

# Is a Brand Journalist Just Another Journalist? Examining Differences and Similarities in the Self-Perceptions of Their Professional Roles and Ethical Orientations

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## ABSTRACT

The lines between journalism and public relations (PR) have become increasingly blurred with the rise of organizational media. Within this landscape, certain publications mimic journalistic formats while concurrently serving as PR instruments to promote organizational interests. These hybrid endeavors are commonly known as “brand journalism.” This paper presents the findings of a quantitative survey conducted among brand journalists in Germany, focusing on the perceptions of their roles and ethical orientations. We compare their responses to those of German journalists surveyed as part of the Worlds of Journalism research project. The data suggests that brand journalists largely align with journalists in terms of their professional roles and ethical orientations, with only a few noteworthy distinctions. One such distinction is that brand journalists tend to perceive their role less as critical observers who scrutinize political leaders and businesses. In essence, our study underscores the remarkable resemblance in role concepts between brand journalists and journalists, offering insights into the convergence of organizational media with modern journalism.

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The lines between journalism and public relations (PR) have become increasingly blurred, giving rise to a phenomenon known as “brand journalism” (Koch, Viererbl, and Schulz-Knappe 2023; Koob 2023; Serazio 2020; 2021a). Brand journalism serves as an umbrella term encompassing a diverse array of publications produced and distributed on behalf of organizations that resemble journalistic publications in terms of both content and layout (Koch, Viererbl, and Schulz-Knappe 2023). The striking resemblance between these publications and genuine journalistic content often poses a challenge for recipients to understand that these publications do not engage in independent reporting but rather serve strategic objectives (Cole and Greer 2013; Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, and Smit 2010). Among the most recognizable forms of brand journalism are customer magazines, which organizations employ to communicate directly with their target audiences, providing updates on new products and other relevant developments (Koch 2016; Koch, Denner, and Gutheil 2020).

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While journalism seeks to serve the common good by providing unbiased and independent information, strategic organizational communication primarily aims at promoting the particular interests of the organizations themselves (Serazio 2020; 2021a). This places brand journalism and brand journalists somewhere on a continuum between these two poles (Dyson 2007). The juxtaposition of strategic interests with journalistic principles raises questions about how to categorize brand journalists. How do they perceive their professional roles and ethical orientations? Do these perceptions and orientations diverge from those embraced by journalists? This paper aims to address these issues by conducting a quantitative survey that examines brand journalists and compares their characteristics, role perceptions, and ethical orientations with those of journalists. To this end, we compare the responses of brand journalists with those collected from journalists participating in the Worlds of Journalism research project.

### **Brand Journalism: Bridging the Gap Between Journalism and Strategic Communication**

Brand journalism serves as an umbrella term used to describe a range of publications produced and distributed by companies and organizations (such as NGOs or associations) that resemble journalistic publications in both content and layout (Koch, Viererbl, and Schulz-Knappe 2023). Among the various forms of brand journalism, customer magazines are highly prevalent. Organizations use these magazines as a direct channel for engaging with their customers, providing updates on recent developments such as new product launches (Denner, Koch, and Himmelreich 2018; Koch, Denner, and Gutheil 2020). Brand journalistic publications bear a striking resemblance to journalistic media, both in terms of their content and layout. This resemblance is also evident in related phenomena like native advertising or content marketing (Serazio 2021b). From an audience perspective, this convergence poses a challenge in distinguishing between brand journalism and traditional journalistic content (Denner, Koch, and Himmelreich 2018; Koch, Denner, and Gutheil 2020). Previous research suggests that recipients increasingly find it difficult to differentiate between genuine editorial content and brand-related or commercial elements, particularly without appropriate labels or disclaimers disclosing the nature of the publication or content (Amazeen and Wojdyski 2019; Wojdyski and Evans 2016). Consequently, this phenomenon reflects an ongoing trend where the distinction between journalism and public relations becomes increasingly blurry (Balasubramanian 1994; Dyson 2007).

Brand journalism publications not only mimic journalistic formats but also fulfill specific journalistic functions, including the provision of information, entertainment, relaxation, and service (Koch 2016). Consequently, recipients expect them to offer independent, accurate, balanced, transparent, and critical reporting (Koch, Denner, and Gutheil 2020). However, it is important to note that brand journalism also serves strategic organizational interests, such as enhancing an organization's image and reputation, improving stakeholder relations, and influencing public perception to shape the public agenda (Koch, Denner, and Gutheil 2020). One of the primary motivations for organizations to engage in brand journalism is to gain control over the information they disseminate, freeing them from relying solely on journalistic media and enabling them to legitimize their actions directly to the public (Suchman 1995). Hence, recent research

suggests that, among other factors, perceived journalistic quality of the content plays a vital role in the persuasive success of these publications (Koob 2023). Therefore, the high similarity between brand journalism and journalism is a fundamental aspect of this phenomenon. Without blurring the lines between journalism and public relations, these publications would not be able to effectively serve both journalistic and organizational objectives concurrently. This dual function underscores the unique nature of brand journalism.

However, while journalism is driven by the goal of serving the common good, organizational objectives often prioritize the organization's individual pursuits, rather than the common good (Fröhlich 2019). This raises the question of how comparable these publications are to genuine journalistic content. Despite the increasing importance of brand journalism in the media landscape as indicated by recent research (Koch, Viererbl, and Schulz-Knappe 2023; Koob 2023; Serazio 2020; 2021a), there is still a lack of comprehensive findings regarding the authors of these publications. Therefore, the current study aims to shed light on the individuals behind these brand journalism publications. In addition to exploring sociodemographic factors and career backgrounds (e.g., education or current employment conditions), we will focus on how the brand journalists see their own professional role, which functions they consider important in their profession, and their ethical attitudes.

