On Consuming Celebrities: the Case of the Kylie E-Community

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we seek to move beyond the standard endorsement and communications approach to celebrity so perceptively critiqued by McCracken (1989). To build upon the insights of O’Guinn (1991) and Penaloza (2004) gleaned from cultural analyses of the singular celebrity case through attention to computer-mediated fan communities. Our analysis reveals that celebrities offer consumers vital dreams of survival and escape achieved through consumer to consumer exchanges in the emerging digital landscape of online fan communities. Here celebrity functions as a form of collective therapy practiced through celebrity e-forums. In this way, we demonstrate how commercial domains are reappropriated and commodified by fans as unique repositories for the exchange of empathetic understanding the collective display of affective emotional investments.

INTRODUCTION

The labours of consumption operate in uncertain times; while stocks, shares and our beloved brands from yesteryear tumble and fall, those theories which purport to explain consumers as solely economic agents lose their appeal and credibility. Consumers live, punctuated by news of the daily downturns of firms and organizations, seek other forms of solace and salvation. In this critical context of disenchantment the labours of consumption gains a more social and sacred character, enlivened and revitalized by the hyperreal vitality and presence of all manner of celebrity hopefuls. In this paper we seek to instigate a celebrity turn within consumer research and consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) to augment our understanding of consumers and the sacred character of the investments and identifications they make in celebrity culture. In this paper, we seek to move beyond the standard endorsement and communications approach so perceptively critiqued by McCracken (1989) and to build upon the insights of O’Guinn (1991) and Penaloza (2004) gleaned from cultural analyses of the singular celebrity case. To advance such approaches we turn to the vital dreams of survival and escape which celebrities offer and the possibilities of transformation which they afford consumers in computer-mediated fan communities. As a context for this discussion we use the case of Kylie Konnect and Kylie forums to explore the vitality of consumer to consumer interactions - fan to fan conversations around the loved object (Ahuvia 2005) of Kylie.

On the face of it there would appear to be little of uniqueness about the case of Kylie1; little to merit concerted academic debate and discussion. But this would overlook the ingredients of Kylie which make her exactly the right context and imaginary resource for fan conversations around the loved object of Kylie. Moreover, Maffesoli (2007) draws attention to the role of such persona within the tribal aesthetic: “They recreate what already exists…and it is by communing with their repeated stagings and identifying with them that we all…transcend ourselves and explode creatively, breaking free from our enclosures and throwing off the shackles of our small individual ids.” (2007, 33).

Such promise of transcendence parallels research on sacred consumption (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989). Investments in consumption activities can transform seemingly profane consumer goods such as the Apple Newton into objects that offer potential for emancipation and liberation (Muniz and Schau 2005). Similarly, devotion to media brands such as Star Trek sometimes transcends mere entertainment to become a “profoundly motivating vision of the future” (Kozinets 2001, 77). In this way a religious metaphor becomes “adaptable in a consumer-centred world…[where] some of the same forces that drive many religions may drive the religiosity of brand communities (Muniz and Schau 2005, 746). Through such consumption practices we witness how “the material world can become the seat of the sacred again; consumption can [thus] become (re)ensouled” (Kozinets 2002, 32).

In establishing this point we seek in this paper to make explicit the character of consumers’ investments in celebrity culture, but also the particular sacred appeal of celebrities to consumers. Sometimes as Jauss (cited by Marshall 1997, 69) reveals this connection is not only sympathetic or admiring, sometimes it is ironic and playful

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1 We appreciate that to some to some audiences/markets, Kylie may be relatively unknown but since beginning her musical career in 1988, Kylie has enjoyed the success of 52 singles, 10 studio albums and countless awards and accolades including the prestigious BRIT, Grammy and MTV Europe music awards. For a fuller resume of her achievements we encourage readers to take a look at the wikipedia entry for Kylie as space restrictions prevent us from detailing these here.
but sometimes gains in momentum and investment, becoming associative (celebratory and participative) and even cathartic, so that fans gain a sense of emancipation from their affinity with the celebrity brand community.

