

HR specialists in the spotlight: aggregating popular culture representations to highlight the underlying occupational image

Occupational
image of HR
specialists

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Abstract

Purpose – This study adopts the popular culture lens to investigate the collective understanding behind the human resources (HR) occupations.

Design/methodology/approach – The empirical study analyzes 129 characters from 87 movies, television (TV) series, books and comics. The measurement model was tested using structural equation modeling and cluster analysis identified five HR representations in the popular culture.

Findings – Popular culture reflects five HR representations: The Executor, the Hero, the Buddy, the Bore, and the Good-time person. Results suggest that public opinion pays scarce attention to the so-called HR “strategic position” while underlining the need for a more socially responsible HR approach.

Originality/value – The authors’ study serves as a means for integrating past research on HR role and reputation, occupational image, self-identity and popular media. While most scholars have addressed popular culture as a single case and paid almost no attention to the HR domain, this article complements the literature by offering a fruitful way to distil HR summative popular culture representations, thus advocating for both a theoretical and a methodological contribution.

Keywords HR representations, HR occupational image, Legitimation, Occupational prestige, Popular culture, Occupational representations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Management studies have steadily considered popular culture as a well-established academic practice offering the possibility of perfecting the understanding of social phenomena in organizations, in its functioning, and among its members (Phillips and Knowles, 2012). These studies often give rise to thorny issues which are more compelling than those common to theory such as insane power dynamics (Rhodes and Parker, 2008), misrepresentations of professions (Dimnik and Felton, 2006), managerial plateau in identity work (Westwood and Johnston, 2012). These hardly make their way into mainstream literature.

Surprisingly, the HR literature adopting this perspective is still scant and restricted to the influence of popular culture on career choices and its adoption in training practices (Carollo, 2021; Summers *et al.*, 2014; Wright, 2018). This study contributes to this research stream by adding original insights into the HR professional image stemming from popular culture portraits.

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Institutional theory suggests that popular culture affects the legitimacy judgment around an occupation, which in turn influences occupational prestige and the way organizations enact and develop related practices (Tost, 2011). The present study considers popular culture as one of the influential forces of the institutional environment and it distills the collective understanding that the media production epitomizes to identify the summative representations behind HR occupations. The theoretical framework suggests that these representations affect the professional image and occupational prestige of the HR department, whereas the empirical study distills the summative popular culture representation stemming from a wide corpus of media outlets. Results contribute to the debate on the HR status and are relevant to the struggle of HR specialists to establish their legitimacy (e.g. Guest and King, 2004; Kuipers and Giurge, 2017) and to the crucial role they could play in the ongoing work transformation (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Minbaeva, 2021).

HR occupational image and legitimacy

Legitimation and occupational image have traditionally been critical issues for HR occupations. A significant body of literature indicates a long and persistent struggle in portraying HR as a valuable function contributing to organizational aims (Heizmann and Fox, 2019). Research highlights that line managers agree that human capital is essential in deploying a successful strategy. Nevertheless, they do not acknowledge the distinctive role of the HR department in contributing to a company's profitability (Kuipers and Giurge, 2017). It is claimed that HR dedicates too much effort to administrative activities deemed marginal for the organization. Consequently, HR employees are described as being merely "clerks of work," "handmaidens" and "administrative experts" focused on short-term, non-interventionary, compliance-oriented activities (Reichel and Lazarova, 2013). Despite ample research suggesting that HR specialists should mainly concentrate on becoming "advisers", "internal consultants", "architects", "business partners", "changemakers" or "change agents", the HR function has largely failed in achieving these aims (Caldwell, 2011; Galang and Osman, 2016). While HR specialists put a great deal of effort into becoming business partners, they gave up offering a voice to employees, thus becoming "simply an agent of capital" (Wright, 2008). Consequently, HR aspires to gain a professional status, although it is held up to the title of the "poor cousin" among managerial professions (Kulik and Perry, 2008; Wright, 2008). The legitimacy struggle that the HR department has been experiencing becomes an even more problematic feature, considering its nature as a staff unit. HR needs external approval to be credible and effective, both within and outside the organization (Gibb, 2000; Pritchard and Symon, 2011).

Meanwhile, the HR occupation is currently under discussion because of the change in the nature of work it is undergoing. Workplace digitalization has created challenging conditions for HR functioning (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). HR plays a decisive role in implementing socially sustainable solutions (Minbaeva, 2021). This could be a unique age for the HR function to be recognized as a strategic unit, able to develop sustainable solutions to gain legitimacy by promoting a renewed organizational setting in which workers remain at its center (Wright, 2021).

These considerations point towards the popular representations of the HR profession playing a relevant role in shaping external approval and informing theory about relevant cues on ways to gain occupational prestige.

Popular culture and the work setting

Popular culture is a "form of entertainment that is mass produced or is made available to large numbers of people" (Street, 1997, p. 7), and includes television, radio, popular music, cinema,

novels, and print media (Grandy and Mavin, 2012). “Popular” identifies a culture that defines itself in terms of its less elevated status, which leads to the interest in daily experiences and emotional states (Rhodes and Parker, 2008). When the plot involves work settings, popular culture typically portrays the twine of characters’ daily personal and professional events. The perspective is personal, and even extraordinary organizational affairs, such as becoming international or closing a factory, are shown from a perceived individual point of view. Popular culture contains images of work that often begin from a position of opposition (Rhodes and Westwood, 2008). The realist pieces and realistic perspective adopted while considering popular culture allow for the observation and interpretation of organizational occurrences (Phillips and Knowles, 2012). In this case, mass media assume a sense-maker function (Grandy and Mavin, 2012).

Critical representations of social relationships occurring at work invade workers’ daily lives, thus influencing their feelings and contributing to shaping their identity (Rhodes and Westwood, 2008). Indeed, the media can also steer opinions toward given realities. In this case, the media contribute to the meaning-making of individuals, thereby performing a sense-giver function (Grandy and Mavin, 2012). Individuals draw from such meaning-making function and filter the behaviors, tasks, values, and social dynamics that arise from popular portrayals of HR occupations. Since the representations are based on media outlets, predictably dark side observations will prevail, highlighting under-investigated issues regarding the HR occupational image.

