The Role of Brand Communities in the Construction of Celebrity

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Consumers often seek ways to connect to people whose fame is based on heredity, such as the British Royal Family (BRF). Through depth interviews, we explore how service providers orchestrate consumers’ BRF-related consumption experiences to distance the monarchy from the trappings of, and associations with, “everyday” fame.

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The Construction of Celebrity in Contemporary Consumer Culture

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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“The Construction of Ordinary Celebrity”
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We compare four forms of “ordinary” celebrity, building on a comparison of Susan Boyle of Britain’s Got Talent, Dave Carroll of United Breaks Guitars, Jill and Kevin of JK Wedding Dance, and the Balloon Boy hoax. In 1961, Boorstin characterized a celebrity as a person who is “famous for being famous,” which Gabler (2006) termed an epitaph for any serious consideration of celebrity. But Boorstin’s comments were more generative when he described celebrity as a “human pseudo-event,” “manufactured for us” but lacking in substantiability, a “manifestation of our own hollowness.” This perspective locates celebrity in the deficiencies of consumers, not the talents of the celebrated. Our paper uses celebrity as Boorstin does but offers a more complex view of the interplay between celebrity as manufactured for us and as manufactured by us.

In contrast to celebrity grounded in achievement, the ordinary celebrity’s claim to fame rests on intrinsic ordinariness (Turner 2000). It is vested in performative claims to be an essential self plucked from obscurity by chance or fortune, rather than a cultivated, tutored or trained self transformed deliberately and calculatedly into an invisible and therefore not entirely to be trusted. Ordinary celebrity is an element of success in several areas of market economies such as politics (Sarah Palin), religion (Joel Osteen) and sport (Dennis Rodman) and informs the narratives of entrepreneurs linked to brands like Orville Redenbacher popcorn and Wendy’s hamburgers.

Ordinary celebrity has become more ubiquitous with the rise of video sharing sites like YouTube. We distinguish celebrity built on television from celebrity built on video sharing sites. We also draw distinctions among the generative processes based on two attributes: (1) whether the claim to celebrity is managed by an economic insurgent or an economic incumbent, and (2) whether the consumer initiates or responds to the claim of ordinary celebrity.

Traditionally media like television were considered carriers of power located in the State or commercial interests rather than as motivating ideological or economic forces in and of themselves (Turner 2006). The media were so-called because they mediated between the locations of power and their subjects. Turner contends that through the commercial success of reality television, media have become authors, not mere mediators, of cultural identity. In particular, reality TV produces an identity that celebrates the lack of exceptional talent or training, as long as people perform their ordinariness with some specificity or individuality. As media become economic actors with interests once the prerogative of the State and large corporations, the celebration of the ordinary becomes a profitable business strategy as much as an ideology.

We extend Turner’s analysis by contending that in important respects YouTube, the dominant carrier of populist video content, benefits from the myth that media is an element of the center of power located in the State (Coudry 2003). We argue that it (along with its parent, Google) shares the incentive to achieve cultural effects for economic interests. As has often been noted, however, YouTube differs from television in that it publishes user-generated content that is voted up or down by a massive, virtually global, democratic process. YouTube is, therefore, a house divided against itself. On one hand it operates an ideological system with power to serve incumbent economic and social interests. On the other hand it operates a system that empowers insurgent interests.

The first distinction in our typology of ordinary celebrity is between the interests of economic incumbents like large corporations and media groups (United Airlines and Sony Recorded Music in the cases we investigated,) and economic or social insurgents, the formerly powerless individuals now empowered as creators of content in pursuit of either economic power or social identity, such as wedding dancers Jill and Kevin or the parents of Balloon Boy. The second distinction has to do with whether consumers initiate or respond to the annunciation of celebrity and therefore to the claim of ordinariness. Media like YouTube allow the passive emergence of ordinariness by a process of implicit voting or preferential attachment (Barabasi and Albert 1999). Thus it allows for what we have termed ordinariness manufactured by us. In our work we place Jill and Kevin in this category. We contrast this with ordinary celebrity that is made for us, as in the case of Susan Boyle. We also highlight that the distinctions among the processes of construction of ordinary celebrity are not simply played out by responsive consumers. Our paper illustrates that consumers rely on but also defy broadcast media as each tries to control the production of ordinary celebrity.

