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Defining the Brand Hero: Explorations of the Impact of Brand Hero Credibility on a Brand Community

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a definition of brand hero based on the literature surrounding celebrity endorsement with particular emphasis on source credibility and attractiveness. Three brand communities and their brand hero(es) were analyzed using an ethnographic-grounded theory approach. Findings indicate that brand hero credibility does not solely include expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness but is complicated by the inter-relationship between the brand, community and hero to include the attributes of integrity and affinity. These are key constructs in the effectiveness of the brand hero in motivating the brand community to act for the benefit of the brand.

INTRODUCTION

While the nature of celebrity is often lamented in modern society (Caughey 1987) marketers have held a positive view of celebrities as potential tools for gaining and holding the attention of potential customers through a focus on celebrities as endorsers of a product or brand (McCracken 1989). However, there is a gap in the research in understanding the nature of brand community celebrities, which are people who are recognized by the brand community for their role within the brand’s creation. This article seeks to offer an alternative perspective to that outlined by celebrity endorsement. Through the application of the source credibility framework a more comprehensive understanding of brand hero effectiveness is achieved. The difference in source and audience effects has a profound impact on the application of brand hero credibility. This article will define the concept of brand hero in order to understand the issues surrounding credibility.

THE LITERATURE

A feature of modern society is the rise of fan culture within popular media, which has led to an increasing interest in consumption related social networks, such as brand communities. A brand community is “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p.412). Brand community research has focused on how brand communities positively influence marketing outcomes in terms of brand commitment and meaning, and also for the consumer in the development of self and social identity (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002, Muniz and Hamer 2001, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Muniz and Schau 2005). However, while there has been acknowledgement that there are celebrity influences within a brand community (Belk and Tumbat 2005, Muniz and Schau 2005) there has been little research into the relationship between brand community members and these celebrity figures.

In contrast, there has been extensive research into the area of using celebrities to endorse a brand or product in marketing communications, specifically in advertising. McCracken (1989, p.310) defines a celebrity endorser as “any individual who enjoys public recognition and uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good appearing with it in an advertisement”. A basic assumption of this definition is that a celebrity’s public recognition is developed separately from the brand and this recognition is then used to endorse a brand. From this assumption of externally developed recognition, celebrity endorsement research has focused on finding appropriate celebrities and presenting them in persuasive and symbolically representative communications with the brand (McCracken 1989). This has overshadowed study of internally generated celebrities whose public recognition is tied to their role with the brand, thus issues of appropriateness and symbolic congruence are not relevant.

A number of endorsement roles that the celebrity can fulfill have been identified: (1) the celebrity is an expert; (2) is associated with the manufacturer in some long-term capacity; or (3) has no special knowledge, or association with, the product in question (Friedman, Termini and Washington 1976, McCracken 1989). The first role of celebrity endorser as expert can be applied to the brand hero. The brand hero derives their perceived expertise from their involvement in the creation or production of the brand. However, the literature in celebrity endorsement tends to use examples of experts external to the brand, such as a racing car driver endorsing motor oil (McCracken 1989), where their perceived expertise is a consequence of their profession and would impart knowledge about motor products. The second role of the celebrity endorser in association with the manufacturer in a long-term capacity also can be applied to the brand hero concept. For example, singer Kylie Minogue has a long-term relationship with lingerie maker Holeproof in a capacity of designing a range of co-branded lingerie; she doesn’t just endorse the product but is involved in its creation. In terms of brand heroes where the brand is the sole creation of that celebrity the association between the celebrity and the manufacturer is indelibly linked. However, not all brand heroes require a long-term relationship, for example, a director may have only worked on one Star Trek movie to be considered a brand hero for the Star Trek brand community. The third role includes only celebrities well-known from external sources, which does not fit within the brand hero concept (McCracken 1989), examples of this include Christina Aguilera and LL Cool J, both singers, appearing in television commercials for Virgin Mobile. Neither celebrity has a special association with the brand through expertise or through a long-term association, as these were one-off appearances. This final role has no equivalent to the concept of brand hero, where the core assumption is some special association to the brand in a capacity internal to the creation or production of the brand.