Studies have proven that occupational image is socially constructed, and that popular culture has a relevant role since it influences the position of an occupational category in society. At individual level, the media’s portrayals of organizational life (performed activities, social relations, place of employment) inform on the meaning that individuals construct around their working lives, thus intervening in the process of self-identity construction (Appel and Weber, 2017; Grandy and Mavin, 2012).

Rhodes and Parker (2008) showed that popular culture offers creative suggestions to inform on the conduct of working life. This acknowledges a performative role of popular culture in that “*it reiterates, recites and possibly parodies prior, and therefore, understandable acts and utterances*” that become “*part of the discursive apparatus that forms the “scene of constraint” within which identity becomes congealed*” (Phillips and Knowles, 2012, p. 422).

In addition to a focus on HR occupation, this study provides a methodological contribution to the literature by arguing for the advancement of popular culture in management research. Indeed, our contribution’s methodological approach allows us to consider the summative insight stemming from popular culture. It is a sort of additive representation that fosters the examination of what emerges from all the images on a certain galling organizational topic. The cumulative framework that surfaces and leads to sketching the overall “result” of several cultural pieces may be critical. Moreover, it enables researchers to shape the totality of cultural products, thus contributing to the debate on peculiar circumstances occurring at work.

Popular culture and institutional environment

Based on institutional theory, an institutional environment is a social system that exerts influence and regulation over other social entities as a persistent feature of social life (Weerakkody *et al.*, 2009). It is defined by a set of societal conventions, shared beliefs, and values and it governs the action of communities and organizations that conform to their structure and behaviors to remain legitimate and survive (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). According to this perspective, the institutional environment structures the identities, values, and schemas of HR professionals and contributes to their legitimation (Lewis *et al.*, 2019).

In agreement with the institutional perspective, mass media production (e.g. movies, novels and TV series) is one of the non-economic and non-rational forces that contribute to the creation of shared understanding and beliefs of the institutional environment (Abrahamson and Fombrun, 1992; Geels, 2004). The mass media sector strongly influences the formation and maintenance of collective understanding, and in this way, it also shapes public opinion. Media conveying popular culture representations guide individual interpretations around collective judgments that repeatedly crystallize into reputational orderings (Tost, 2011). In this context, mass media production is relevant because it concurrently contributes to the crystallization of the collective expectations of the macro environment and, in turn, specifies the content underlying legitimacy judgments (Tost, 2011). Legitimacy is an essential component of institutionalization, which occurs when a social entity gains an implicit quality (Suchman, 1995). Suchman proposed a broad-based and inclusive definition of legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (1995, p. 574). Thus, institutional theorists hold that entities are judged to be legitimate when they are seen as appropriate for their social context.

Several scholars have demonstrated that legitimacy is a prerequisite for identity (Brown and Toyoki, 2013; Navis and Glynn, 2010). Chreim *et al.* (2007) proved that occupational identity is both enabled and constrained by the institutional environment, which provides interpretive, legitimating, and material resources that workers adopt and adapt.

This study offers a way to portray mass media production around HR occupations. Popular occupational representations become a way to understand the context in which legitimacy evaluations and self-identity take place. The way people view their identity is central to both how they interpret and act in work situations.

Research framework and design

The mobilized theories allow for the development of an integrative theoretical framework highlighting the potential effects of popular culture representations on occupational prestige and image and, ultimately, on self-identity (Figure 1).

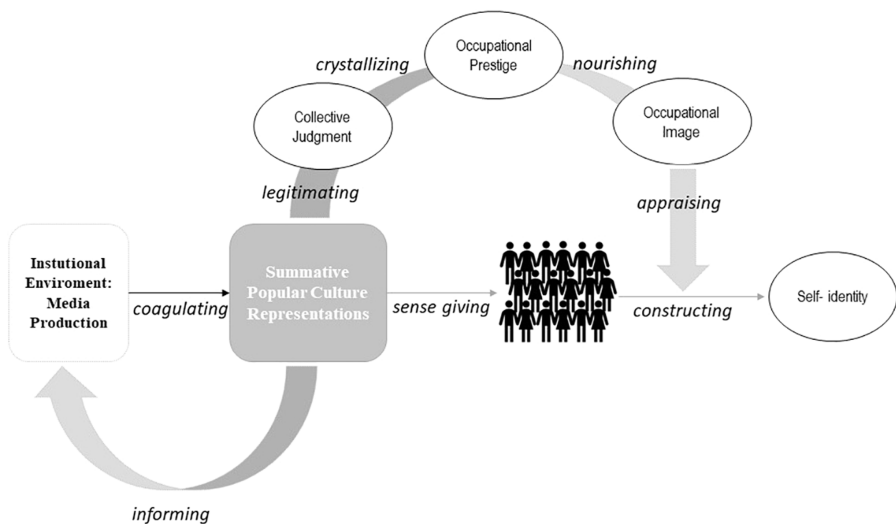


Figure 1.
Theoretical framework

People are surrounded by several popular media outlets that shape their beliefs and ideas. Summative popular culture representations were used in this study in order to discover the images of HR professionals that underpin the current cultural panorama. Together, these representations affect individual perceptions (i.e. media sense-giving functions). During the process of self-identity construction, people are more inclined to detach from groups whose social image is mainly negative (Roberts, 2005). The perspective of social identity threat claims that being part of a negatively portrayed group causes stress to their members and consequently leads to poor performance of groups portrayed as inadequate (Grandy and Mavin, 2012). Therefore, distilling summative popular representations brings to light the occupational image that influences self-identity construction.

At the same time, media production is part of the institutional environment and it molds into representations, thus contributing to defining standards, values, and behaviors that could legitimize (or de-legitimize) an occupation. This contributes to a normative and, ultimately, mimetic effect on competences, performance aims, and Key Performance Indicators (KPI) of an occupation. According to this approach and the concept of occupational prestige, popular culture influences the construction of individual self-identity.

With the aim of distilling the summative popular culture representations of the HR occupation, the present study provides an application of the proposed approach, thus offering the possibility to question its theoretical and managerial value.