### ***Professional Roles and Role Perceptions***

As we delve into the working conditions and career backgrounds of brand journalists responsible for creating content, it becomes imperative to examine how they perceive themselves and their professional roles. The term "roles" refers to the positions or functions that individuals take on in their personal and professional lives (Burns 1979; Markus and Wurf 1987). These roles are associated with a variety of behavioral patterns that describe how individuals fulfill their private or professional obligations, such as being a friend, family member, or journalist. Each role is associated with specific social norms that outline the expected behaviors, rights, and responsibilities attributed to that role (Belz, Talbott, and Starck 1989). Through exposure to these social norms, individuals learn what is considered acceptable or unacceptable when performing a particular role (Biddle and Thomas 1966). Over time, they develop their own set of expectations concerning different social roles, shaped by their experiences and perceptions of others' expectations (Biddle 1979; 1986). Consequently, individuals form concepts of social roles based on both their own expectations and how they perceive others' expectations of those roles (Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler 1981). Similarly, professional roles are acquired through professional socialization processes. This involves interactions with colleagues, supervisors, or customers, adapting to work routines, and undergoing professional training. Similar to private roles, professional role concepts are composed of perceived expectations from others regarding a specific role and an individual's own expectations towards it (Burns 1979; Mortimer and Lorence 1979; Viererbl and Koch 2021).

With regard to their role at the margins between journalism and public relations, brand journalists are likely to draw elements from both professions, contributing to the formation of their professional self-concept (Koch, Viererbl, and Schulz-Knappe 2023; Serazio 2020). Prior research has described the intricate and multifaceted nature of

journalistic role-perceptions, encompassing various sub-types. Some prevalent differentiations include four distinct roles: disseminators, interpreters, adversaries, and mobilizers. Disseminators adopt a relatively neutral stance, focusing on disseminating accurate and relevant news to the public. On the other hand, interpreters seek to delve deeper into events, providing in-depth analyzes and contextual interpretations. The adversarial role-concept involves critically monitoring political and economic actors, while mobilizers aim to incorporate the perspectives of ordinary people in their reporting (Hanusch and Tandoc 2019; Weaver and Wilhoit 1986). In a study examining 18 countries, Hanitzsch (2011) identifies comparable role types and distinguishes between populist disseminators, detached watchdogs, critical change agents, and opportunist facilitators. It is crucial to note that journalists do not necessarily confine themselves to a single professional role, as their role-conceptions may integrate various aspects from these typologies (Deuze 2002; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). For example, a journalist may strive to disseminate neutral and accurate information while simultaneously offering interpretive contextualization of events (Ward 2019). Overall, journalistic role-concepts are linked to the ideal of serving the general good, particularly by providing the public with informed insights and enabling individuals to form their own opinions on current and pertinent issues (Fröhlich 2019; Fröhlich, Koch, and Obermaier 2013).

In contrast, the functions typically associated with the profession of Public Relations diverge from the ideal of serving the general public and are more closely aligned with organizational interests. PR professionals primarily focus on communication that serves the best interests of their clients or employers. This may involve promoting a positive image of the organization or seeking to influence public opinion in its favor (Neijens and Smit 2006; Reich 2010). Regarding the role perceptions of PR practitioners, prior research has identified distinct archetypes. Type 1 revolves around disseminating information related to the organization to the public (Neijens and Smit 2006). Type 2 emphasizes stronger support for organizational goals, such as presenting organizational actions in a favorable light and conveying organizational perspectives to relevant stakeholder groups (Neijens and Smit 2006; Reich 2010). The third type primarily involves mediation efforts between the organization and its various stakeholders, which are particularly evident in establishing communication and an exchange of interests among different actors (Neijens and Smit 2006). In summary, while journalistic role concepts are rooted in serving the general good by informing the public and fostering independent opinions, PR role perceptions center around advancing organizational interests through strategic communication and engagement with various stakeholders.

The distinct objectives associated with the fields of journalism and public relations highlight the unique position in which brand journalists find themselves, operating in the gray area between these domains. As a result, they often encounter expectations stemming from both journalism and PR (Koch, Viererbl, and Schulz-Knappe 2023), raising questions about their professional role-concepts. Despite this significance, research specifically focused on the role perceptions of brand journalists remains scarce. Nonetheless, prior studies (Koch 2016; Koch, Viererbl, and Schulz-Knappe 2023) have identified different archetypes within the professional self-concept of brand journalists. The first archetype identifies as highly journalistic and perceives little or no need to consider organizational interests in their editorial work. On the other hand, a second archetype still views their professional role as journalistic but feels compelled to

accommodate organizational interests, even if they are not entirely aligned with a genuine journalistic role-concept. The third archetype considers themselves fully dedicated to organizational goals, viewing their role akin to that of a PR editor, rather than adhering to journalistic ideals or norms.