“Personal Blogging, Performance and the Quest for Fame”
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The democratization in mass communication brought about by the participatory media (Jenkins 2006) opens new avenues to celebrity. Consider for example Julie Powell’s crossover from a commoner to celebrity through her blog interlacing introspections on cooking Julia Child’s recipes with glimpses of her marriage. Her chronicle formed the basis of the blockbuster movie Julie & Julia (Scott 2009). Estimates suggest there are133 million blogs worldwide, with the number increasing by 1.4 new blogs per second (Technorati 2009). While stressing that not all bloggers want fame, our paper discusses how ordinary people seek to gain a discursive power and “a voice above others” (Marshall 1997) in the clutter of cyberspace by blogging (in most cases) about subject matters as mundane or trivial as cooking dinner. We frame blogging practice as an interactive performance through which the authors perform their lives in the eyes of the others and provide a dramaturgical analysis (Goffman 1959) of this practice.

Indisputably, the Internet produces new means for public self-presentation (Schau and Gilly 2003), and new avenues for research (e.g. Zhao and Belk’s (2007) examination of blogs as channels for conspicuous consumption and Kozinets et al ‘s (2010) study of narrative styles of word of mouth communicators in blogging networks). As yet, however, there is a theoretical void concerning performance in the production of blog content. This omission begs redress given that the social web features ever more specialized and dramatized blogs, a few of which garner fame and following by producing narratives on seemingly everyday consumption practices such as parenting (http://www.dooce.com/), cooking (http://smittenkitchen.com/), traveling (http://camielsandchocolate.com/), fashion (http://www.bryancboy.com/), gardening (http://www.yougrowgirl.com/), or running (http://runningat30.blogspot.com/). These blogs are not individualistic introspections, but are joint leisure activities that are shared among the blogger, his or her friends, and—if successful—
the stranger blog audiences. With our work, we aim to explore this under-theorized territory.

Our methodology incorporates both in-depth interviews and narrative analysis of blogs. We utilize a netnographic (Kozinets 2001, 2010) method to collect blog data. The blog entries are treated as consumers’ retrospective and introspective narratives, through which they impose meanings on their daily activities and selectively underline particular aspects of consumption experiences (Thompson 1997). We juxtapose these narratives (the front stage) with the interview data to probe them about particular instances and stories and the underlying motives of representation (back stage). We also inquire about how bloggers imagine and construct their audiences through the comments left on their blogs or other monitoring processes. Our inquiry into the imagined audience further enables us to anchor the dramaturgical aspect of blogging processes and underscore the ways blog performances are shaped. As a supplemental data source, we also have collected interviews with famous bloggers from various media sources.

Our findings demonstrate how bloggers stylize the mundane and stage their lives to appeal to their audience in a dramatic fashion formulated by Goffman (1959) First, bloggers often seek to idealize (Goffman 1959) their mundane daily lives through weaving actual consumption experiences with readily available literary narratives, scripts and ideals. Blogging allows people to enact consumption fantasies encoded in popular culture rather than merely witnessing them. Second, bloggers continuously try to mystify their audiences to keep their audience involved and intrigued. Details about their lives are shared selectively, and contacts to the audience are regulated to maintain a social distance. By idealizing and mystifying consumption experiences, bloggers can conceal daily challenges thus enabling followers some escape from their own lived realities when they read and fantasize about bloggers’ lives. By manipulating back stage and front stage selves, bloggers can instill different cultural meanings into their online persona.