Theoretically the notion of the ‘fan’ has previously been ascribed a type of passivity, defined in response to celebrity system (Jenkins 2006a). However, fans should be conceptualised as actively producing cultural meanings around celebrity (Penaloza 2004; Grossberg 2005; Turner 2004); to embrace the move from a representational culture to a presentational culture where celebrities are reworked in terms of their value and utility by audiences and users (Marshall 2005). Celebrities, as MaFFesoli suggests, exist as “Archeatypes…[within] this creative unveiling…revelators trying to bring out what already exists.” (MaFFesoli 2007, 32). Similar to other consumer tribes, “fan communities move among corporate landscape, occupying them ideologically and affectively, ‘poaching’ and appropriating ideas, myths and memes, living with them, making them their own, and moving on” (Kozinets 2007, 195).

Writing about the 1920s star system, Firat and Dholakia (1998), comment that: “The people of fortune were celebrities and (almost) everyone wanted to know them, and to be acquainted (for most, of course, vicariously) with them. Celebrities, stars and others, who became the acquaintances of all, sold things… ideas, values and attitudes.” (1998, 47). Pringle in Celebrity Sells (2004) makes a similar point. And in this respect we witness how the marriage between celebrity culture, consumption and everyday life is firmly cemented and established. And as marriages go, it ain’t a bad one since celebrities are part and parcel of consumer culture, their longevity and appeal expressional of the social forces which converge around the Entertainment-Marketing Complex (c.f. C.W. Mills 1959).

Online fan communities are thus ideal platforms to explore the emerging participatory culture which is taking shape as people are learning how to live and collaborate within such knowledge communities (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b, 26). Kozinets (1997) suggests that identification with a virtual community of consumption depends largely on two factors, both we argue, are clearly evident in online fan communities. First is the relationship that the person has with the consumption activity. In comparison with other consumption contexts, experiences with celebrities involve a high level of intensity and emotion often appearing central to a fan’s self-concept and indeed, the guiding heuristic is often a religious one as celebrities are said to perform some of the functions of gods who are worshipped by fans (O’Guinn 1991). In particular pop stars generate and instigate investments of time and energy as we are drawn “into affective and emotional alliances with the performers and with the performers’ other fans” in search of “opportunities to make meanings of their social identities and social experiences that are self-interested and functional” (Frith 1987, 35-37). Second is the intensity of the social relationships and emotional interactions the consumer expresses and shares with other members of the virtual community. Given that fans are typically associated with cultural tastes that are denigrated by the dominant value system (Fiske 1992), the internet can thus provide a forum where the fan attempts to make up for an “absence of ‘authentic’ relationships… [a] perceived personal lack of autonomy, absence of community, incomplete identity, lack of power and lack of recognition” (Jenson 2002, 16-17).

In taking account of the social uses of celebrity, we do not deny that the celebrity is also “a manufactured commodity” that demands “commercially strategic” development (Turner 2004, 26). Here the commercial value of celebrity collides with, and feeds off, its cultural value to produce a regime of connections, investments and effects. The challenge for marketers is to create a fusion between consumers; a fusion which begins with understanding the consumption rituals and practices which fans initiate (Sandvoss 2005; Hogg and Bannister 2000; Holt, 1995). For as, Taylor 1999, 161) suggests: “fans are not true cultists unless they pose their fandom as a resistance activity, one that keeps them one step ahead of those forces which would try to market their resistant taste back to them.” So on the one hand, fans are seen as ideal consumers as their consumption habits can be highly predicted by the culture industry but they also express anti-commercial beliefs indicating a co-existence between commercial ideologies and commodity-completist practices (Hills 2002). The focus of our paper thus becomes to achieve a deeper understanding of online celebrity fan practices: What investments do they project upon celebrities through these e-forums? What significance does celebrity play in their lives? How is the celebrity brand re-imagined and reworked by fans in their communal exchanges?

