The Ties That Bind: Consumer Engagement and Transference With a Human Brand

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We analyze the process consumers go through when television programs featuring human brands with which fans presume an active relationship are discontinued, and assess the processes of transference to subsequent programs featuring the same actor and role. We find that consumers who experience strong bonds with the original series are more likely to seek out the characters in their spin-off afterlife and to develop strong bonds with the characters in the afterlife, including reruns and subsequent roles. Unfortunately, these fans experience transference impediments as the new program alters/evolves the character; the human brand is not the same in new contexts.

Special Session Summary
The Pitfalls of Fame: Insights from Human Brands

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Consumers relate to brands of many types, but none more than human brands, "one of several operationalizations of the broader concept of a brand" (Thomson 2006: 104). Human brands (sometime equated with celebrities) are a vital part of both contemporary culture and the contemporary market economy. Given the centrality of human brands to consumers' lives, it is surprising that research that touches directly on the topic is extremely limited within our literature. The purpose of this symposium was to offer a forum for scholars interested in how consumers relate to and co-create human brands. Our aim was to provide insights on how human brands come to have the meanings they do, the implications of having powerful human brands, and the role consumers play in human brand development. In the first presentation, Hope Jensen Schau (University of Arizona) and Cristel Antonia Russell (University of Auckland) examined how the human brands developed by actors in television series matter to the relationships consumers form with these actors and the characters they portray. Next, Marie-Agnès Parmentier (HEC Montréal) and Eileen Fischer (York University), using case studies of David Beckham and Ryan Giggs, provided insights into the factors at play in the emergence and evolution of human brands with which consumers form relationships, and the practices that help maintain and restore human brand equity in the eyes of both fans and industry insiders when equity erodes. In the third presentation, Susan Fournier (Boston University) discussed the approach that has driven Martha Stewart's brand building effort while revealing the flaws of this approach, highlighting how it falls short because of its failure to take into account the full range of processes that feed the creation of human brands. Finally, Matt Thomson (University of Western Ontario), discussed the papers and offered some concluding remarks on the issues raised as well as avenues for future research.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

"The Ties that Bind: Consumer Engagement and Transference with a Human Brand"

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Beginning with Fournier (1998), research on consumer-brand relationships has assumed a level of anthropomorphism and is guided by the extant literature on interpersonal human relationships, asserting that brands can be active relationship partners. Research shows that consumers develop relationships with celebrities (Thomson 2006), TV characters (Russell, Norman and Heckler 2004), and service providers (Price and Arnould 1999) because the human brand is capable of a wider range of attribute evolution than an inanimate consumption object and has an enhanced reciprocity potential. Human brands provide a vivid context to examine consumer-brand relationships because they mature and adapt to changing circumstances; or put simply they more closely mimic relationships between and among people.

This research investigates another parallel with human relationships: transference, the tendency to carry over attachment patterns from one relationship to the next. We focus on consumers' experience of the cessation of a brand's production, to identify whether and to what degree transference occurs with subsequent offerings of the human brand. The literature on human loss, and the processes of grief, mourning, and recovery, provides a conceptual basis for investigating the emotions and behaviors associated with the departure of a favored brand and the process of transference whereby new relationships are impacted by previous relationships.

According to adult attachment theory, previous relationship patterns can reemerge when people form new relationships (Andersen and Cole 1990). Past experiences and interpersonal patterns learned are superimposed onto the new relationship, including memories and affective responses. Transference is most likely triggered when previous relationships are salient (Andersen et al. 1995). In psychiatry, Freud (1917) proposed that the period following a loss is used for decathexis, the incremental divestment of libido from memories of the lost object, and that it eventually leads to recathexis, the redirection of libido from the memory of the lost person to available survivors which removes the cause of the pain and renews opportunities for pleasure. Research shows that the process of transference applies to a greater degree when there is more resemblance between the old and the new relationship objects (Brumbaugh and Fraley 2006). This process has clear implications in the domain of human brands, but, as in the brand extension area (Aaker and Keller 1990; Boush and Loken 1991), the process of transference might apply best when consumers perceive coherence between original and the extension.