There have been three main approaches to celebrity endorsement developed. The first two approaches are similar in their application and rely on the target market viewing the celebrity as either a credible source of information or as an attractive source. The third is referred to as the ‘meaning movement’ approach, where a celebrity is an appropriate endorser when there is congruence in the symbolic images evoked by both the celebrity and the brand. The ‘meaning movement’ approach may be of importance in understanding the effectiveness of a brand hero, but it is beyond the scope of this article. Source credibility states that the celebrity will be viewed as a credible source when it is perceived that celebrity has the ability to make valid assertions (expertness), and a willingness to make valid assertions (trustworthiness) (McCracken 1989). Source attractiveness has been considered as a separate factor in explaining source effectiveness (Kahle and Homer 1985) or as an additional component of credibility (Kamins 1990). Attractiveness as an indicator of credibility is considered the most appropriate conceptualization, as the focus for brand heroes is not physical attractiveness, but rather their attractiveness is a function of their contribution to the brand’s success. However, the nature of brand
hero credibility is somewhat different which will be explored further in the findings section.

The definition of celebrity does not fully encompass the brand hero concept, as the special association the brand hero has with the brand means that other factors beyond mere recognition are present. The definition that is most widely used is “celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness” (Boorstin 1964, p.57). In particular, the key-determining factor of a brand hero being influential in a brand community is their perceived credibility with the brand and the community. However rather than being limited to expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, for the brand hero, credibility takes on additional dimensions as the relationship between the brand, brand community and the brand hero create a more complex relationship of perceptions than the simple brand-endorser memory matrix proposed by McCracken (1989). The findings presented will discuss how current definitions of endorser credibility apply to the brand hero context. Also, credibility will be extended to include the added complexity of the brand community situation and the effect this has on brand community outcomes.

**METHOD**

The objective of this article is to define the concept of the brand hero and the outcome of credibility on brand hero effectiveness. A qualitative approach was applied as the nature of understanding brand hero credibility is exploratory. Both the grounded theory approach, particularly the principles of building theory from data through constant comparison and theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967), and ethnography, and its concern for culturally based patterns of behavior (Goulding 2005) were applied in this research. Theoretical sampling of cases was conducted for analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967), where sampling was based on a single/multiple role by single/multiple brand hero matrix, with three sites selected that are discussed below, see Figure 1. The analysis method applied was derived from grounded theory, with data being open-coded, then built into categories that through systematic comparison were developed into theoretical constructs and relationships.

**Site 1: Discworld**

The principal site of investigation was the Discworld brand community. Terry Pratchett as the author of Discworld books represents a single brand hero with a single role. Discworld is a fantasy-comedy series that has sold over 40 million books worldwide. There are 38 books, aimed at adults, in the series. Data collection was ethnographically based with the researcher forming an embedded role in online and real-world Discworld communities. This involved participant observation in online forums and real-world conventions, and in-depth interviews with brand community members and Terry Pratchett.

**Site 2: The Brumbies**

The Brumbies are a rugby union team that competes in the Super14 competition comprising teams from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The Brumbies have multiple brand heroes that perform a single role as players. Data collection involved participant observation of fans at games held in Canberra, Australia over a three-year period.

**Site 3: Star Trek**

Star Trek has multiple brand heroes who have multiple roles from actors, directors, authors and creators of the television series, books and movies. Star Trek is one of the most successful television science fiction series ever, with continuous production of Star Trek related entertainment since the sixties. Data collection was non-participant in nature and involved analyzing the question and answer sessions that were held online at the official Star Trek website (www.startrek.com) between community members and various Star Trek celebrities.