**METHODOLOGY**

To explore the richness and diversity of the emergent digital landscape demands a particular style of method. A methodology capable of taking seriously the social interactions and conversations consumers engage in through such new technologies. Our analysis took the form of a digital ethnography (Murthy 2008); and drew upon the insightful work of Kozinets (1997, 1998, 2001, 2002b) and Kozinets et al (2008). Such an approach provides researchers with “a window into naturally occurring behaviours”, in relation to the “language, motivations, consumption linkages, and symbols of consumption-oriented online communities” (Kozinets 2002b, 62 & 70). Such “connected research” allows us to learn from social dynamics between participants (Schillewaert, De Ruyck and Verhaeghe 2009) as we increasingly witness a shift towards the “public display of private worlds” (Beer 2008, 624).

Textual and visual material in the form of conversations, images and blogs were thus collected through two online forums devoted to talk around Kylie (http://forums.kylie.com/ and http://kyliekonnect.com). Kylie.com is an international forum with 15,687 registered users (as of 20/3/09). Over the 12 month period of our analysis 2052 discussion threads generating a total of 58,525 postings were made. The forum provides an arena for members to discuss Kylie’s music, live appearances, TV appearances and press from around the world. KylieKonnect launched in November 2007 was the first artist social networking site for music fans. It allows members from around the world to create profiles, upload images and blogs; but also to connect and interact with other Kylie fans. The forum element of the site is made up of 648 threads, totalling 8007 postings covering a variety of Kylie-related chat. Subsequent to the collection of this data, we attempted to code our material to organize our ideas into a set of thematic insights. These codes were based upon the collected material and the theoretical lens which surrounded our study. Analysis and interpretation was constructed around moving between individual postings, chunks of postings, entire discussion threads and the emergent understanding of the complete data set (de Valck 2007; Muniz and Schau 2005; Schau & Gilly 2003). Analysis of social interaction between participants in the form of naturally occurring discourse proved particularly insightful (Ritson and Elliott 1999). We adopted a number of techniques proposed by Wallendorf and Belk (1989) to establish the trustworthiness of the data including triangulation across researchers and forums, observation over time and negative case analysis. We also acknowledge that analysis is based on the communicative acts of only a small percentage of Kylie’s fan base rather than the complete set of behaviours of all fans in the community (Kozinets 2002b). Our results are organized in terms of the follow-
UNPACKING THE KYLIE E-COMMUNITY

For O’Guinn (1991) the organising logic for celebrity worship is that of religion, as sometimes fans imbue celebrities with godlike powers and in this section we explore the ways in which the sacralisation of celebrity manifests itself on online fan communities like Kylie Konnect and the Kylie forum.

Members appear to emphasise the sense and awareness of themselves as being part of a brand community (Muniz & O’Guinn 2002; Muniz and Schau 2005). Fans in this respect talk of the role of the forum in social and sacred terms: “As Kylie fans, we are here to share everything about her. As forum users, to critique as an audience of Kylie and other users’ thoughts but as whole, we are here to support each other.” In terms of summing up and expressing the happenings of such forums we might concur with O’Guinn when he suggests: “They get together and talk, reminisce, and share one another’s joys and sorrows... They gather in his/her name, but for each other.” (1991, 8).

The sense of camaraderie and the stress upon the value of forum membership is thus palpable, with members suggesting: “I love KK [KylieKonnect] it is the friendliest forum I have found anywhere and people here understand what you are saying and everything is taken as it is meant.” Moreover, they clarify the nature of the celebrity communion, one which transgresses global boundaries and traditional markers such as age and gender, rather as they affirm: “it’s not about age, it’s about taste.” Here we see the promise of communitas in online fan forums; where communitas is pivotal to sacred consumption (Belk et al. 1989) and therein sometimes “consumption can become (re)sacralised” (Kozinets 2002a, 32).

The importance of the emerging digitalscape and the connections it makes possible is further emphasised when fans speak of how in their more mundane lives devotion to Kylie is not always met with such positive affirmation. For example, some forum members voiced their disappointment that their social contacts did not understand the appeal of Kylie: “All of my friends hate her... they don’t understand how good she is live”. Such awareness of the negative associations she brings forth in others, reveals the significance of the virtual forum as a space where such talk has little place. In this respect the e-forum provides a relief and platform to compensate for this absence of a Kylie community in their everyday lives (Jenson 1992). Instead, we witnessed a developing sense of shared taste and fellowship (O’Guinn 1989) that helps to explain the almost confessional nature of many of the conversations around Kylie.