Overall, brand journalists perceive their professional role on a continuum between journalism and PR. In light of this context, our study seeks to examine the extent to which brand journalists prioritize specific elements of journalistic and PR-related role concepts in shaping their individual professional roles. Particularly, we are interested in (perceived) resemblances and differences to journalists. We aim to understand to what extent the role perceptions of brand journalists align with those of journalists and where distinctions emerge. Consequently, we pose our first research question: How do brand journalists' perceptions of their professional role differ from journalists' perceptions (RQ1)?

### ***Ethical Attitudes of Brand Journalists***

In the realm of journalism research, the debate about professional ethics and moral norms is almost ubiquitous. Thereby, questions regarding an ethical practice of journalism are partially discussed controversially and demands on journalistic practice may change over time (Ward 2019). Generally, journalism is assumed to follow the idea of serving a common, societal good, e.g., in terms of enabling the public to participate in political debates or critical monitoring of political decisions as a watchdog (Peterson 1984). At the same time, the profession is shaped by a number of societal and organizational conditions, which is why "the question of the common good is rarely an easy negotiation, within the community of journalists and various societal agents" (Ramaprasad et al. 2019, 200).

As Ward (2019) shows, on the one hand the question of journalistic ethic might be discussed at a macro-level. Here, ethical issues concern societal functions of the media system and the question how well such functions are fulfilled. On the other hand, ethical questions may emerge on a micro-level which addresses a journalist's individual decisions or "what they should do in particular situations" (Ward 2019, 308). Regardless of the level of the ethical issue, the question arises on what basis ethical decisions are made. According to Forsyth (1980), how individuals deal with ethical decisions can be differentiated along four ethical positions. In case of (1) absolutism, ethical rules need to be followed without any exceptions as their claim to validity is unconditional. In contrast, with the ethical position of (2) situationism, ethical decisions are derived based on specific parameters of a situation and absolute ethical rules do not apply. The principle of (3) exceptionism follows an approach in which adherence to existing ethical rules is generally expected but situational conditions allow deviation from these rules if necessary. Lastly, (4) subjectivism considers the decision on ethical questions to be made by the individual person, based on their personal values and beliefs. Hanitzsch (2007) illustrates these principles by examining unconventional and potentially problematic journalistic practices, such as putting pressure on informants or paying for information. Journalists following an absolutism approach (1) would categorically reject such practices due to their contradiction with established ethical principles and values. Situationists (2), on the other hand, would base their decisions on specific circumstances, approving of questionable practices in some situations while rejecting them in others. Exceptionists (3)

would endorse such practices in rare, well-justified exceptional cases, refraining from them in the majority of cases in adherence to fundamental ethical standards. Finally, Subjectionists (4) argue that each journalist should make these decisions based on their individual values and beliefs.

Given the grey area between different interests the brand journalists work in, we are interested in examining their ethical attitudes and aim to compare them to the ones of journalists. We base this comparison on the four ethical positions outlined above, for which the Worlds of Journalism Study (Hanitzsch, Steindl, and Lauerer 2016) provides comparative data. Accordingly, we pose the following research question: How do the ethical attitudes of brand journalists differ from those of journalists (RQ2)?

## Method

### Sample

The sample selection process involved multiple stages. Initially, we began with a pool of 226 of the most widely circulated brand journalistic publications in Germany. We focused on this subset because of their widespread utilization and consequential influence in this domain. The inclusion of this large number was imperative to ensure diversity across various companies and industries, as well as to guarantee a sufficient number of brand journalists for our survey. Our criteria for selecting the media were as follows: the publications had to be distributed by a company, an industry, an interest group, or association with their primary audience being external stakeholders. Consequently, our study did not encompass employe magazines, which primarily target internal stakeholders and are often not accessible to the general public. Furthermore, we restricted our selection to periodic publications that appeared at least biannually. In accordance with the aforementioned criteria, we compiled a list of relevant publications and arranged them based on circulation numbers.

To do this, we utilized the comprehensive print database of the “Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern (IVW)”, an organization that is responsible for providing data and information related to the circulation and distribution of (advertising) media in Germany. We employed a two-step approach to identify the responsible in-house editorial teams or external agency teams associated with the publications. Initially, we employed the publications’ imprints to collect information about their editorial teams. In instances where imprints lacked sufficient contact details, we conducted extensive research on the publications’ websites and social media platforms. On some occasions, we found email addresses within the respective articles, providing us with direct contact information for the brand journalists.

Furthermore, to expand our reach and gather additional contacts, we leveraged the database “Deutscher Journalistenverband (DJV)” where freelance journalists commonly register their contact information. This additional resource allowed us to enhance our list of potential participants and increase our chances of securing a diverse and representative sample of brand journalists for our study. Despite employing a systematically structured approach with multiple steps, it is important to note that the lack of a comprehensive database specifically for brand journalists in Germany limits the full representativeness of our sample. As our study relied on voluntary participation, there is the

potential for self-selection bias within our sample. In total, we extended invitations to 1,618 individuals, with the final sample comprising 348 brand journalists, resulting in a response rate of 21.5 percent. Among these, 59.2 percent identified as female, 38.2 percent as male, 0.3 percent as diverse, and 2.3 percent chose not to respond to the question regarding their gender.<sup>1</sup> The average age of the respondents was 49.55 years ( $SD = 10.37$ ).<sup>2</sup> In terms of educational background, the majority of the brand journalists held a university degree (71.3 percent), while 10 percent had completed a PhD program, 9.5 percent had obtained some form of university entrance qualification, 2 percent had completed a lower educational qualification, 4 percent described their educational level as “other,” and 3.4 percent chose not to provide an answer to this question.

