomenon which is not near its end on a market characterized by a structural overproduction, and where having a strong brand is the only way to survive (Berreman, 1946; Brown, 2006), consumers sing the praises of disinterestedness. They say that regularity of output casts doubts on the talent of the writer but they rush on the last (annual) book of Guillaume Musso. They claim to appreciate discretion but Amélie Nothomb is still one of the best-selling writer in France despite her overwhelming presence in the media at each new book release. But the findings of the studies help to understand those contradictions as they show that readers use diverse strategies to minimize their cognitive dissonance, like or “charging” the publishers to clear the writer from any commercial intent or making a distinction between the “true” writers and the “commercial ones”.

In fact, it seems that consumers do everything they can to preserve their idealized image of the author. There are many explanations which can explain such a resistance to the realm of a writer’s life. First, literature – like arts in general – is a game of hide and seek which must make the calculations and artifices that underpin it invisible (Kerrigan et al., 2011). Then, humankind’s deep-seated love for narrative, its clear preference for fiction over fact, can be advanced (Brown, 2011). The findings of the study can then be seen as a new illustration of the fact that consumers prefer myth to reality. In addition, specifically in France, art is the last refuge of the aristocratic ideology, which has always been anti-bourgeoisie oriented (Heinich, 2000; Sicard, 2007). Or it can be an aspiration to reenchant the world by reintegrating a part of sacred in this over-rationalized world (Belk et al., 1989). But, whatever the reason, the persistence of the stereotype seems to be deliberate. If the concept of authenticity was not built without commercial intent (Brown, 2006; Dettmar & Watt, 1996; Jensen, 1994), the present research suggests that the concept of authenticity is neither built without symbolic intent, to preserve a “sacred area” in the life of consumers.

Whatever the reason for the persistence of such a belief, it is paradoxically good news for authors as well as publishers. The findings suggest that the promotion of a writer (heavy media support, numerous promotional tours, and/or massive displays on the shelves) doesn’t necessary affect his/her image provided they

“stick” to the stereotype of the writer. It is worthy to note that the websites of the three best-selling authors in France (Guillaume Musso, Marc Lévy and Michel Bussi) all include a fairly developed part on their creative process. On the contrary, writers always presented as artists by the media, like Amélie Nothomb or Michel Houellebecq, either

do have a minimalist website (list of novels), or no website at all because they don't need to reassure readers on their artistic value. But, given that they "play the game", readers seem to be ready to forgive a lot to the writers they like: they are ready to give them a chance after a mediocre book, to follow them over time only for the pleasure of finding an old friend, and even to justify their success (and potential loss of authenticity). What the readers don't seem to be ready to forgive is to be boring. If Guillaume Musso is criticized for his easy style and the recurrence of his love stories, no one blames him for running out of ideas. Marc Lévy regularly changes genre (comedy, thriller) to maintain interest in his work. In short, readers first ask writers to do their job: be creative, renew, surprise, move, touch, disturb.

## 5.2. Implications for understanding and managing brands

In relation to past research on brands, the findings of the two studies bring into light the fact that the author name is at the same time the "ultimate" brand, i.e. the brand which goes beyond the classical functional, social, and relational roles of branding to reach a "spiritual" dimension, and the "limit" of the branding concept, as consumers exclude it from the scope of the brand. Indeed, on the one hand, the findings of the study shows that the author name does not only play the role of a "trust contract" or a "friend", but also of a "magician". Of course, the author name helps readers making a choice, and developing strong emotional relationships with the writer. Findings also confirm that a strong author name has a powerful leverage effect (greater consumer loyalty, willingness to pay more or to search for longer, and communication efficiency). But the relationship between the reader and the writer goes far beyond that. It develops into feelings usually associated with the magic (amazement, delight...) and/or the sacred (gratitude, veneration...). This shows that a "spiritual" approach does indeed exist, next to the three cognitive, affective, and social perspectives used for brands until now. The author name perfectly illustrates the fact that the brand can be considered as a soul that incarnates into a product. Each new novel of fiction writers embodies their interiority, their personality, is a material extension of their self (Kornberger, 2010). And the strong demand of consumers for renewal, creativity, surprise shows that this kind of brand can indeed be a tool to experiment the unexpected, and not only a means of reassurance (Brown et al., 2003). But, on the other hand, current research points out is that consumers refuse to consider the writer (or at least the "true" writer) as a brand because of their "sacred" conception of art. For French readers, the author name is clearly a brand of another kind rather than another kind of brands. The findings of the research are then completely at the opposite of the observations made about the service brand by De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1999). If the service brand is of the same nature as a brand of consumer goods, even if it must be managed differently because of the specificities of services, the author name appears here to be of a different nature as a brand of consumer goods, even if it is managed the same (end-of-aisles, promotion).

However, even if the author name is of a different kind as a brand of consumer goods or services, the findings of the research bring interesting insight in terms of brand management. The incredible benefits of a strong author name suggest that the brands have a lot to gain by being more "embodied", to have more "flesh" (Civanyan, 2008). To be embodied not in the sense of anthropomorphizing the brand through a representative, an endorser, or a mascot, but by showing to consumer their human and creative dimensions, by putting forward the motivation of the people working for the brand (CEO, R&D, workers...). At the beginning, branding was a way to make a product "sacred", set apart of the "ordinary" products. Indeed, brands are proper names, not common nouns, and naming is an act that imparts an extraordinary and unique destiny to a person or an object (Armengaud, 1990). A certain type of brand management (rationalization, standardization, and imitation) has made brands fall back into the profane world from which they had been extricated. This type of management seems to have forgotten that the initial vocation of brands is to bring some magic into the world (Kornberger, 2010). The recommendation would therefore be that they resume their original purpose, and to show to consumers that they do have a human, emotional and cultural value beyond their economic value (Civanyan, 2008). For example, inspired by the incredible success of the European Heritage Day, the LVMH group opens the gates of all its factories in France one a year. Consumers can discuss with the designers, the seamstresses, etc. The huge success of the operation shows that consumers aspire to know more about brands, the way they are created, produced, and marketed, and not only about the benefits they can get from them.

## 6. Limitations and future research

This study provides a better understanding of the nature and specificities of author names but it also has a number of limitations. First, it focused exclusively on certain aspects of branding omitting other dimensions of the concept (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998; Schmitt, 2012). Next, the study focused on reader reactions alone,

while the question of whether or not the author name is a brand name also concerns authors, publishers, booksellers, literary agents, and critics (Bourgeon-Renault & Gombault, 2009; Busson & Evrard, 2013).

Third, the research was restricted to writers and omitted the many other kinds of creators (painters, film directors, photographers, etc.). Fourth, and it is an important limitation, the study was conducted in France, a country in which writers enjoy a special status for historical, political, social, and legal reasons. It would therefore be worth broadening the scope of the research to other dimensions of the brand (brand community, brand symbolism, etc.), to publishing industry professionals, to other creators, and to other countries (especially Anglo-Saxon countries because of their specific conception of copyright). And, more globally, even if an author name is not of the same nature as a brand name on consumer goods or services, the analogy between the two, and the use of the literature on brands and brand management can be fruitful in terms of research and of great help for authors and publishers in answering questions such as: To what extent can an author change genre without having to use a pseudonym (brand extension)? To what extent can one author replace another in writing a serial with a recurring character (brand substitution)? In the case of recurring characters, are readers more attached to the character or to the author (brand attachment)? What are the relative weights of author's name and publisher's name in book purchasing decisions (co-branding)? Is internet piracy likely to erode an author's value in readers' eyes (brand value)? There look to be many promising research themes.

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