Sample

The research sample is composed of 129 HR characters derived from 87 outlets: 13 novels, 49 movies, 21 TV series, and some others including reality shows and comics. Full information on the outlet's titles and authors, and the names and job titles of the characters and their pertaining clusters are provided in Table 1.

To define the sample of the study, different national and international HR professional associations and labor unions [e.g. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Associazione Italiana Direzione del Personale (AIDP), HR Community and Bibliolavoro [1]] as well as some scholars and experts in the entertainment industry were asked to identify outlets containing HR characters.

Data collection

To assess the characters' features, we used the coding scheme provided by Dimnik and Felton (2006) who developed a framework to code professional characters (e.g. managers, employees and professionals) considering both the literature on stereotypes stemming from popular culture and evidence of an inductive research program. The resulting coding scheme was applied to accountants but its items effectively describe business characters more broadly.

This coding framework was chosen since it identifies the representations of business characters and had already been applied. In addition, Roberts (2005) claims that attributes concerning outward appearance (e.g. clothes and make-up) matter in outlining personal identity which in turn contributes to the construction of the occupational image.

The existing formalization of the meaning of each item and the scale values allowed us to address potential problems of inter-coder reliability and reliability over time. The authors periodically discussed the coding (inter-rater reliability was 0.87).

Data analysis

The measurement model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) to evaluate the consistency and reliability of the constructs.

Title/Autor	Character	Job title	Year	Cluster
NOVELS/COMICS				
<i>Breve storia di lunghi tradimenti</i> T.Avoledo	Cecilia Mazzi ^b	HR director	2007	5
<i>Cacciatori di teste</i> J.King	Recruiter ^a	Recruiter	2000	4
<i>Cordiali saluti</i> A.Bajani	HR director ^c HR employee ^b	HR director HR employee	2005	2 3
<i>Dilbert (2013)</i> S.Adams	Catbert 2013 ^b	HR director	1989– to date	1
<i>Headhunters</i> J.Nesbo	Roger Brown ^a	Headhunter	2008	5
<i>Il mondo deve sapere</i> M.Murgia	Hermann ^b Recruiter ^d	Organizational psychologist Recruiter	2006	1 5
<i>Il piccolo principe si mette la cravatta</i> B.Vilaseca	Pablo Principe ^a	HR director	2011	2
<i>A WomAn in Jerusalem</i> A.B. Yehoshua	HR director ^a	HR director	2004	4
<i>Twenties Girl</i> S.Kinsella	Lara Lington ^a	Headhunter	2009	2
<i>Memorie di una cernia</i> M.Sassone	Camel ^c La cernia ^a	Recruiter Headhunter	2014	1 1
<i>Risorsa umana sar� lei</i> S.Talneau	Recruiter ^d	Recruiter	2006	1
<i>Risorse disumane</i> M.Morpurgo	Dottor R. ^b	HR director	2012	4
<i>The pursuit of happiness</i> C.Gardner	MrAlbanese ^c	HR director	2006	2
<i>Up in the air</i> K.Walter	Ryan Birgham ^a	HR advisor	2001	1
<i>Volevo solo dormire addosso</i> M.Lolli	Marco Pressi ^a	HR director	1998	1
<i>Zzot, Fulminati in azienda</i> J.O Selz	Bianca Schedulab	HR director	2009	3
MOVIES/TV SERIES				
<i>30 Rock</i>	Jeffrey Weinerslav ^c	HR employee	2006	3
<i>Glengarry Glen Ross</i>	Blake ^b	Professional trainer	1992	1
<i>Bienvenue � bord</i>	Isabelle ^b	HR director	2011	2
<i>Better off Ted</i>	Janet Crotum ^c	HR director	2009– 2010	5
<i>Billions</i>	Wendy ^b	HR director	2016	2
<i>Camera caf� (France)</i>	Jean-Guy Lecointre ^c	HR director	2001	2
<i>Camera caf� (Italy)</i>	Guido Geller ^c	HR director	2003– to date	1
<i>De gr� ou de force</i>	S�bastien Jalabier ^a	HR professional	1998	5
<i>Dinnerladies</i>	Philippa Moorcroft ^c	HR director	1998	3
<i>Deux jours, une nuit</i>	Dumont ^t	Entrepreneur	2014	5
<i>El jefe</i>	Jean Marc ^c Ricardo Osorio ^a	Line manager HR director	2011	5 5

Table 1.
Novels, comics, movies
and TV series
characters and
representations

(continued)