## Measures

In the initial phase of our study, we gathered information pertaining to the professional background and employment status of the brand journalists. The questionnaire items were adapted from the World of Journalism study's country report on journalists in Germany (Hanitzsch, Steindl, and Lauerer 2016). We began by inquiring about the educational and professional training of the brand journalists. Specifically, we asked whether they had pursued specialized coursework in journalism or a related field during their university studies or professional traineeships. Furthermore, we sought to determine if the participants had focused their studies on subjects relevant to their current editorial work, such as politics, economics, or health.

Regarding the employment status of the brand journalists, our questionnaire encompassed a range of inquiries, encompassing both formal aspects and queries related to individual editorial workflows. Concerning the formal working conditions, we gathered information on the type of employment contract, which included options like full-time, part-time, freelance editor, permanent freelance editor, or other. We also inquired about their employment status, specifying whether it was temporary, permanent, or without a fixed contract. Additionally, we sought to understand the number of media outlets they were affiliated with, whether they engaged in additional jobs alongside their editorial work, and if they held memberships in one or more professional associations related to PR or journalism. Furthermore, we investigated the frequency with which the brand journalists undertook managerial responsibilities, as indicated by their participation in editorial and newsroom coordination activities, such as attending editorial meetings or assigning reporters. This was assessed on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = “almost never” to 5 = “always” ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ).

To examine the brand journalists' *professional role perceptions*, we employed a set of 21 items from the World of Journalism study's country report on journalists in Germany (Hanitzsch, Steindl, and Lauerer 2016; see table 1 for an overview of all items).

We measured *ethical attitudes* using a set of four items, each rated on a five-point scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These items were aligned with the four ethical positions delineated by Forsyth (1980). To facilitate a comparison between brand journalists and journalists, we again derived the items from the World of Journalism study's country report on journalists in Germany (Hanitzsch, Steindl, and Lauerer 2016): “In my current editorial work I should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context” (absolutism,  $M = 4.51$ ;  $SD = .71$ ), “What is ethical in my

**Table 1.** Brand journalists' agreement with journalistic role perceptions and comparisons to the worlds of journalism data on journalists Germany.

Within my editorial work, I would like to ...	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M(SD) WoJ</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
... report things as they are.	4.45 (.75)	301	4.59 (.73)	765	-2.76	536	< .01	.19
... provide analysis of current affairs.	4.02 (1.03)	299	4.31 (.96)	768	-4.21	510	< .001	.29
... provide advice, orientation and direction to daily life.	3.97 (1.04)	300	3.82 (1.06)	767	2.11	555	< .05	.14
... be a detached observer.	3.83 (1.14)	290	4.27 (.95)	771	-5.85	448	< .001	.42
... educate the audience.	3.63 (1.02)	295	3.60 (1.10)	762	0.42	573	n.s.	.01
... promote tolerance and cultural diversity.	3.51 (1.19)	293	3.80 (1.21)	765	-3.53	536	< .001	.24
... provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience.	3.28 (1.10)	293	4.00 (.95)	766	-9.88	467	< .001	.70
... provide information people need to make political decisions.	3.24 (1.19)	287	3.36 (1.45)	760	-1.37	622	n.s.	.09
... let people express their views.	3.10 (1.15)	283	3.27 (1.24)	764	-2.08	540	< .05	.14
... tell stories about the world.	3.09 (1.30)	289	3.56 (1.18)	759	-5.36	479	< .001	.38
... motivate people to participate in political activity.	2.88 (1.19)	283	3.10 (1.42)	761	-2.51	597	< .05	.17
... advocate for social change.	2.86 (1.23)	280	2.77 (1.21)	745	1.05	494	n.s.	.04
... influence public opinion.	2.76 (1.06)	284	2.68 (1.13)	752	1.06	540	n.s.	.07
... provide entertainment and relaxation.	2.73 (1.16)	294	3.51 (1.09)	768	-9.97	502	< .001	.70
... support national development.	2.45 (1.19)	267	2.14 (1.15)	738	3.68	457	< .001	.27
... monitor and scrutinize political leaders.	2.14 (1.20)	275	2.76 (1.46)	746	-6.89	590	< .001	.46
... be an adversary to the government.	1.96 (1.06)	271	2.27 (1.30)	739	-3.86	584	< .001	.26
... set the political agenda.	1.93 (.97)	275	2.10 (1.06)	744	-2.42	531	< .05	.17
... monitor and scrutinize business.	1.91 (1.07)	274	2.80 (1.39)	748	-10.82	627	< .001	.72
... support government policy.	1.45 (.67)	271	1.27 (.79)	741	3.60	561	< .001	.25
... convey a positive image of political leadership.	1.32 (.59)	271	1.25 (.57)	741	1.69	465	n.s.	.12

*Note.* Two-sided *t*-tests for paired samples. We employed Welch's *t*-test in recognition of potential discrepancies in variances and sample sizes. Means based on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = unimportant to 5 = extremely important.

current editorial work depends on the specific situation" (situationalism:  $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ), "What is ethical in my current editorial work is a matter of personal judgment" (subjectivism;  $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ), and "It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it" (exceptionism,  $M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = .91$ ).