THE OTHERING OF KYLIE

On the forums we witness the constant referencing to Kylie as an absent other—whereas an imaginary resource she makes possible threads of quasi-religious character and sentiment to be expressed. For example one of the forums sections is titled: “Do we know whether Kylie is aware of our conversations?”—responses ranged from the “I can’t say for sure if she checks in to see what her humble subjects are doing, but you never know...she could be here right now and we would be none the wiser.”; to the: “I wonder does she even have a username”. While some are sceptical about Kylie’s presence, their questioning would suggest to us that they want to believe that she is party to their conversations—overhearing their ‘gifts’ of praise and devotion which they offer through the forum.

In this respect we witness how participants seek to transform themselves and the sense of their own identities through the narratives they construct around their shared devotion and adoration to Kylie. For example, one of the sections is entitled: Kylie is a new superhero? Here we find creative renditions of authoring themselves through her appeal: “Yes because she saves me from boredom and gets me all happy!” to another fan who suggests:

“I wrote a story...about a Princess named Kylie that took place far into the future where the Earth is finally at peace and KYLIE is the heir to Earth’s throne (sic). But then Evil arise from the depths of space and KYLIE has to become KYBORG (the thing she was dressed as at the beginning of the Fever Tour) to fight off the evil. It was kinda cheesy but still good.”

Forum members’ expressions of their devotion to Kylie are littered throughout the forum. Two threads were particularly insightful: First, Kylie’s 40th birthday in May 2008 was accompanied by the creation of a special area for postings of birthday wishes where expressions of gratitude dominated. Second, a thread titled: “What has Kylie done for you?” appeared to encourage the offering of survival and salvation tales (cf. Muniz and Schau 2005). For some, the appeal of her music runs deep and goes far beyond the derogatory view of it as ‘pop’ or mere ‘entertainment’. Rather it generates strong emotional sentiment from fans keen to express their gratitude in relation to the help and comfort they gain from experiencing her music:

I just wanted to thank you for being such an inspiration for me, your beautiful voice is always like a light that shines even in the darkest places, and the most obscure moments of my life. I feel like i have no words to describe how happy your work makes me.

Such sacralisation harks back to Belk’s discussion of the domains of sacred consumption (1989); we witness how celebrities are through fans co-creation endeavours sometimes “set apart from others” (Belk 1989, 11): or, as another member echoes:

Thank-you for everything you have done for me, inspiring me and giving me courage to come through the most difficult part of my life. For that and for you being you and your music and everything about you, I love you.

The forum in this instance enables us to glimpse the process of celebrity sacralisation in the making. In this way, expressions of ‘love’ were expressive of the emotional nature of the community (cf. Maffesoli 1996). For some, such declarations can be encouraged by feelings of sexual attraction towards Kylie; but for some treatment of Kylie as a ‘loved object’ (Ahuvia 2005) is perhaps generated through the affectual benefits that being a Kylie fan provides. As Rojek (2001, 52) suggests “the celebrity is an imaginary resource to turn to in the midst of life’s hardships or triumphs, to gain solace from, to beseech for wisdom and joy”. Here we see parallels with religious devotion (Muniz and Schau 2005) as fans employ the language and rhetoric of religious sentiment to express their reverence and respect for Kylie for fulfilling “a need to believe in something significantly more powerful and extraordinary than the self” (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989, 2). Or as one of her fans describes Kylie:

3 On the basis of our own participant observation (June 2008) we can suggest that her performances also represent a significant community gathering enabling disparate fans to come together and share their passions.
For me she has not only been an inspiration, I look up to her and see her as a role model, I think hr music is great and I love the personality she lets us see. She has always been very special to me. Because I started having panic attacks when I 8, I had had them before but they came back when I was 8 that was the same time I became a fan and for me I think she was meant to come and help me and she has, she has been a support. She came when I needed her and it makes me feel happy when I see her because has not just been an idol but she has been a support.