Title/Autor	Character	Job title	Year	Cluster
<i>El metodo</i>	Ricardo ^a	HR employee	2005	5
	Montse ^b	HR employee		1
<i>Enlightened</i>	Judy Harvey ^c	Head of HR	2011–	4
	Amy Jellicoe ^a	HR IS employee	2013	3
	Dougie Daniels ^c	Head of the HRIS office		1
	Tyler ^c	Head of the HRIS office		3
<i>Fuga dal call center</i>	Geometra Palma ^c	Head of recruitment	2009	4
	Labor psychologist ^d	Company counselor		1
	Trainer ^d	Trainer		5
<i>Get a job</i>	Lawrence	Manager HR	2016	4
	Wilheimer ^c			
<i>Giorni e nuvole</i>	Recruiter1 ^d		2006	3
	Recruiter2 ^d			3
<i>Gli ultimi saranno ultimi</i>	Dr. Saltutti ^c	HR director	2015	5
<i>Green wing</i>	Joanna Clore ^b	HR director	2004–	5
	Kim Alabaster ^c	HR employee	2007	1
	Naughty Rachel ^c	HR employee		1
	Harriet	HR employee		3
	Schulenburg ^c			
	Karen Ball ^c	HR employee		3
<i>Grey's anatomy</i>	Mrs. Grant ^c	HR employee	2009	1
<i>Il mio domain</i>	Monica Barbieri ^a	Trainer	2011	2
<i>Il paradiso delle signore</i>	Clara Mantovani ^a	HR director	2015-to date	4
<i>Il posto</i>	The recruiter ^d		1961	4
<i>Il responsabile delle Risorse umane</i>	HR director ^a		2010	4
<i>Office space</i>	Bob Porter ^b	HR employee	1999	1
	Bob Slydell ^b	HR employee		1
<i>In good company</i>	Carter Duryea ^b	Manager	2004	2
<i>It's a free world ...</i>	Angie ^a	Recruiter and owner of a work agency	2007	1
	Rose ^a	Recruiter and owner of a work agency		3
<i>La felicità è un sistema complesso</i>	Enrico Giustia	Hatchet man	2015	5
<i>La loi du marché</i>	Thierry ^d	HR professional	2015	3
	Moloch ^d	HR director		3
<i>On a failli être amies</i>	Marithè Bressy ^a	Trainer	2014	3
<i>Le couperet</i>	Iris Thompson ^c	Recruiter	2005	4
<i>Le placard</i>	Felix Santini ^b	HR employee	2000	5
<i>L'employ du temps</i>	Recruiter ^d		2001	2
<i>Less than perfect</i>	Gene	HR director	2002–	1
	Schmidtline ^c		2006	
<i>Linee guida sulla ferocia</i>	Donato ^a	HR trainee	2009	1
	Domatore ^b	Recruiter		1
<i>Lo sciacallo</i>	Nina Romina ^c	HR director	2014	5
<i>The Intern</i>	Cameron Cook ^c	HR director	2015	2
	Luis ^c	Recruiter		3
	Samantha ^c	Recruiter		2
	Justin ^c	Recruiter		3
<i>Mi piace lavorare</i>	Dr. Venzi ^c	HR director	2003	1
	Collaborator of Dr. Venzi ^d	HR employee		4

(continued)

Table 1.

Title/Autor	Character	Job title	Year	Cluster
<i>Monday Monday</i>	Christine Frances ^a	HR director	2009	3
<i>Mr Robot</i>	Sally ^b	HR manager assistant		2
	Edward Alderson ^b	HR manager	2015	3
<i>New in town</i>	Lucy Hill ^a	Plant manager	2009	2
<i>Orange is the new black</i>	Joe Caputo ^a	Line manager	2015	5
	Daniel Pearson ^b	HR director		5
<i>Predestination</i>	Agente Miles ^c	Recruiter	2014	1
	Mr. Robertson ^c	Recruiter		1
	Mrs Stapleton ^c	Recruiter		1
<i>Private Practice</i>	Charlotte King ^c	HR director	2007– 2013	1
	Miranda Shaw ^c	HR director	2015	2
<i>Quo vado</i>	Dr. Sironi ^b	HR director	2015	1
<i>Ratataplan</i>	Recruiter ^d		1979	4
<i>Recurso Humanos</i>	Recruitment trainee ^a		2004	5
	Senior recruiter ^b			4
	Recruiter ^d			5
<i>Riens du tout</i>	Monsieur Lepetit ^a	HR director	1992	4
	Madame Dujardin ^c	Training manager		4
	Franck Verdeux ^a	HR employee	1999	3
<i>Santa maradona</i>	Dr. Chambonne ^b	HR director		4
	Recruiter ^d		2001	5
	Recruiter ^d			5
	Recruiter ^d			4
	Recruiter ^d			4
	Recruiter ^d			4
	Recruiter ^d			4
<i>Si accettano miracoli</i>	Fulvio Canfora ^a	HR director	2015	1
<i>Silicon Valley</i>	Gary Irving ^c	HR manager	2014	2
<i>Sotto una buona stella</i>	Luisa Tombolini ^b	Hatchet man	2014	2
<i>The Apprentice (Italy)</i>	Flavio Briatore ^b	Recruiter	2013-to date	2
	HR employee ^d		2007	4
<i>The big bang theory</i>	Janine Davis ^c	HR director	2014– 15	4
	Sally Wilcox ^c	HR director	2010	3
<i>The Internship</i>	Roger Chetty ^b	Head of the Apprentice Program	2013	2
<i>The Office (Germany)</i>	Dr. Nuebel ^c	HR director	2004– 2012	3
<i>The Office (US)</i>	Toby Flanderson ^c	HR employee	2005-to date	3
<i>The pursuit of happiness</i>	Jay Twistle ^c	Recruiter	2006	5
	Alan Frakesh ^c	Recruiter		2
	Recruiter ^d	Recruiter	1987	4
<i>The secret of my success</i>	Mrs. Miller ^c	Recruiter		1
<i>The strain</i>	Eve ^c	HR manager	2014	1
<i>Ti presento un amico</i>	HR employee ^d		2010	4
<i>Tutta la vita davanti</i>	Daniela ^b	Trainer	2008	1
	Claudio ^c	Company boss		5

Table 1.

(continued)

Title/Autor	Character	Job title	Year	Cluster
<i>Up in the air</i>	Ryan Bingham ^a	Hatchet man	2009	4
	Natalie ^b	Hatchet man		3
<i>View from the top</i>	John Witney ^c	Recruiter and trainer	2003	2
<i>Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré</i>	Philippe ^c	HR employee	2003	3
	Hugo Paradis ^c	HR employee		5
<i>Volevo solo dormire addosso</i>	Marco Pressi ^a	HR director	2004	1
<i>Workaholics</i>	Eric Rossdale ^c	Training manager	2011	2
<i>Workers - Pronti a tutto</i>	Sandro ^b	Temp agency	2012	1
	Filippo ^b	Temp agency		1

Note(s): ^(a) = main character; ^(b) = supporting; ^(c) = named minor; ^(d) = unnamed, extra

Table 1.