The extant transference literature suggests that a brand's withdrawal might prompt the development of new consumer-brand relationships where the previous relationship pattern resurfaces. We test this proposition in the context of relationships formed with a human brand within television programs. TV programs are consumed in the intimate, domestic space, where the strongest interpersonal relationships take place, and they promote the formation and development of deep and intense attachments with characters (Russell and Puto 1999). We analyze the process consumers go through when TV programs with which they presume an active relationship are discontinued, and assess the processes of transference to subsequent programs featuring the same actor and role.

Observational and survey data were collected before, during and following the final season of one of television's most popular and long-lived programs (Friends: 10 years, 238 episodes) and at the onset of a spin-off program (Joey: 2 years, 47 episodes) that features the same actor in the same role (Matt LeBlanc as Joey Tribbiani). These data provide insights into how consumers cope with the loss of their relationship partner and whether transference occurs with the new program. Joey launched its first season with a respectable audience of 11million; however, it ended with audiences only slightly above 4 million. While Friends features an ensemble cast, this is a fragment of the Friends finale audience (52.5 million) and Joey's following decreased over time.

We examine observational data collected on three online forums centered on Matt LeBlanc and Joey (271,318 posts). Fans "forced to live without Friends" expressed loss at its end and excitement about Joey returning. Using the language of transference, fans explicitly claim to be "shifting their alliance" to Joey and "moving over with Joey" indicating that the main impetus for watching the show is to transfer their bonds to the new program and experience the continuation. Fan complaints about the show revolve around changes in continuity (Joey's family, absence of other "friends") creating impediments such that they state their transference is "less than seamless," "jarring," and "unfulfilling;" further-more, Joey is perceived, even by his most ardent fans, as "a shadow of himself." Interestingly, prior to the cessation of Friends, these fans expressed extreme allegiance to Joey and Matt LeBlanc posting homage websites dedicated to following LeBlanc's professional and personal life. These fan tributes are often referenced in fans' signature files that follow every post on a forum.

Survey data (N=262) were collected five months after the withdrawal of Friends from a sample of viewers, ranging from occasional to avid, and including 30% who had watched Friends from the beginning. Along with participants' histories of viewing the original and spin-off series, the survey collected measures of attitude and connectedness to both series, attachment to the Joey character, as well as measures of the counteracting processes of transference and counter-transference. The results indicate that viewers maintain continuing bonds by watching re-runs and that the intensity of their bond (in this context, connectedness) is a key predictor of these continuing bonds. Connectedness is also a key predictor of the process of transference and it affects transference to viewing the spin-off series through the experience of grief. Consumers experiencing strong bonds with the original series are not only more likely to seek out the characters in their spin-off afterlife but also to develop strong bonds with the characters in the afterlife, in line with the transference process in adult attachment theory (Andersen and Cole 1990; Brumbaugh and Fraley 2006). In a manner typical of that observed in bereavement research, the newly formed bonds provide liberation from the loss and grief caused by the withdrawal of the original series.

We find that when a given program is discontinued, consumers do experience transference when they have strong bonds with human brands and when these human brands migrate from one program to another. However countertransference is also present where pre-existing strong bonds can inhibit the transference of previous bonds because the expectations for the relationship are so high they cannot be met and because the similarities with the previous experience provide a hurtful reminder of the previous relationship.

"Branded Like Beckham? An Examination of Dynamic Processes in Human Branding"

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Given recent work on consumers' attachments to celebrity brands (Thomson 2006), we are beginning to understand that human brands are important to end consumers, to people building their brands, to the industries in which the brands emerge, and to economies as a whole. However, we have yet to develop systematic insights into how such brands emerge and evolve as people's careers progress, as they engage with distinctive target audiences, and as unforeseen or uncontrollable events occur that can challenge a person's brand equity.