Seeing Kylie in such redemptive and enduring terms was a common theme amongst forum conversations. Many fans appreciate that she is not making the headlines for “driving too fast”, “being drunk” “using drugs” or “doing other bad things”. Fans, in this way, strive to distance Kylie from other less sacred celebrities, especially those who invite and encourage media speculation for their inappropriate or immoral behaviour. Rather Kylie becomes a sacred ideal in comparison to her profane rival celebrities (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004).

KNOWING KYLIE WITHIN THE E-ECONOMY

In this section, we reveal how fans strive through their narratives to express their identifications with Kylie. Emblematic of this desire by fans are their attempts to collect Kylie memorabilia. Such collecting we argue permits fans to perpetuate and make tangible this sacredness (cf. Belk 1989, 21). For example, one of the most popular threads on the forum with a total of 2273 posts (as of 10/03/2009) was that devoted to “Your Kylie Collection”. Discussions on this thread typically took the form of members ‘listing’ and displaying their collections to others members of her music, merchandising from posters to annuals etc, through such interactions we glimpse how fans attempt to make explicit the strength of their devotion through the ritual of collecting (Belk, 1989) but also through the act of constructing narratives and sharing those with others around their memorabilia we witness how the community imagines itself but also signifies the strength of its devotion within the e-community.

In this sense fans are keen to not only collect tangible objects which bring them closer to their heroes, but also to use the forums to strive for a proximity with others who share their own life-worlds and views. In this respect, what has touched audiences most is Kylie’s recent battle with breast cancer (something that has inspired some of the songs from Kylie’s most recent album). Fans appear to relate to Kylie on this level and the experience of her music then becomes an experience of identity formation in that “we absorb songs into our own lives and rhythm into our own bodies; they have a looseness of reference that makes them immediately accessible” (Frith 1996, 121). For fans, music and experience can become so intertwined that it is difficult to locate the music’s meanings without talking about their own personal lives (Cavicchi 1998). This is in evidence through forum postings where fans narrate their own personal experiences of dealing with cancer. For example “I lost my Mother last week to cancer and your wonderful “feel good” music did help me cope” and “I too have recently been diagnosed with cancer; only being 33 years old… What I love about her is she still puts her diamonds and lippy on and if it’s good enough for Kylie then it’s good enough for me.” For others, it extends beyond experiences with cancer, to also include coping with other illnesses.

Kylie to me is a constant light in my life, i admire her so much, im proud to be a fan. at the moment she is helping me alot!! im having a big operation on 5th nov and right now kylie and her music are keeping me together. i've been a fan for 20 yrs and kylie is in my heart for sure.

On the 31st of March this year, I gave birth to stillborn twin daughters, 3 days before I was booked in for my c-section. Although the better days outnumber them now, I still have my bad days and listening to Kylie cheers me up a bit. Also, what I have been through and breast cancer are two completely different things, but I find it inspirational that Kylie has publicly been through a very dark time, and something that would have been very traumatic, and she did it with dignity and picked herself up and is back, better than ever. She is living, breathing proof that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

As illustrated, fans have been dedicated followers of Kylie throughout her long career; such commitment is another key ingredient of sacred consumption (Belk et al. 1989). Kylie’s music can be seen as having transformative power for fans and in this way it becomes part of the “care of the self” (DeNora 1999, 37). The religious theme is thus foregrounded and conventional thinking dictates that during times of illness people turn to religion to improve their emotional well-being or pray for healing and redemption. What we witness on the forum is fans putting their “faith” in Kylie as an imaginary resource of hope, comfort and salvation, but also this connection enables them to link with like-minded others. De Nora (1999, 45) argues that “Music is a device or resource to which people turn in order to regulate themselves as aesthetic agents, as feeling, thinking and acting beings in their day-to-day lives.” As one fan suggests, “As for me personally, she changed my life completely, she made me believe in my own power, possibilities and dreams, in my own future - and she’s done it just through her music, her behavior and just simply by being a real woman!”