Starting from 41 items, [Dimnik and Felton \(2006\)](#) performed an exploratory factor analysis from which they extracted six factors whose labels and meaning are described in [Table 2](#). From the initial 41 items, they identified 28 items that load on the six factors, respectively. As professional certifications are not as common for HR employees in Southern Europe, the related item was deleted from the original coding. Running a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the resulting measurement model ensured that the items were indeed measuring common latent constructs, considering the fact that Dimnik and Felton's measure is a second

Low score	Variable	High score
Insensitive, cold, callous Insincere, devious Dishonest, unethical Uncharitable Impolite and impatient No advice or insights	Warmth	Sensitive, caring, tender, kind Sincere, straight-forward Honest, ethical Charitable Polite and patient Has insights and advice
Weak, subservient, no power Dreamer, impractical Stupid Boring, predictable work	Confidence	Powerful, leader, respected Pragmatic, hard-nosed Intelligent Exciting, eventful work
No interest in sex Sedentary No friends or acquaintances Over 50	Vitality	Shows interest in sex Physically active Has friends and acquaintances Under 30
Works in non-HR service firm, non-specialized HR department, or in government Neutral colored clothing No co-workers shown or not referred to	Occupational status	Self-employed/works for an HR service firm, HR professional, HR manager Bright, colorful clothing Co-workers shown or referred to as friendly
Pessimistic Serious, worried, sober Nervous, neurotic, anxious Unhappy love life	Outlook	Optimistic Smiling, pleasant, happy Calm, relaxed, easy-going Happy love life
Physically unattractive Unfashionable, slob Abnormal speech (loud, screeching) Short	Appearance	Physically attractive Fashionable Normal speech Tall

Table 2.
Variable meanings

order measurement model (Prudon, 2015). CFA allowed the authors to perform a more rigorous analysis of the constructs' validity compared to factor analysis. This was useful also because Dimnik and Felton restricted themselves to performing the exploratory factor analysis of their coding scheme and did not complete the standard path for developing a new scale (Clark and Watson, 1995). CFA allows for the evaluation of the psychometric properties of existing measures by examining whether a measure is invariant across groups, populations, or time. This was of particular importance in our case because Dimnik and Felton (2006) developed the measure independently and applied it to the accountants' cohort. Moreover, this measurement model was recently developed and had not become widely used in the literature yet, further suggesting the need to test its validity.

The results of the first CFA on the slightly modified 27-item model did not report satisfactory goodness-of-fit indices, the cause being four problematic items. Therefore, we performed CFA on different models by eliminating the four items with considerably low factor loadings and squared multiple correlation values (Facteau *et al.*, 1995), and that loaded on more than one variable according to the high modification indices (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1996). Overall, 14 models were implemented and compared.

The model with the best goodness-of-fit indices included 24 items loading on the original six latent variables (Dimnik and Felton, 2006): six items loaded on the first variable (warmth); four on the second variable (confidence); four on the third variable (vitality); three on the fourth variable (occupational status); four on the fifth variable (outlook); and three on the sixth variable (appearance). Table 2 shows the labels of the variables and their relevant details. When compared to the original model by Dimnik and Felton (2006), the items "greed", "height", and "humor" were further excluded.

The CFA of the final model provided the following results: $\chi^2/df = 1.80$; GFI = 0.912; AGFI = 0.878; CFI = 0.942; NNFI = 0.919; SRMR = 0.0502, and RMSEA = 0.078. A satisfactory fit is obtained when AGFI is greater than 0.80; GFI, CFI, NNFI are greater than 0.90, and SRMR is less than or equal to 0.10 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Chin and Todd, 1995). An RMSEA value of 0.05 indicates a close fit and values up to 0.08 represent reasonable errors of approximation in the population (Browne and Cudeck, 1993). Accordingly, the model's overall fit was considered satisfactory.

Then, convergent validity was tested by checking whether all items significantly (all *t*-values greater than twice their standard error) and substantially (all standardized parameters above 0.50) loaded onto the expected latent construct (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Moreover, all constructs showed satisfactory levels of average variance extracted (AVE) (all AVEs >0.52) and composite reliability (all >0.67), which is a less biased measure of reliability than Cronbach's Alpha. With regards to discriminant validity among the constructs, the condition proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) was adopted. All AVEs are greater than any squared correlation (SC) among the constructs (greater SC = 0.11), suggesting that discriminant validity was achieved. In addition, the correlations between the latent variables range from 0.02 to 0.33 (below the threshold proposed by Kline, 2005).

Next, the six validated variables (i.e. warmth, confidence, vitality, occupational status, outlook, and appearance – see Table 2) were used to perform cluster analysis, thus allowing the authors to identify the summative insight behind a large set of popular culture representations regarding the HR occupation. The K-means cluster analysis was chosen since hierarchy among the cases was not relevant in this study.

The solution maximizing both internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity identified five clusters composed as follows: 35 characters classified as executor, 21 as hero, 24 as buddy, 25 as bore, and 24 as good-time person.

Table 3 displays a synthetic description of HR professional representations that emerged from the analysis. The ANOVA's *F*-tests provide evidence that the means for all clusters on each variable are statistically different, except for vitality.

Table 3 also shows the values of the variables that synthetically represent the cases of the cluster.

The clusters' names were appointed on the basis of their distinguishing features.

To provide additional insight into the composition of each HR representation, the cluster configurations were further analyzed by considering their internal distribution in terms of:

- (1) The role prominence of the HR professional characters (main, supporting, named minor, or unnamed character);
- (2) Personal data (gender and age);
- (3) Socio-economic variables (pre-crisis *vs* post-crisis and local *vs* global) (Table 4).

Implications of this analysis are described in the sub-section *Evidence within cluster* in the *Findings* section.