In order to address this gap, our paper develops case studies of soccer stars David Beckham and Ryan Giggs as human brands. Drawing on definitions that emphasize consumers' understandings as the basis of brands (e.g., Keller 1993) we define a human brand for a person engaged in a field of practice as the sets of associations that audiences within and beyond the field identify with the individual. Drawing on our two cases, we develop theory that helps answer the following questions: What factors, including consumer fans' evolving relationships, contribute to the emergence of a powerful human brand? What challenges can undermine equity for such a human brand among consumers? And how can equity be maintained or restored?

The data used to develop our case study is archival. For each player, we collected: published biographies or autobiographies (e.g., Beckham and Freeman 2001; Beckham 2005; Milligan 2004); postings from websites (www.davidbeckham.com; www.ryangiggs.cc); and websites maintained by and for fans (e.g., davidbeckham.fans-online.com; www.start.at/giggsy). Further, we collected all articles that mentioned either Giggs or Beckham in: Sports Ilustrated; World Soccer; ESPN the Magazine; Vogue UK; and People. We also examined each player's Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter postings as well as media coverage describing fan reactions to both Giggs and Beckham (e.g. http://www.helium.com/debates/73611-does-ryan-giggs-have-david-beckham-to-thank-for-his-career). Our analytic focus has been on identifying factors that lead to equity, on categorizing challenges to equity, and on discerning practices that have helped to maintain or to re-establish equity with audiences.

In answering the first question regarding factors that contribute to the emergence of a powerful brand, the paper identifies two distinct elements of human brand equity: professional equity and celebrity equity. Our analysis suggests that while Giggs and Beckham both have the former, Giggs lacks the latter. Professional equity is earned among audiences within the field practice (e.g., professional soccer). It is earned in part through demonstrating the ability to perform well specialized activities valued within the field, but also by forming upward reaching social networks with more powerful actors in the field and by taking opportunities to achieve visibility within the field (e.g., by choosing to play for the most storied Manchester United club). Celebrity equity is earned outside the field of origin among consumers (who in this case may well not be soccer fans). And while professional equity can serve as a basis for forming celebrity equity, celebrity requires the individual to cultivate an authentic persona (cf. Thomson 2006) that is of interest to consumers relatively unfamiliar with the field (as Beckham has done through his combination of dedication to a 'manly' sport coupled with a high fashion sensibility), to develop field-spanning networks (as Beckham has done by hiring Simon Fuller, a celebrity impresario rather than a soccer agent), and to take opportunities to achieve visibility beyond the field of origin (for example by cultivating affiliations with celebrities in other fields, e.g., Tom Cruise).

In answering our second question we identified challenges to professional equity as distinct from threats to celebrity equity. Factors that promote one type of equity can challenge the other. For example, threats to professional equity can arise from publicly visible performances that are interpreted (often with critical assistance by fans and the media) as failures to demonstrate those abilities most valued in the profession (as when Beckham was sent off against Argentina in the 1998 FIFA world cup). These challenges can be compounded when it is perceived that opportunity-seeking beyond the field of practice (such as the pursuit of endorsements) is impeding performance within the profession. Celebrity equity, in contrast, is threatened when visibility beyond the field declines as may happen when individuals re-invest in their profession and withdraw from activities that attract media attention (as Giggs has done).

In addressing our third question, we identify "balancing" practices that simultaneously demonstrate the individual's ability to perform well within the standards of the profession while providing opportunities to reinforce a persona that engages fans attention and attracts media attention. Beckham's move in 2007 to the LA Galaxy team in the America, and his recent efforts to be "transferred" to AC Milan can be interpreted as (unevenly effective) efforts to rebalance his brand equity. In the conclusions of our paper, we discuss the implications of our insights for understanding both consumers' relationships to human brands, and the roles that consumers may play in shaping the evolution of human brands.