The Kylie forum thus becomes a sacred space wherein fans can come together to understand, make sense and manage the stress and anxieties that confront them in contemporary consumer culture. It is at these moments perhaps that communities take a ‘sharing and caring’ form (cf. Kozinets 2002a, 22).

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that all fans experienced the quasi-religious character of this style of devotion to Kylie, as the community is also noteworthy for its divergent character. For some fans, the appeal of Kylie is simply that of the enjoyment they receive from listening to her music, which provides “lots and lots of fun and entertainment”. While another suggested, “she hasn’t really done anything for me, she is only a singer nothing more than that to me, although some of her songs do make me happy when I feel sad, but that’s all really.” Another forum member was quick to agree “Voice of reason once again. Second that.” At times, Kylie’s music can therefore be enjoyed as an end in itself, a hedonistic soundtrack to fun, dance and laughter, rather than as a means to some other personal or social goal (Holbrook 1987). Another noteworthy posting adopts a more critical stance towards such devotion suggesting that although it offers to many escapism, sometimes this may border on the “unhealthy”:

4 It was Emile Durkheim who envisaged religion as the symbolic self-consciousness of society. Such a view places especial importance on the channels of communication with which society constructs itself. It was also Durkheim who confidently pronounced that “…If there is one truth that history teaches us beyond doubt, it is that religion tends to embrace a smaller and smaller sector of social life…this shows that there is a decreasing number of collective beliefs and sentiments which are both collective and strong enough to assume a religious character.” (1987, 245). He did however draw our attention to the enduringness of such religious sentiment.
Hmmm... I was half-tempted to go for the she hasn’t done anything for me route, because, in all fairness, she hasn’t. But I am in the mood to pay a kind of tribute to my younger years. Kylie kept me occupied during the hardest time of my life. I didn’t have to think about my problems when I was being a “Kylie fan”. Like a second identity I could escape to from real life. From this point, I know how unhealthy this was, and I also know it wasn’t because it was Kylie, it could have happened with any celebrity. But it happened with her.

Given these opposing and divergent uses - Kylie can be seen as a malleable and fragmented brand community. While some fans sacralise Kylie seeing her as possessing inspirational god-like qualities and seeking personalised meanings reflective of their own life experiences, others are more playful (dare we say postmodern) in terms of the ways they weave Kylie into the fabric of everyday life merely for fun and escapism.

THE ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES FOR CONSUMING CELEBRITIES - DISCUSSION

In this paper we foreground what consumers share with other consumers on celebrity e-forums to demonstrate the sacred qualities of such spaces to highlight the consumption and identity ‘work’ that takes place through talk on celebrity mattering. Our analysis of the Kylie Brand Community reveals the forms of collective therapy and sacralisation being practiced on such celebrity e-forums. Here we might concur with Koiznets, who you might recall spoke of Star Trek as a “moral compass around which fans centre their lives, one as all-encompassing as a religion.” (2001, 77). Or even paraphrase Maffesoli to consider celebrity, through the sacred lens of religion which he defines as simply “that which unites us as a community” (1996, 38). To speak of consumers as fans places emphasis squarely upon Weber’s concept of ‘emotional communities’ as ephemeral, changeable and ill-defined (cf. Maffesoli 1996, 12), and through attention to their illusive and ephemeral character we start to glimpse the extent to which celebrities are useful resources for rethinking ourselves and our forms of togetherness.

These commercial domains5 are thus reappropriated and decommodified as ‘inalienable’ (cf Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) by fans as unique and cherished repositories for the exchange of forms of empathetic understandings and the collective display of affective emotional investments. Celebrities are then for consumers ‘good to think with’ (Levi-Strauss 1966), and the internet forums initiate a particular form of at-a-distance proximity between fans and on celebrities.