	F (*)	Sig.	Cluster				
			Executor	Hero	Buddy	Bore	Good-time person
Warmth	102,10	0.000	1,389	2,423	2,387	1,430	1,506
Confidence	8.93	0.000	2,217	2,232	1,910	1,776	2,164
Vitality	0.82	0.516	1,700	1,701	1,690	1,566	1,716
Occupational status	14.90	0.000	2,356	2,024	2,013	1,754	1,563
Outlook	46.48	0.000	1,700	2,470	1,520	2,303	1,603
Appearance	8.32	0.000	2,156	1,976	1,680	1,614	1,885

Note(s): (*) The *F* tests should be used only for descriptive purposes, as the clusters have been chosen to maximize the differences among cases in different clusters

Table 3.
Analysis of variance
and factor mean for
each representation

	Executor		Hero		Buddy		Bore		Good-time person		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<i>Role</i>												
Main character	7	0.20	4	0.19	8	0.33	5	0.20	7	0.29	31	0.24
Supporting	12	0.34	6	0.28	4	0.17	3	0.12	5	0.21	30	0.23
Named minor	14	0.40	10	0.48	7	0.29	9	0.36	7	0.29	47	0.37
Unnamed extra	2	0.06	1	0.05	5	0.21	8	0.32	5	0.21	21	0.16
<i>Gender</i>												
Male	23	0.66	11	0.52	13	0.54	17	0.68	20	0.83	84	0.65
Female	12	0.34	10	0.48	11	0.46	8	0.32	4	0.17	45	0.35
<i>Culture</i>												
Local	17	0.49	4	0.19	3	0.12	15	0.60	14	0.58	53	0.41
Global	18	0.51	17	0.81	21	0.88	10	0.40	10	0.42	76	0.59
<i>Age (% calculated within each age group)</i>												
Under 30	3	0.19	5	0.31	6	0.38	0	0	2	0.12	16	100
30–50	27	0.29	14	0.15	18	0.19	19	0.20	16	0.17	94	100
Over 50	5	0.26	2	0.10	0	0	6	0.32	6	0.32	19	100
<i>Age (% calculated within each cluster)</i>												
Under 30	3	0.9	5	0.24	6	0.25	0	0	2	0.08	16	0.12
30–50	27	0.77	14	0.67	18	0.75	19	0.76	16	0.67	94	0.73
Over 50	5	0.14	2	0.9	0	0	6	0.24	6	0.25	19	0.15

Table 4.
Cluster composition

Findings

Representation #1: Executor

The executor is called on to deal with “dirty and unpopular” situations, and acts in a sarcastic, unsympathetic, and aggressive way. The executor is a successful and powerful individual, although not loved by others. They are mainly self-employed (e.g. consultant), intelligent, and conform to what is asked. Their image is characterized by cynical and indifferent behavior, frequently imposed by economic crises where everyone is called on to fire and exploit others. This representation is the largest cluster in our analysis. They have the lowest score for warmth, the highest for appearance and occupational status, and the second best for confidence.

Marco Pressi, the HR director in *Volevo Solo Dormirle Addosso*, is representative of this image. The Italian movie encircles the downsizing that takes place in the company where Marco is called on to make redundancies. The company’s original claim was “people first”, but Marco must turn from training to firing people. He is young, successful, competent, and manipulative when it comes to achieving his personal objectives. The work environment is characterized by high pressure toward cost cutting imposed by Asian partners. A second representative is the corporate “downsizer” Ryan Bingham who has the same role in *Up in the Air* (2009). He travels to workplaces across the US and cynically conducts company layoffs on behalf of employers. Ryan is a professional who works for an HR consultancy company, and he is a senior and tutors his young colleague Natalie on handling the emotional and motivational side of the firing process. The character is played by the actor George Clooney, thus turning Ryan into a good-looking, fashionable man whose main attractive feature is his persuasive way of speaking.

Representation #2: Hero

They are powerful, pragmatic, intelligent, emotionally sensitive, attractive, and ethically upright. They work in an elegant firm and are pleasant and optimistic. This is the most positive among all representations. The hero has the highest scores for warmth and outlook, making them the employees’ favorite HR professional, while they also score high on confidence.

Monica Barbieri falls within this representation: she is the main character in *Il Mio Domani*. She is a successful and sophisticated 45-year-old HR consultant. At the beginning of the story, she lives an ordinary life, but then, due to a personal crisis, she decides to improve her life, giving more authentic meaning to her professional role. Another similar character is Wendy Rhoades in the American television drama series *Billions* (2016). She is a very professional and capable in-house hedge fund coach. Wendy combines smart intellect with a keen understanding of human nature. She uses these skills to help the business and the people and is a well-respected character.

Representation #3: Buddy

They are oriented towards other people but are not practical and have little power. They often appear worried, pessimistic, and anxious. The buddy is devoted to employees: highly sensitive, sincere, kind, provides advice to co-workers, but finds it hard to cope with other job duties. Owing to their low effectiveness, they have relatively little authority. The buddy presents the second highest score for warmth, the lowest for outlook, and the second lowest for confidentiality and vitality.

An example of this representation is Amy Jellicoe in *Enlightened*. She works in an unattractive HR department. Amy is a “tragic heroine” portrayed as worrying too much about her ideals to which she does not always live up. She has a bad job and is an idealistic yet socially awkward executive. After a humiliating nervous breakdown at work, she goes into

rehabilitation and returns to the company with a new mindset, but also a much less important job. Although Amy wants to be an “agent of change”, the people who know her best are skeptical. Similarly, Marité, the main character in the French movie *On a failli être amies* is a trainer who excels at defending jobseekers and vulnerable employees. She is calm and, although not as overtly, she seems quite melancholic.

Representation #4: Bore

They are generally older and sedentary, and wear unfashionable clothes that make them look sloppy. The bore has a repetitive job, which contributes to lowering their ascendancy, thus leaving them isolated. This leads them to have the second lowest score for occupational status. Sometimes, the character is depicted as a bean counter and not very smart. The bore had the lowest scores for vitality, confidence, and appearance.

An exemplar of this representation is the main character in the Jewish novel *A Woman in Jerusalem*, the story of a female victim of a suicide bombing in the Jerusalem market. Her body is nameless in a hospital morgue. The owner of the bakery in which she worked sends his HR manager to identify the body and figure out how her absence went unnoticed for so long. The HR manager accepts the mission under the threat of losing his job. The character is a gray administrative employee who is an honest 39-year-old man caught up in his own small state of despair. He wears neutral colors and is described as pessimistic, serious, and sober. Another example is the not very sharp HR manager Lawrence Wilheimer in the movie *Get a job*. In the circumstance of a massive lay off in his company, the top manager made all her decisions without consulting him, thus suggesting that Lawrence does not hold any relevant role either for the general manager or for the employees. He is a mature man, very formal and old-fashioned in his appearance and clothes. He does not look particularly bright and competent, he is not recognized as a leader, but he is very compliant.