"Taking Stock in Martha Stewart: A Cultural Critique of the Marketing Practice of Building Person-Brands"

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This inquiry concerns the phenomenon of the celebrity person-brand: a productized, branded entity that derives its equity from association with a celebrity that serves as creator, muse, and steward of the brand. Celebrity person-brands are at once celebrities (persons) and products (brands). They are a sub-class of celebrity brands as both are marked by recognizability, visibility, and attractiveness within the society (Gamson 1994; Turner 2004), but not all celebrity brands have been productized (e.g., Sheryl Crow, Barack Obama). In our hyper consumer culture, motivations to commercialize celebrity to capture branded product value are great (Lieb 2007).

Although recent research explores consumers' relationships with celebrity brands (Thomson 2006), insight into supply-side mechanisms through which equity is developed in person brands is lacking (for exception, see Lieb 2007). As paradigms for marketing and entertainment increasingly collide (Donaton 2004), the need for insights into celebrity brand-building grows. This research imparts a deeper appreciation of the complex workings of the process of celebrity brand creation, and the principles that guide equity development of such brands over time.

Our research focuses on one person-brand exemplar: Martha Stewart, as owned and managed under the entity Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MSO). Our case selection follows the logic of inquiries that inform their phenomena by focusing on that phenomenon in its extreme. While other celebrity person-brands exist—e.g., Wolfgang Puck and Emeril Lagassi—these brands are narrower in their productization, and weaker in markers of celebrity overall. It is also significant for theory development purposes that Martha Stewart experienced a lengthy, highly-visible crisis. In 2001, after thirty years in the making, the Martha Stewart brand stood as one of the world's strongest (Khermouch 2001). This situation changed entirely in 2002 when word broke of an investigation that eventually landed Stewart in jail. Though business improved with Stewart's return to MSLO as Chief Creative Officer in Fall 2006, signs of recovery are mixed. Lost equity has yet to be recovered, and analysts remain split in their forecasts. MSO's crisis serves as a critical inflection point in the trajectory of our phenomenon; the system in stress provides diagnostic learning opportunities by exposing the processes in play (Reis and Knee 1996).

This research advances the cultural branding paradigm (Holt 2004, Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2005) by providing insight into the fallible habits of mind that brought the Martha Stewart brand to the brink of extinction. By popular accounts, MSO operated as best-in-class marketers and yet this acknowledged excellence did not prevent them from jeopardizing their brand. We argue that MSO's predicament signals fundamental shortcomings in the classic marketing principles managers apply to build, leverage, and sustain their brands.

Data for our investigation include: four MSO business case studies spanning from IPO to post-jail recovery (Fourier et al. 2001; Fournier 2001; Fournier 2006; Glynn and Mihoubi 2000); biographies of Stewart and histories of MSO (Byron 2002); company SEC filings, releases, and annual reports; MSO marketing campaigns; media coverage of MSO. Using grounded theory, we first induct a five-stage person-brand development model from the historical archives of activities at MSO. The model reflects classic brand leverage logic (Farquhar et al. 1992), whereby resources are first devoted to establishing strength in the master brand (Martha Stewart the Person) such that it can sponsor powerful extensions downstream. The model adopts a financial markets' perspective, striving toward a self-sustaining, risk-tolerant multi-brand portfolio that transitions from the parent brand. Intermediate stages in the model differ with respect to the reflexive relationships existing between the person and brand components, and the relative marketing emphasis placed on person versus brand. Second, we critique MSO's strategy from the perspective of cultural branding theory, highlighting three blind spots that compromised development of the person-brand: (a) Failure to consider multivocality of the person and brand; (b) Denial of the reciprocating, non-linear system of person-brand meaning making; and (c) Illusions of control over the collaborative cultural process of person-brand meaning making. Lastly we offer a revised framework for person-brand building that contrasts with psychologically-oriented association models that treat person-branding as a leveraging process (Keller 2003). In our model the process is one of collaborative meaning making that enables co-creation of the brand.

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