**WHO IS THE BRAND HERO?**

The different sites of investigation underlined the differences that exist between the traditional conceptualization of the celebrity endorser credibility and how credibility is applied to brand heroes. Figure 2 shows the attributes of the brand, the brand hero and the
brand community that combine to create brand hero credibility. The findings suggest that while the brand hero needs to be seen as an expert and trustworthy, these concepts take on different dimensions in the brand hero context as the brand hero is placed within the milieu of the brand community. As the relationship is more complex there are also additional dimensions to brand hero credibility that will be presented. The findings from the analysis of the different brand community sites indicate that credibility is extended through brand hero integrity and affiliation.

**Brand Hero Integrity**

The research revealed that for the brand community one of the key brand hero attributes was integrity. The celebrity endorsement literature refers to source credibility in terms of expertise and trustworthiness. Expertness is defined as the perceived ability of the celebrity to make assertions about a product, and trustworthiness is the perceived willingness of the celebrity to make valid assertions (McCracken 1989). These definitions have an underlying assumption that the celebrity’s credibility is based on their activities external to the brand, which is then matched-up to the brand and the message (McCracken 1989). Such an assumption does not take into account the credibility that a celebrity might attain through their association with the brand. For instance, Terry Pratchett the brand hero to the Discworld brand community hardly needs to establish his expertise in the Discworld brand or in the fantasy literature product category as his creation of the brand itself has established his legitimacy. When respondents were asked whether they believed Terry Pratchett was a celebrity the responses were mixed but respondents referred to his credibility as an author and his integrity as a representative of the Discworld brand.

“Yes essentially Terry Pratchett is a giant of literature, he’s a god. There’s nothing else you need to say about Terry Pratchett in my mind he’s a giant of literature he’s something out there, I don’t need him in my life, he’s there. His books are in my life and occasionally I go to his lectures and go ‘oh wow this is fascinating’ it really is.” (Chris, Personal Interview)

The statement by Chris indicates that Terry Pratchett’s credibility is enhanced because of his perceived status in the product category. One of the core aspects of brand hero credibility is the belief that they represent the top of their field. This status in the field is often expressed in comparative terms between competing brands and brand heroes.

“I completely agree with what Terry Pratchett says. Sorry, but JK is not the only author in the world, and she’s a long way short of the best authors around. I am a big Harry Potter fan, but she in no way compares to the Discworld series. She has only wrote one series of books about one main group of characters, and it will be interesting to see where her writing goes after here. Will she be able to take the world that she has invented for HP and write about different people, or will we be stuck with the same people & personalities. Pratchett’s discworld series has many different characters with different stories that all somehow complement each other. You very rarely meet a character that you feel you have already encountered in a different person. Lets just look back in twenty years, and see whether there is still such a great demand for the discworld series, & discworld memorabilia, and compare it to how JK is doing. Mind you, the Harry Potter books are so similar to the star wars series, that maybe we’ll be up to the prequels by then!!” (Harry Potter Forum post in TP vs JKR Thread)

For the Discworld community, as a smaller brand in the market, most of the comparisons are made with the largest brand, Harry Potter (Muniz and Hamer 2001, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). When comparing Terry Pratchett’s status to J.K. Rowling the consensus of the community was that he was the better author and deserved more success but that J.K. Rowling was an adequate author who had won the ‘lottery’, as one online member described it. So for the brand hero the issue of expertness not only depends on their ability to make assertions but also on their perceived status within the product category based on their contribution to the
brand’s success. This linking of expertness to the brand’s success is also present in understanding the notion of trust in source credibility.

“He doesn’t strike me as a kind of arrogant celebrity and I think he would be interesting. I think he writes books because he genuinely wants people to read them not because he’s cashing in. I don’t get that impression, I don’t think he could write the books as well as he does if he was just going: ‘Right, I could do with another half mil so you know I’ll churn another one out’. I think he genuinely wants you to read them. If you’re intelligent you realize that if you’re going to make money out of people they’re going to have some demand on you.” (Tegan, Personal Interview)