Participatory media dilute the institutional structures through which fame is traditionally made. Our analysis of bloggers shows how consumers strive to gain a discursive voice and power (Marshall 1997) and manufacture a persona that could gain them celebrity status within relatively limited social networks or the greater cultural sphere. Whereas celebrities deploy scripted and readily available dramatic roles to fashion cultural meanings (McCracken 2005), bloggers create their own dramas and embellish their mundane activities through drawing upon a wide variety of cultural resources. We discuss the implications of our findings for theories of celebrity and self-representation and conclude our paper with further questions about the consumption of these blogs by their audiences and audience engagement with the celebrity blogger.

“The Role of Brand Communities in the Construction of Celebrity”

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Celebrities abound in our culture, as do writings on celebrity in the social sciences (e.g., Gamson 1994, Turner 2004). And while we know that consumers feel attachment to people who have acquired considerable celebrity we do not know why consumer make investments of attention and begin to feel attachments with those who as yet possess little or no fame. Given our cultural fascination with celebrity and its alleged democratization (e.g., Andrejevic 2002), it is timely to address this question. We focus in particular on an online brand community’s attention and attachments to reality TV contestants.

Following others who examine celebrities in consumer research and cultural studies (e.g., Schickel 1985; Thomson 2006) we draw on relationship-focused theories to inform our understanding. However, our examination differs in two important ways. First, our focus is on relationships that develop between communities and individuals versus those between an individual consumer and a celebrity. Second, we focus on the formation of relationships between communities and those who possess little celebrity versus the evolution of relationships between fans and those who already possess a considerable level of fame (e.g., Tyra Banks).

As our goal is theory development, we use qualitative methods well suited to the purpose. Data was gathered through a 20 month netnography (Kozinets 2002) in the online brand community comprised of fans of America’s Next Top Model (ANTM). In order to narrow down the dataset the material generated on one popular site (Television Without Pity), for contestants in one season (“Cycle” 9, Fall 2007) was collated. Out of the thirteen contestants who competed for the ANTM title that season, eight became the focus of our analysis: the four who generated the most attention in the community (e.g., posts and file size) and the four who generated the least from the moment threads for each contestant were created (August 26th 2007) to roughly three months after the season finale, and as the next cycle began (February 29th 2008). The analysis for this study follows the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We engaged in open coding, axial coding, and constant comparison using Atlas ti software.

Our data analysis suggests that the formation of relationships with individuals under scrutiny by a community cannot be disentangled from the formation/maintenance of relationships between members of the community. That is, consumers forge relationships with some—but not all—contestants in the process of interacting with others who share an interest in this set of people who are vying for attention. To some extent, the visibility a contestant achieves and the meanings invested in that person are a by-product of the process of community practices such as communing, socializing, spilling, and gossiping that have been identified in prior consumer and fan research (e.g., Baym 1999; Holt 1995; Jenkins 2006). Our analysis also reveals that the process of meaning creation for contestants is influenced both by what consumers perceive the focal individual to be or do and by what others with whom they are being compared are perceived as being or doing. That is, the pervasive practice of comparison with other contestants in current and prior cycles impacts visibility and meanings that a community attaches to a given individual. Another finding concern the dimensions along which a community’s relationship with a contestant varies. One dimension is the extent to which the relationship features coaching: for some contestants, the community collectively provides advice about what she is doing wrong and right and about how she might further enhance her human potential. Another dimension is the extent to which the relationship features play: that is, some contestants garner considerable attention and differentiated meanings because the relationship between them and the community is a playful one that involves games such as coming up with the best metaphor to describe the individual’s hairstyle, or competitive lampooning of the individual’s character or demeanor. A third dimension is the extent to which the relationship features empathy: some contestants garner much greater sympathetic identification than do others. Our analysis links these relational dimensions to differences in the extent to which contestants achieve less measures of celebrity, within the community and beyond.
“Above Celebrity: Maintaining Consumers’ Experiences of Heritage-Based Fame”