Representation #5: Good-time person

This representation identifies an active, relational person who, however, is mainly interested in their personal life and considers work as functional to their personal fulfillment, so that they sometimes behave impatiently and seem unhappy while working. A good time person is not very competent and they are not worried about their occupational status being compromised. They score the highest for vitality, but the lowest for status.

An exemplar of this is Claudio, the company boss in *Tutta la Vita Davanti*, an Italian movie describing the working conditions in a call center. Claudio is around 50, generally insincere, but tries to appear polite. He is always worried about his looks and is more involved in managing his love affairs than his HR activities. The extent of his love and lack of interest in business issues are such that he ends up driving his company into the ground. A second example is Joseph Salvatore Caputo, known as Joe in the American comedy television series *Orange is the New Black* (2016). He is the main character and HR director of Litchfield Penitentiary. Despite his somewhat flirting and gruff nature, Joe is an honest man who genuinely cares for the women in his charge. His personal affairs and “struggle” with other high-ranking colleagues, in addition to the fact that he is “soft” and an underdog in the prison, lead to both staff and prisoners having little respect for him.

The overall analysis of the summative HR popular representations suggests that some combinations of the characteristics of the HR professionals contribute to depicting positive judgments, whereas others negatively affect the HR representations. [Figure 2](#) incorporates these characteristics into the proposed theoretical framework and suggests their impact

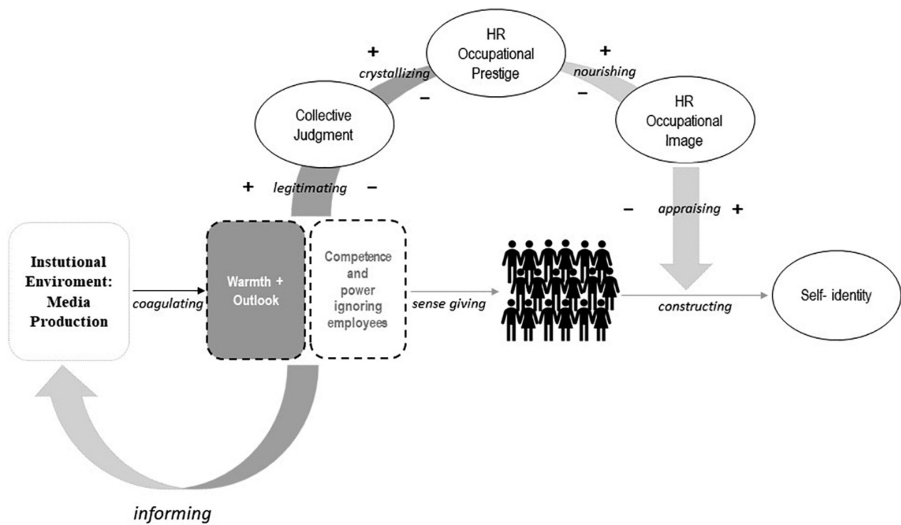


Figure 2.
Popular culture and HR
occupational image

on HR occupational prestige and image, as more extensively explained in the discussion section.

Evidence within representations

The cluster compositions offer further interesting evidence of the depiction of HR professionals with respect to starring role, age, gender of the characters, and issuing date and place of distribution of the outlets (Table 4). HR employees are mainly named supporting characters (37%). In this position, they prevail in both the executor and hero clusters, meaning that they are included in the story to either positively or negatively influence the main character's life. When HR people are the main characters, they tend to be the buddy (33%) — they take care of employees but are not recognized professionals. Men play the greatest part in the sample, and are the most numerous in the executor, bore, and good-time person clusters. Surprisingly, the distribution was more balanced in the hero and buddy clusters (52 vs 48% for heroes, 54 vs 46% for buddies). Approximately half of the heroes were female and 46% were buddies, whereas only 35% of the characters in the sample were women. Middle-aged HR employees constitute the largest part of the sample (73%). Characters under the age of 30 are essentially positive people, represented as either hero or buddy, for 69% of young HR characters, which is 12% of the sample. Characters over 50 are mainly negative; 64% are in the bore or in the good-time clusters (Table 4).

Distinguishing whether the outlet was globally or locally distributed shows whether cultural origin influenced HR professional representations. Global outlets are mainly North American and English, while local ones were essentially Italian, Spanish, and French. The sample composition was balanced: 59% global and 41% local outlets. Global HR professionals are more prevalent in the more positive clusters (81% hero and 88% buddy), whereas local characters clearly depict low professional HR representatives (60% bore and 58% good-time), suggesting a “cultural contextual” effect. Finally, the image of unqualified employees prevailed in the pre-crisis representations (64% bore and 58% good time), which come from pre-2009 outlets (a reasonable date to detect whether the 2007–2008 economic crisis affected the HR professional image), tentatively suggesting a new trend for HR in more recent times.

Discussion and conclusions

The five representations offer critical cues about common beliefs permeating working life around the HR occupation and integrating the mainstream discourse on this occupation's status and prestige.

They provide interesting insight into how proper organizational and HR solutions suitable to deal with problems raised by employees can be effectively designed. The summative representations also portray relevant characteristics (e.g. capabilities, behavior patterns, micro-social dynamics, relational approaches, and values) that have been proven to impact HR occupational image (Roberts, 2005). These patterns are deemed either desirable or depreciable (see Figure 2).

The representations that receive positive judgment entail the relevance of characteristics such as warmth (honest, charitable, ethical behaviors) and high outlook (optimism, pleasantness, easy-going). The categories "warmth" and "outlook" suggest the concepts of "integrity" and "positive attitudes". The adopted method proposes multifaceted occupational images. In fact, the two positive dimensions (i.e. warmth and outlook) merge together to depict a constructive representation, and the positive evaluation of only one is not sufficient to obtain a favorable image. These findings play a key role in the debate around HR legitimacy, as they offer factual support to the HR function's ability to contribute to a new social contract (Minbaeva, 2021). They confirm that a positive HR representation is related to the perception of an HR specialist who genuinely takes care of employee well-being and who can enhance positive feelings during difficult times. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the public opinion pays little attention to the so-called HR strategic position despite the mainstream HR literature positing that the power and influence of HR specialists are mainly related to their strategic vs administrative role (Galang and Osman, 2016). This does not imply that the HR strategic position is not relevant, rather that public opinion advocates for other HR features.