## Results

In a first step, we examined the professional backgrounds and working conditions of the brand journalists. With regard to a professional specialization in the field of journalism or communication, 17.2 percent report they have a degree in journalism, 29.2 percent state to have completed a professional journalistic traineeship, 16 percent have accomplished both a journalism degree and formal journalistic training, and 37.5 percent have not undergone any kind of such professional education. Furthermore, when asked about specialization in fields related to their current editorial focus, such as politics, economics, or health, 53.8 percent affirmed such specialization, while 46.2 percent indicated otherwise.

With regard to their formal working conditions, the brand journalists report to work in average for 20.66 years ( $SD = 10.69$ ) in the field. 45.1 percent are employed on a full-time basis, 19 percent work part-time, 22.9 percent work as freelancers, 2.9 percent have fixed freelance positions, and 10.2 percent indicated "other" in response to their employment status. In terms of job security, a significant portion of brand journalists (67.2 percent) hold permanent contracts, while 5.6 percent reported being employed on a temporary basis, and 27.2 percent stated they work without a fixed contract. Regarding their scope of work, 38 percent are affiliated with a single media outlet, whereas 62 percent contribute to multiple mediums ( $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 3.81$ ).

When asked about additional employment alongside their editorial roles, 68.1 percent stated they do not have other employment commitments, while 31.1 percent acknowledged dual employment. Membership statistics reveal that a majority of brand journalists (55.2 percent) are part of journalism associations, with only a small fraction affiliated with other communication-related associations (3.2 percent). A significant proportion (41.6 percent) indicated non-membership in any professional association. More than one-third of respondents (42.1 percent) reported being frequently or consistently engaged in editorial and newsroom coordination, which include attending editorial meetings or assigning reporters. Meanwhile, 24.2 percent occasionally perform coordination tasks, and 33.7 percent participate in these activities rarely or almost never.

### **Professional Role Perceptions of Brand Journalists**

One of the central objectives of this study was to investigate the professional role perceptions held by brand journalists and discern how they diverge from those of journalists. To achieve this, we assessed their alignment with 21 items from the World of Journalism Study, designed to gauge the professional role perceptions commonly associated with journalists (Hanitzsch, Steindl, and Lauerer 2016; see Table 1).

Our analysis reveals a significant degree of agreement among brand journalists with respect to several key aspects of the professional role typically attributed to journalists. Specifically, brand journalists express a strong commitment to serving as detached

observers of events (Table 1). They are driven by the fundamental journalistic principle of reporting things as they are ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) and actively seek to provide analyses of current affairs ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ). This alignment underscores that brand journalists aspire to fulfill this “classic” journalistic function, which encompasses the crucial responsibility of reporting information impartially and independently. This commitment to objectivity is further substantiated by the high level of agreement with the statement that they aim to be detached observers ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). Their dedication to these principles reflects their commitment to upholding the core values and responsibilities traditionally associated with the field of journalism.

Interestingly, our survey indicates that brand journalists place considerable importance not only on delivering impartial information and reporting events objectively but also on serving as guides and educators for their audience (Table 1). They express a strong desire to provide advice, orientation, and direction to enhance the daily lives of their readers ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ). Moreover, they express a commitment to educate the audience ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). One notable finding is their aspiration to promoting tolerance and cultural diversity ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ), highlighting their role as promoters of social inclusivity. This multifaceted approach underscores that brand journalists see themselves as more than mere conveyors of facts; they also see their role as educators. Their dedication extends beyond providing orientation; it involves active efforts to educate and contribute to a more inclusive and tolerant society.

Our analysis also sheds light on how brand journalists do not perceive their role, revealing two central aspects (Table 1). Firstly, our findings indicate that brand journalists do not primarily see their role as watchdogs monitoring and scrutinizing businesses ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) or political leaders ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ). This suggests a relatively lower emphasis on criticism and control in their professional orientation. Secondly, brand journalists do not perceive themselves as endorsers for political entities, such as leaders, governments, or their decisions. They do not aim to convey a positive image of political leadership ( $M = 1.32$ ,  $SD = .59$ ), support government policy ( $M = 1.45$ ,  $SD = .67$ ), set the political agenda ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = .97$ ), or to be an adversary to the government ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). This clearly illustrates that they do not view themselves as mouthpieces for the government. In essence, brand journalists do not perceive their role as aligned with bolstering or critiquing political entities or businesses.

### **Comparing Professional Role Perceptions of Brand Journalists and Journalists**

To examine similarities and differences between professional role-perceptions of brand journalists and journalists, we compared the level of agreement among brand journalists with the same 21 professional role perception items used in the Worlds of Journalism (WoJ) research project, which were also applied to journalists in Germany (Hanitzsch, Steindl, and Lauerer 2016). To uncover significant differences between these two groups, we performed two-sided *t*-tests and compared their mean values. In recognition of potential discrepancies in variances and sample sizes, we employed Welch’s *t*-test for a more robust analysis (see Table 1).

The most notable distinction emerges in the context of monitoring and scrutinizing businesses,  $t(627) = -10.82$ ,  $p < .001$ . Brand journalists ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) exhibit a markedly lower inclination to monitor and scrutinize businesses compared to journalists ( $M =$

2.80,  $SD = 1.39$ ) surveyed in the WoJ study. Similarly, though to a somewhat lesser extent, differences are also observed in monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 1.20$  vs.  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ),  $t(590) = -6.89$ ,  $p < .001$ . These findings underscore that brand journalists do not perceive their role in the same vein as journalists, particularly when it comes to the watchdog function of scrutinizing businesses or political figures, which is more prevalent among journalists.