For Tegan, Terry Pratchett represents someone who is credible because of his motivation for producing Discworld being a love of the brand and the fans. This perception imbues a great deal of trust in Terry Pratchett’s management of the brand. Other respondents referred to the notion of ‘selling out’ and that Pratchett never would, an example of this in the denial that any Discworld figurines would ever be sold at McDonald’s as Happy Meal toys. There was vehement denial that Pratchett would ever allow his brand to be used in such a way, one respondent said that he would have to be ‘dead and buried, very dead and very buried before Discworld would be sold out’ (David, Personal Interview) and even then another respondent believed that Pratchett’s wife and daughter would not ‘sell-out’ the brand in this way as ‘they love it too much’ (Sandra, Discworld Convention). The belief that the brand hero creates and manages the brand for the benefit of the brand and its values underpins perceptions of brand hero credibility. So for the brand hero, credibility is defined as the perceived integrity of the brand hero in maintaining the brand’s values.

**Brand Hero Affiliation**

Besides the integrity of the brand hero in maintaining the brand’s values another aspect of brand hero credibility related to their attractiveness to the brand community. Source attractiveness as a component of credibility refers to the celebrity’s perceived familiarity, likeability and similarity (McGuire 1985). In terms of the brand hero the most salient attractiveness dimension was similarity, where the brand hero had to demonstrate a similar sense of being affiliated to the brand and the community as that felt by the brand community. Familiarity and likeability were not useful constructs in the brand hero context, as familiarity was a part of the brand community experience and likeability was based on a sense of affinity, so they are not covered further. Similarity of perceived affinity was achieved in two ways, (1) the demonstration of a long-held affinity to the brand, and (2) the appearance that the brand hero was just another fan. In order for the brand hero to be accepted by the community the brand hero needed to show that on some level they were ‘just like the community members’.

In the first instance when a potential brand hero was presented to the community the brand hero was required to demonstrate that they held the similar affinity with the brand as that of the brand community. This was prevalent in the Star Trek brand community where there are a number of brand heroes who perform different roles within the brand. A case that demonstrates this was the Question and Answer (Q&A) session held between the online Star Trek community and the director Robert Wise. This brand hero only had one instance of contributing to the Star Trek brand through his direction of the first Star Trek movie. Many of the questions asked of this brand hero revolved around Robert Wise establishing his credentials as a Star Trek fan.

“Had you ever seen any “Star Trek” show before Paramount asked you to direct the Motion Picture?” (Romain NIGITA, Robert Wise Q&A, 02.05.2004)

“Mr. Wise, did you have anything to do with the 1983 TV version, aka the Special Longer Version? Did you re-edit the film specifically for television and video? What prompted the 1983 longer version? Thanks,” (James B., Robert Wise Q&A, 02.05.2004)

As Robert Wise had only a brief association with the Star Trek brand the questions that the brand community asked him revolved around his work in the brand and his history with the Star Trek brand. In this Q&A session only one question was asked about Robert Wise’s career outside of Star Trek, this in contrast with Leonard Nemoy (Dr. Spock, a long running character from the original television series and movies) where half the questions asked concerned his life outside of Star Trek, with questions such as:

“Your voice talent is excellent. Will we be seeing more voice work from you?: (designationlocutus, Leonard Nemoy Q&A, 03.04.2003)

“As a writer and advanced amateur photographer myself for many years now, there are many questions I would like to ask you about your passion for still photography, culminating in your latest, and remarkable, “Shekhina” project. For example, how did your interest in photography evolve, and did you begin with 35mm?” (gundar Leonard Nemoy Q&A, 03.04.2003)

This was interpreted to indicate what Leonard Nemoy had already established his affiliation with the Star Trek brand and as such the community did not need to ascertain his commitment to the brand. The less the brand hero is viewed as having a similar affiliation to the brand the more likely the brand community is to attempt to establish this credibility. So for Robert Wise, who had little long-term affiliation with the brand there was a need to establish the perception of him being committed to the Star Trek brand. Whereas, a brand hero like Leonard Nemoy with a long history of Star Trek involvement did not need to establish his brand affiliation.