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Consumers often seek connections to people possessing fame based on heredity, rather than on deeds. One example is the British Royal Family Brand (BRFB). Images and narratives pertaining to the BRFB are perpetuated through goods, services and experiences in myriad industries, and especially in tourism, media, and commemoratives/souvenirs. Balmer (2007) asserts the BRFB is “a global brand” (31). Its appeal extends from the Victorian Era, when one-fourth of the world’s population and total land mass were under British rule (Aronson). BRFB images are highly mediated, and therefore often intermingle in discussions of glamour, manners and lifestyles. While it might be assumed that hereditary Royals are “only celebrities,” they also resonate in ways achievement-based celebrities do not. As Balmer (2007) observes, monarchies as (human)brands possess an irresistible combination of five differentiating aspects: royal, regal, relevant, responsive, and respected.

In this paper, we explore two research questions: How do those responsible for orchestrating consumers’ experiences with the BRFB perceive the Royals, vis-a-vis the notion of “celebrity?” How do these perceptions shape the ways stakeholders create and manage BRFB consumption experiences? Interviews were conducted with eight service providers England from April-August, 2005. (Follow-up interviews, for the purpose of member checks and updating providers’ perspectives, are planned for summer 2010). Informants include three retailers, three journalists (including the founding editor of a global magazine devoted to royalty) and two senior employees of royal palace museums. The text from the 2005 interviews yielded over 280 typed pages of single-spaced text.

Our analysis reveals that with regard to the first question, no provider believes “celebrity” describes the BRFB. Rather, because the brand represents the heritage and history of others, providers believe most members deserve more respect and tolerance than “regular” celebrities (even as they acknowledge the human failings of individual Royals). Indeed, many providers evoke monikers such as “Saint,” “Savior” and “Hero/Heroine,” supporting these terms with narratives from past history or current events. Yet most also distinguish between this elevated stature of BRF members and the more celebrity-like stance of Princess Diana. One informant flatly states that BRF members “are not celebrities. They are way above that…all this celebrity bit comes from Diana…the Queen is hardly glamorous…if you see the queen as a celebrity [it] really cheapens everything…in the back of their [consumers’] minds, they know the history behind it all [the BRFB].” Another believes the moral duties of the BRFB distinguish them from celebrities: “…more is expected of the Royal Family…somebody said the Queen should have commented on such and such a crisis…So there is this expectation that the Royal Family be involved.” However, our media informants also recognize (and acknowledge their role in perpetuating) an overlap in celebrity-like status of the BRFB, as media outlets are more invasive and the public is provided more access.

With regard to the second research question, we note providers use several strategies to help distance the BRFB from other celebrity-based human brands. First, they try to Connect the brand directly to consumers—e.g., by reminding them of the salience of the BRFB in their own lives. For example, one museum featured a “memory wall” where consumers left written remembrances of the memorable ways their lives had intersected with the BRFB. Providers also Enable consumers, by perpetuating aspects of the BRFB through narratives that support a distance from mere celebrities.

Providers also Sacralize the brand—supporting and offering narratives and displays that defy or differentiate the BRFB from other famous people. BRFB providers may also Teach, or reinforce the importance of the brand through history lessons, pageantry or narratives, to attract new BRFB admirers. Finally, unlike marketers of celebrities, providers Protect the brand by orchestrating consumers’ experiences to focus more on positive aspects, and downplaying potentially tarnishing events or people. For example, although cheap porcelain exists that commemorates the BRFB, one informant only displays the finer variants. While he stocks lesser-quality goods, he hides them in a cabinet until a consumer requests those items. Interestingly (and perhaps counter-intuitively), journalists also use Protect in their daily or weekly coverage of the BRFB. Finally, providers also Aestheticize, by perpetuating the BRFB experience through sensory-laden activities (e.g., exhibitions and displays). Furthermore, they often actively discourage consumers from engaging in the lower-quality BRFB consumption (e.g., buying souvenirs from street vendors, or printing negative reviews of BRFB television programs). We explore these and other themes more fully in the paper.