Similarly, brand journalists place less emphasis on providing entertainment and relaxation ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) compared to participants in the WoJ study ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ),  $t(502) = -9.97$ ,  $p < .001$ . Another substantial difference emerges regarding the aim to provide news that attract the largest audience,  $t(467) = -9.88$ ,  $p < .001$ . Here, brand journalists ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) perceive this function as notably less crucial in comparison to the WoJ sample ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = .95$ ). These findings may initially appear surprising, as it suggests that journalists put in more effort to capture their audience's attention. However, this contrast can be attributed to the distinct contexts in which journalists and brand journalists operate. Journalists often compete vigorously for audience engagement, whereas brand journalists often cater to a pre-existing fanbase and may not prioritize the need to attract larger audiences in the same way.

Smaller, yet still notable distinctions are also evident in the aspects of being a detached observer,  $t(448) = -5.85$ ,  $p < .001$ , and telling stories about the world,  $t(479) = -5.36$ ,  $p < .001$ . Once again, in these dimensions of the professional role concept, brand journalists exhibited significantly lower scores compared to their counterparts surveyed in the WoJ study. [Table 1](#) displays several other significant differences, although the means presented indicate relatively modest disparities. Consequently, for many of the elements pertaining to the professional role concept of both groups, the comparisons reveal a greater degree of similarity than distinction. In sum, the more substantial differences highlight the distinctively reduced inclination of brand journalists towards perceiving their role as involving critical scrutiny of businesses and politics, providing entertainment, and aiming for broader audience appeal.

### **Ethical Orientations of Brand Journalists**

In our exploration of research question 2, which delves into the ethical orientations of brand journalists, we find a strong commitment among brand journalists to professional ethical codes ([table 2](#)). We categorized their ethical stances according to Forsyth's (1980) framework, which identifies four primary ethical positions individuals may adopt when making ethical decisions. Firstly, we inquired about absolutism, where adherence to ethical rules is deemed inviolable, irrespective of situational factors. It is noteworthy that brand journalists expressed a robust agreement with the notion of consistently adhering to professional ethics, regardless of contextual variables (absolutism:  $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = .71$ ). This underscores a high adherence to ethical standards in these dimensions of their ethical decision-making. In line with that finding, when considering the principle of exceptionism, which allows for some flexibility in ethical rules based on extraordinary circumstances, brand journalists indicated that it is not acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it (exceptionism:  $M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = .91$ ). These two findings collectively signify the existence of stringent ethical norms in these domains.

**Table 2.** Brand journalists' agreement with ethical positions and comparisons to the worlds of journalism data on journalists in Germany.

	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD) WoJ</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context.	4.51 (.71)	267	4.60 (.64)	767	-1.83	425	n.s.	.00
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation.	2.80 (1.34)	264	3.15 (1.32)	759	-3.67	452	< .001	.26
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment.	2.35 (1.18)	266	2.08 (1.05)	759	3.72	651	< .001	.24
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it.	1.61 (.91)	258	2.03 (1.04)	757	-6.17	502	< .001	.43

*Note.* Two-sided *t*-tests for paired samples. We employed Welch's *t*-test in recognition of potential discrepancies in variances and sample sizes. Means based on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

However, the landscape is somewhat distinct for the other two ethical dimensions. In the context of subjectivism, where ethical decisions are rooted in personal values and beliefs, we observed a modest level of agreement among participants. Some brand journalists believe that determining what is ethical in their work is subject to personal judgment ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). Furthermore, the principle of situationism, where ethical judgments are contingent upon the specific parameters of a situation, and where absolute ethical rules may not necessarily apply, garnered substantial agreement. Brand journalists conveyed that ethical considerations in their work depend on the particular circumstances at hand ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ). These findings indicate a disposition toward some ethical flexibility, as brand journalists acknowledge that ethical judgments can be subjective, contingent on individual values and beliefs, and influenced by situational factors. However, it is essential to note that the levels of agreement in these latter two dimensions fall within the low to medium range, suggesting that while brand journalists may entertain some ethical flexibility, they do not wholly relinquish the importance of adhering to ethical standards.

### **Comparing Ethical Orientations of Brand Journalists and Journalists**

To examine the ethical orientations of brand journalists in comparison to journalists, we once again compared the level of agreement among brand journalists with that of journalists from Germany who were surveyed in the WoJ research project (Hanitzsch, Steindl, and Lauerer 2016; see table 2). The results reveal only minor distinctions between the two groups. Firstly, both brand journalists and journalists equally concur that they should consistently adhere to codes of professional ethics, irrespective of situational context (absolutism). There is no statistically significant difference between their mean scores,  $t(425) = -1.83$ ,  $p > .05$ . However, some slight variations emerge in the other three dimensions. Brand journalists express a significantly higher level of agreement with the statement that what is considered ethical in their daily work is subject to personal judgment (subjectivism:  $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) than journalists ( $M = 2.08$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ),  $t(651) = 3.72$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Interestingly, brand journalists exhibit even more stringent ethical attitudes in the remaining two dimensions. They are less inclined to agree that it is acceptable to set aside moral standards when faced with extraordinary circumstances (exceptionism:  $M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) compared to journalists ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $t(502) = -6.17$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, brand journalists express less agreement with the idea that ethical judgments in journalism depend on the specific situation (situationism:  $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) compared to journalists ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ),  $t(452) = -3.67$ ,  $p < .001$ . In summary, these findings suggest that the ethical orientations of journalists and brand journalists are remarkably similar. Surprisingly, brand journalists even exhibit a slightly stronger conviction that ethical standards should not be compromised in the face of extraordinary circumstances or specific situations.