Moreover an unintended consequence of such proximity appears to be that they operate as stages for the construction of debates around celebrity, be they of an ethical, moral or sacred kind. Here we emphasise the narratives constructed and participation engendered around celebrities in such internet spaces. Spaces which make possible the emergence of identity, communal and transcendental value. But which also serve to make explicit to consumers the difficulties and tactics of negotiating ways of life within contemporary consumer culture. For as Dyer commented in the work Heavenly Bodies (1986), “the stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the ‘individual’.” (quoted in Turner 2004: 104). Such a view suggests that sometimes celebrities be understood as ‘moral beacons’ (Porpora 1996, 210); or as Boorstin advocated, back in the 1960s: “receptacles into which we pour our own purposelessness.” (ibid, 214). Here then we start to glimpse the importance of celebrities in an age of anxiety and uncertainty, without recourse to ‘metanarratives’ (Lyotard 1984; Firat and Venkatesh 1995); an age of “playing with the pieces of identity” (Baudrillard 1993); an age where as Marx prophetically pronounced “All that is solid melts into air” (cf. Berman 1983). In such a critical context of disenchantment our intense and emotional connection with celebrities, be it from afar or virtual means, starts to then make sense, for we witness how they permit us to enter into intense moral and social dilemmas. In some senses what is unique, in contrast to earlier eras, is the internet platform itself as a space wherein consumers weave and spin, through their interactions and narratives, their own ‘threads’ of significance (cf. Geertz 1973) which unite them and sometimes leads them into producing emergent understandings. Here we concur with Firat and Dholakia (1998) on the almost theatrical character of such spaces and spacings: “... instead of the stage, the backstage and the audience, the theater is composed only of the stage. All interaction across all dimensions – economic, social, political – occur on this stage. This means that everyone is a player, an actor. On a stage, different groups of actors may be engaged in different interactions simultaneously. They all contribute to what is happening on the stage.” (1999, 154-155). The value of such stages and the stagings therein, is revealed as a site wherein consumers “put them to work” (McCracken, 1989). And sometimes such consumption work is trivial and mundane, sometimes merely driven by distraction and diversion, but sometimes it becomes re-enchanting, and at other times it becomes playful and emancipative in character making possible catharsis. It is in such moments that the sacred character of such spaces is revealed – as communal spaces of revelation and insight.

In such commercial contexts, especially given the nature of the internet connection we witness how celebrity functions as a site for organizing social identity, a vessel for identity formation and group transformation. The liminality of celebrity thus takes centre-stage, for as Turner suggested: “In liminality people ‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarise them” (1982, 27). And as a means for organizing identity (du Gay 2007), and for reorganizing such constituent parts, roles and characters, we might finally explore the value of what we might term celebritopias6 – that is as a land of myth, magic and fairytale princes and princesses. The mythological space of celebritopia then presents itself to consumers as a neverending staging, a soap opera rich and ripe in potential for interaction, participation and collaboration. A neverending story of opportunity and possibility which punctuates our own more domestic, prosaic and profane everyday lives; an opportunity which in some senses renders our own lives and meanings as sharable; and a narrative which as we have sought to demonstrate provides our own lives with a sense of meaningfulness and sacralisation. When we start to see the social importance of celebritopias we see how celebrities are important sites for

5 See 1 above, but to save you the effort we note that Kylie Konnect is unashamedly commercial with the emphasis placed on updating fans on her latest performances, cds and perfume ranges); along with links to Kylie.com the official retail site where fans can view lyrics, download wallpaper, watch her performances and purchase CDs, DVDs, ringtones, widgets etc.

6 Here we might quote Porpora when he suggests: “Traditionally, heroes are the protagonists of myths – that is, metaphorical or figurative accounts that are addressed to the ultimate questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? Addressed to ultimate questions as they are, myths relate to a sacred plane of existence, a plane that transcends profane, everyday life. In the sacred plane, heroes personify transcendent ideals and transcendent visions of the good.” (1996, 227)
the negotiation, revitalization and transformation of our public and private selves. Celebrity it would appear in its technological guise currently makes possible a space in our lives for sacredness to emerge, a space for innovation and interrogations to disturb and unsettle the eternally same (de Certeau 1984).

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