Our results contribute to the theoretical longstanding debate around HR roles which advocates for the need to move from an administrative level to a more strategic business partner role (Ulrich, 1996). The findings confirm the relevance, from a public opinion perspective, of activating a multiple HR role where the so-called employee champion needs genuine attention, competence and dedication from the HR professionals. This suggests that the HR professionals can gain credibility not only by pursuing the always-mentioned business partner role but also by adding value to the organization-employee relationship. They can do so by taking care of employees, their competences, commitment and needs and finding the right balance between the business focus and the people, in line with the less discussed role of the employee champion (Wright, 2021).

The findings also suggest that one of the controversial issues stemming from summative representations is the ethics of the HR occupation.

The representations condemn HR professionals pursuing unethical actions and worrying about their firm and personal interests despite the workers' security and respect. This is the case of the executor, who seems to have power and influence to the detriment of employees. The representations also suggest that a genuine concern about workers is not enough to gain popular positive feedback since, at times, two main elements are lacking: first, credible competences to balance the firm's and workers' perspectives; and second, a recognized authority within and outside the organization, regardless of an ethical, generous, and vital approach.

The perceived level of HR "confidence", mainly related to competence and power, surprisingly does not discriminate between positive and negative representations, and is high in three good and bad representations (hero, executor, and good-time person). A possible explanation is recognizing how people "use" their competence and power: for their own purposes (good-time person), to support top management (executor), or for the employees' interest (hero). We believe that the relevance and centrality of HR ethical behavior can be an

original contribution stemming from our study. Indeed, this could complement the more recent literature on HR transformation, thus readying it to face the incumbent global megatrends and effectively navigate its new landscape (Harney and Collings, 2021; Minbaeva, 2021). We posit that the ethical behavior should be considered as a prerequisite by HR professionals who intend to embrace the inside/outside perspective, plan how the HR function can provide value to all the organizational stakeholders (Bissola and Imperatori, 2012; Ulrich and Dulebohn, 2015), and tackle the deep changeover that the HR profession must undergo in order to face the trends that are affecting the future of work and organizations (Harney and Collings, 2021). This also reinforces the importance of strengthening trust in the HR function by building a socially responsible role, especially during times of crisis, when HR specialists are often associated with short-term reactive concerns (Bissola and Imperatori, 2014). This finding complements the literature suggesting that crises could be a challenge to develop socially sustainable employment solutions (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). Figure 2 provides a summary of the insights stemming from our study and integrates them into the theoretical framework which we depicted in order to highlight the relevance of the popular culture perspective in management studies and in HR research in particular. First, the overall results of the summative HR popular culture representations show that individual behaviors such as being honest, charitable and maintaining an ethical conduct paired with an easy-going pleasant personal style (which are defined in our empirical study by high levels of warmth and outlook) can promote a positive collective judgment of the HR profession. Such a positive collective consideration contributes to the occupational prestige of this quasi-profession, which, in turns, positively nourishes the HR occupational image. On the contrary, summative HR representations reveal that competent and powerful HR professionals who disregard employees' needs legitimate a negative collective judgment, which contributes to threatening the occupational prestige of HR and therefore damaging the HR occupational image.

Social groups influence occupational images (Roberts, 2005). In our sample, gender and age had diverse representations contributing to the debate about occupational prestige, segregation, and diversity (García-Mainar *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, female characters are portrayed in a more positive way than their male counterparts. This goes against the unfavorable stereotype that women frequently experience but is consistent with HR being described as a feminized occupation (Kochan, 2009). Similarly, young characters are essentially positively depicted, suggesting that ageism might be a risk factor for HR occupations.

Finally, HR representations also carry some implications for HRM education since they help to critically question prevalent rhetoric practices. These include issues such as HR strategic partnering or, on the contrary, the fact that HR need to be "nice" people who love interactions. Conversely, our evidence seems to anticipate the need for education paths able to better cope with the competing demands for profit, social justice, and environmental sustainability (Biffi *et al.*, 2017).

This study contributes to the literature on popular culture. The findings demonstrate that it is worth depicting kaleidoscopic occupational portrayals, since these can grasp the diverse understandings embedded in popular culture about an occupation, in turn contributing to the debate about occupational prestige. This consideration offers an overall outline of the topic under investigation, which includes a full range of insights ranging from positive to negative. This allows us to sketch a balance of how the topic is represented without neglecting the critical and condemning potential of popular culture when placing work settings in the spotlight (Rhodes and Westwood, 2008). Our exploration of the HR occupation provides an example, corroborates the critical role of occupational summative representations capturing portrayals, and features that even a highly attentive observer cannot detect, as they do not exist by themselves. From a more hands-on standpoint, the summative popular representations offer the media producers (e.g. movies and TV series screenwriters and fiction writers) a concrete showcase of how they indirectly influence (HR) occupations,

enlightening them about their role and their effects on the job market. Our results also strengthen the message that the public should not only appraise an occupation based on its representations in mass media and popular culture as these mainly highlight the critical and problematic issues of the HR roles.

The results also contribute to institutional theory by suggesting a viable method for depicting one of the relevant components of the macro institutional environment, namely popular culture. Popular culture acts as a normative force driving collective judgment, which has received scant attention in institutional literature (Tost, 2011). In the case of HR, this institutional pressure puts forward a possible explanation for the growing mistrust toward HR professionals and the difficulties encountered in the relationship between HR specialists and line managers (Larsen and Brewster, 2003). Moreover, it could help HR specialists become more aware of the social judgment that stems from popular culture and hopefully to call them to action in contrasting and complementing it.

Note

1. CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) is a global professional association for human resource management professionals based in London. It is the world's oldest association in its field. AIDP (Associazione Italiana Direzione del Personale) and HR Community are the two main national Italian associations for HR professionals. Bibliolavoro is the cultural unit of one of the main Italian labor unions.

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