## **Discussion**

This paper presented the results of a quantitative survey conducted among brand journalists in Germany, with a primary focus on their self-perceptions regarding professional roles and ethical orientations. We compared their responses with those of journalists surveyed as part of the Worlds of Journalism research project, aiming to unveil similarities

and differences in their self-perceptions. Our analysis reveals that brand journalists share a multifaceted professional role concept that bears resemblance to that of journalists. They adhere to the fundamental journalistic principle of reporting events and information as they unfold and providing analyzes of current affairs. Consequently, brand journalists aspire to fulfill the “classic” journalistic function of being a detached observer and presenting information impartially and independently. However, it is noteworthy that, when compared to journalists, brand journalists exhibit a somewhat lower level of agreement with these specific items.

Additionally, brand journalists, akin to their journalistic counterparts, express a profound desire to offer guidance, orientation, and direction to their audience. They are committed to the role of educators, seeking to contribute to a more inclusive and tolerant society. This aspect of their professional self-concept also aligns closely with that of journalists, further highlighting the significant common ground between these two groups. Hence, these findings illuminate a notable convergence in the professional roles and ethical orientations of brand journalists and journalists.

However, a fundamental distinction also emerges. Notably, brand journalists do not view their role through the lens of watchdogs tasked with the critical monitoring and scrutiny of businesses or political leaders—a role that has been a cornerstone of journalism. This distinction underscores a relatively diminished emphasis on criticism and control within the professional orientation of brand journalists. Unlike journalists, brand journalists do not perceive their role as intricately intertwined with the watchdog function, which entails vigilant oversight and scrutiny of corporate and political entities. The watchdog function, which is more pervasive among journalists, entails an active role in holding businesses and political figures accountable for their actions.

The revelation that brand journalists do not readily identify with the traditional watchdog role, particularly in scrutinizing businesses, resonates with prior research findings concerning the unique role of brand journalism. This finding echoes the results of earlier studies, suggesting that while there are indeed parallels between brand journalism and journalism, these parallels only extend to a certain degree (Koch 2016). For instance, research conducted by Koch, Viererbl, and Schulz-Knappe (2023) has illuminated how the alignment between brand journalism and journalistic work routines can often dissipate when they come into conflict with the strategic interests of the organization. This observation potentially implies that brand journalists may prioritize other facets of their role, such as the dissemination of information, education, or fostering engagement with their audience, over the traditional watchdog function, especially when it conflicts with organizational objectives. However, it might be pertinent to consider the nature of content typically associated with brand journalism. Indeed, individuals working within various journalistic domains have also highlighted the relatively limited relevance of the functions of criticism and control. For example, a study focusing on editors within the realm of lifestyle journalism found that critical content often does not align well with the overall tone and style of lifestyle magazines (Viererbl 2023). Consequently, the diminished importance ascribed to the watchdog function by brand journalists could potentially stem not only from conflicting organizational interests but also from the inherent nature of the content often associated with brand journalism. In this context, the limited emphasis on criticism and control within the professional self-conceptions

of brand journalists may well reflect the broader tonality and style of their publications, where other dimensions of their roles take precedence.

In our investigation into the ethical orientations of brand journalists, we discern a robust commitment among them to adhere to professional ethical standards. Their ethical stances, classified through Forsyth's (1980) framework, unveil noteworthy insights. This inclination towards absolutism aligns with findings in previous studies examining ethical attitudes in journalism, as demonstrated by Ramaprasad et al. (2019) and earlier work by Hanitzsch et al. (2011). Concurrently, they reject the idea of setting aside moral standards, even in extraordinary circumstances. However, a nuanced perspective emerges in the other two ethical dimensions. Some brand journalists believe that ethical determinations in their work hinge on personal judgment, exhibiting a modest level of agreement with subjectivism. Similarly, they express a disposition towards ethical flexibility, asserting that ethical considerations in their work are contingent on specific circumstances, aligning with situationism. These findings underscore a balanced approach to ethics, acknowledging subjective and situational factors while maintaining a commitment to ethical standards.

When comparing the ethical orientations of brand journalists with journalists, we identify only minor distinctions between the two groups. Both brand journalists and journalists share a resolute commitment to adhering to professional ethics, regardless of situational context. However, subtle differences emerge in the other three dimensions. Brand journalists exhibit a slightly higher inclination towards subjectivism, suggesting that ethical determinations in their daily work are more rooted in personal judgment. Conversely, they manifest a greater reluctance to compromise ethical standards in extraordinary circumstances (exceptionism) and show a slightly lesser reliance on situational parameters to guide ethical judgments (situationism) compared to journalists. In summary, these findings underscore a remarkable similarity in the ethical orientations of brand journalists and journalists, with brand journalists demonstrating a slightly heightened conviction that ethical standards should remain steadfast, even in challenging circumstances.

The rationale behind this could be multifaceted. For journalists, the nature of their work often requires them to navigate a complex web of ethical considerations, especially when seeking to obtain critical information. In certain instances, adhering to the highest ethical standards may pose practical challenges or hinder their ability to access crucial data. Consequently, journalists may find themselves compelled to occasionally extend the boundaries of ethical principles to achieve their journalistic objectives. On the other hand, brand journalists may not encounter the same investigative demands or ethical dilemmas. Their roles may involve a different set of priorities and responsibilities, potentially reducing the need to delve deep into investigative research. This distinction in roles and objectives may contribute to the slightly heightened conviction among brand journalists that ethical standards should remain unwavering, as they are not constrained by the same investigative imperatives faced by journalists. Once more, it is crucial to consider the significance of these differences in light of their relatively small magnitude.