The second aspect of brand hero affiliation is the appearance the brand hero is just another fan. This goes beyond merely establishing an affiliation for the brand as discussed previously, but includes those aspects of brand community involvement that define membership activities. For example, Terry Pratchett was considered a credible Discworld community member because he would behave just like any other fan at community events.

“Now, the question is, why does he do it? Why give up three days of precious free time to spend them in a field with people who would buy your books anyway? Even if it did increase sales, the amount would be a drop in the ocean compared to what he’s selling already. So I’m left with the notion that he enjoys it. He walks around, chatting to fans, occasionally being photographed but not, I hope, being hassled too much. He doesn’t appear to have an entourage (we saw him walking down from the top barn to his car on Sunday morning, presumably to pick up something) or to have any security worries (if he had any ‘minders’, they were very well hidden) and because he acts like a ‘regular person’, that’s how he gets treated. It might be that he feels he ‘owes’ it to the fans to turn
For this Discworld brand community member they perceive that Terry Pratchett is motivated by enjoyment of fan contact rather than by commercial concerns. In her mind this gives added credibility and appeal to Pratchett as a brand hero. The ‘regular person’ aspect of his credibility presents a persona that the brand community is able to identify as someone similarly committed to the community and the brand. This was also evident in the Brumbies case where the captain, Stirling Mortlock was sidelined due to injury. He demonstrated his commitment to the brand by acting as the waterboy for half the team’s season. He also demonstrated an affinity for the community while being the waterboy by interacting with the crowd. For example after an apparently incorrect line call the following exchange occurred:

“Ref are you blind?!” Male 20s
“Ref you can borrow my glasses if you like!” Male 40s
“This guy is useless, isn’t he?” Stirling Mortlock to the men yelling
“You should get out there, Waterboy! We need you!” Male 20s

Such exchanges create a sense of the brand hero being on the same side as the brand community, that they are all working together for the benefit of the brand. A similar affinity was found in the Star Trek community:

“What can the fans do to help get more publicity for Star Trek: Enterprise?” (Pam, Scott Bakula Q&A, 19.11.2003)

This apparent sense of affinity of the brand hero for the brand community and the resultant expectation from the brand community that they are working with the brand hero for the benefit of the brand is a crucial function of a brand hero. While the celebrity endorser is attempting to persuade the audience (McCracken 1989) the brand hero is attempting to motivate a communal effort between themselves and the brand community for the benefit of the brand. The broader scope of brand hero credibility, that extends to encompass aspects such as integrity and affinity are important considerations. The brand hero needs to represent themselves as a symbolic agent of the brand and community’s values. Further research is needed on how marketers can build this brand community celebrity, in particular how do you build celebrity for a brand hero while emphasizing the brand hero’s credibility? The notion of ‘selling out’ is inherently anti-corporate or anti-marketing, marketers need to understand how they can create integrity and affinity without creating the perception of ‘selling out’. A starting point for this research would be in defining the term ‘selling out’ and under what conditions the perception of ‘selling out’ occurs.

Additional research is also required into the effect that brand heroes have on brand community outcomes. This research indicates that being perceived as credible leads to the perception of a communal effort to advance the brand. Important areas of study would be in the nature of the relationships formed between the brand hero and the brand community and an investigation into the effects on community identity and involvement. This additional research would assist marketer’s in understanding the nature of the brand hero as a brand community communication source and also the limits that marketers have in controlling the brand hero and in turn the brand community.

The research is limited by the three cases chosen, which represent certain types of brand communities and brand heroes. Further research is needed to ascertain whether the influence of a brand hero is community or hero determined, and a wider selection of brand community sites is required to achieve this. This study is further limited by not including the ‘meaning movement’ hypothesis in defining brand hero effectiveness. While the current study focused on brand hero credibility, further research into the symbolic transfer of meaning between the brand and the brand hero would be a valuable and interesting extension of the current study. However, understanding the nature of brand hero credibility, in terms of integrity and affinity, is important to our knowledge of the brand community phenomenon. Brand heroes are influential tools in the creation and management of social networks around consumption objects.
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