Despite these differences, our findings reveal several similarities between the brand journalists in our sample and those surveyed in the Worlds of Journalism study. These similarities encompass both role perceptions and ethical attitudes. One potential explanation for this lies in the brand journalists' possible former occupation in the journalistic field. Our data indicates that a significant portion of our sample has undergone

journalistic training or obtained a journalism degree. It is plausible to assume that these participants have been socialized in a journalistic working sphere, adapting journalistic self-concepts and corresponding ethical attitudes. Research on job transitions from journalism to PR illustrates how former journalists perceive various factors that drove them out of journalism, such as intensive working hours, lack of job security, or a lack of appreciation, pulling them towards a career in PR (Viererbl and Koch 2021). Similar processes may also elucidate a job change from journalism to the specific field of brand journalism. A key factor could be the longstanding challenging economic situation of many news organizations, leading to significant layoffs and job losses for journalists (Sherwood and O'Donnell 2018). Journalists opting for a new career path often seek work in PR since jobs in this area require comparable skillsets, such as communication, writing, research, and knowledge of journalistic workflows and editorial work (Koch and Obermaier 2014; Viererbl and Koch 2021). With brand journalism blurring the boundaries between journalism and PR, journalists may find this particular area even more attractive as it closely aligns with their skill profile.

It is imperative to approach our findings with due consideration of the inherent limitations in our study. Firstly, as detailed in the method section, the absence of a comprehensive database for drawing a random sample of all brand journalists in Germany necessitated a pragmatic data collection approach. While our meticulous selection process aimed to encompass a diverse array of brand journalists contributing to a wide spectrum of publications, such as those by business organizations, NGOs, units, or associations, the extent to which our sample accurately represents the entire population remains somewhat constrained. Given the voluntary nature of participation, it is essential to acknowledge the potential presence of self-selection bias. Secondly, all the insights into the professional roles of brand journalists and their ethical orientations are drawn from self-reports. Consequently, our findings offer a comprehensive view of how brand journalists perceive their professional roles and their attitudes toward ethical decision-making. However, it is important to recognize that these attitudes and self-perceptions may not necessarily align precisely with the actual work they undertake or the publications they produce. One contributing factor could be the presence of social desirability bias, especially concerning items that refer to norms, values, and (journalistic) functions our participants perceived as demanded or expected by the public. Thirdly, to facilitate a comparison between the responses of brand journalists and journalists in Germany, we based our questionnaire on a carefully curated set of items from the 2016 Worlds of Journalism Study for Germany. While this enabled a comparative analysis, the constraints on the questionnaire's space limited the depth of our inquiry. Further elaboration on specific (un-)ethical behaviors, for example, could have provided a more nuanced understanding of the distinctions in brand journalists' attitudes and perceptions relative to journalists. Moreover, future research could delve into how brand journalists reconcile their strong orientation towards journalistic standards with the organization-oriented goals inherent in brand journalism. Investigating how brand journalists maintain their self-image when journalistic standards, such as independence or impartiality, may only be partially compatible with the expectations of their superiors or clients would provide valuable insights into the dynamics of brand journalism.

So, are brand journalists simply a variation of journalists? While our study revealed significant commonalities in the professional self-concept and ethical attitudes between

journalists and brand journalists, it raises the fundamental question of whether these similarities are sufficient to categorize them both as journalists. Brand journalism undeniably shares striking similarities with journalistic publications, both in terms of content and layout. However, even though brand journalists express their commitment to reporting things objectively and maintaining a detached perspective, they operate within the sphere of a brand or organization, a distinction that challenges the normative expectation of journalistic independence. Nonetheless, it is evident that the boundaries between these roles are becoming increasingly blurred, necessitating further research to discern where the demarcation lines should be drawn. A comparable debate emerged in the context of embedded journalists (Brandenburg 2007; Pfau et al. 2004). These reporters, attached to military units engaged in armed conflicts, also encounter limitations on their journalistic independence. Yet, they are still recognized as journalists.

However, the question remains—do brand journalists enjoy the same recognition? To delve into this, a metaphor from the realm of evolution may offer clarity. Just as species adapt to distinct environments, brand journalism and journalism may have evolved within separate niches, each developing characteristics suited to their respective landscapes. And external factors like organizational context act as selective pressures shaping distinct traits. The blurring of boundaries between these roles resembles the convergence of species in adjacent ecological niches. Similar to the debate on embedded journalists, where limitations on independence coincide with recognition, brand journalists navigate a terrain where organizational allegiance complicates traditional notions of journalistic autonomy. In essence, brand journalists and their traditional counterparts may share the same ecosystem, but they have evolved in different directions. Our study underscores their commonalities, yet, they remain distinct “species”.

## Notes

1. Within the World of Journalism sample for Germany, 40.01 percent identified as female. Accordingly, our sample contains more individuals who stated to be female.
2. Within the Worlds of Journalism sample for Germany, the respondents' average age was 45.58 years ( $SD = 10.50$ ). Accordingly, the individuals of our sample are slightly older in comparison.

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