Consuming Stardust: the Consumption of Celebrities Beyond Product Endorsements

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In this paper, we contribute to theory on the role played by celebrities in today’s consumer culture through an interpretive study that introduces the idea of three different layers of celebrity: the performer, the character and the private self, each of which is associated to specific consumption practices.

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differentially important across the four age x gender groups. Both male and female adolescents in the 16 to 18 age range (older teens) seek reality programs that incorporate dramatic situations and relationships among the program participants. Gender differences were found for the younger adolescents (the 13 to 15 age range). Whereas younger males prefer reality programs that involve humorous and/or inspirational elements, females of the same age watch a reality program because of one or more of the participants/characters featured in the program and the program's realism (real people placed in real-life situations).

Our results are consistent with extant developmental theories which show that the appreciation of dramatic content and human relationships typically requires a higher level of cognitive and emotional sophistication, which is gradually developed throughout adolescence (Vorderer and Knobloch 2000; Zillman 2000). Our research offers insights that would be helpful to television programmers, advertisers, and public policy makers. For example, television programmers and advertisers can utilize motivation-based segmentation when developing more targeted programming schedules and media buys with quality rationale. By understanding adolescent motivations to watch reality programming, public policy experts can appeal to the same motivations and encourage adolescents to engage in non-televison activities, such as reading and exercise.

References

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We live in a world obsessed with celebrity. Michael Jackson. Madonna. Sofia Loren. Paris Hilton. Tiger Woods. These names are familiar to many people around the world and bring with them memories and emotions, positive and negative, both in those who actively follow their careers and life vicissitudes and in those passively exposed to the media hype surrounding the famous. Consumer researchers have long investigated celebrities for their role as product endorsers. Research in this domain, initially conducted from a social psychological perspective, views celebrities as particularly source of advertising messages (for a review see Erdogan 1999). In the consumer culture theory tradition (Arnould and Thompson 2005), celebrities are understood as receptacles of cultural meanings that are transferred to consumption goods through the act of endorsement (McCracken 1986, 1989). Both psychological and cultural perspectives have thus investigated celebrities from a narrow point of view. Following this year’s call for big picture research at the North American ACR conference, in this paper we draw attention to the complex and multifaceted manners through which consumers consume celebrities–beyond the consumption of endorsed products.

Our study draws on data obtained from 18 informants (half men, half women; aged 13 to 50; mostly Italian) with varying levels of interest in celebrities (i.e., worship/fandom; active search for information; passive exposure to news). We conducted phenomenological interviews (McCracken 1988; Thompson 1997) lasting on average 90 to 120 minutes. Informants were asked about their views on celebrities, what they like/dislike about them, and several narratives of consumption stories and rituals centered upon the famous were elicited. We also resorted to photo-elicitation and autodriving (Heisley and Levy 1991) by showing informants pictures of appropriately selected celebrities and by asking them to bring pictures, videos and other relevant material (e.g., autographs). Interviews were transcribed.
verbatim from digital records. Informants were given access to their transcribed interviews for correction and/or amplification. The interviews totaled more than 30 hours of conversation, resulting in approximately 360 pages of single-spaced discursive material and 47 auto-driven artifacts.

We found that celebrities can be consumed in highly complex manners. Specifically, in this paper we introduce the idea of three different layers of celebrity: the performer, the character, and the private self. These layers represent specific aspects of the flow of goods, news, performances and media images based on the celebrity. The performer refers to the celebrity’s recognized performances— for instance, the Oscar-winning actor or the professional athlete whose skills earn her a gold medal at the Olympics. The character consists of the attitudes, looks, narratives, lifestyle and those other aspects that constitute the celebrity’s public image beyond performances. Celebrities are sometimes known more for these aspects than for their professional achievements and a theme that reverberated throughout our interviews is the opposition between the “real” celebrities and the new brand of people “who are famous because they are famous” through the exposure gained with Big Brother, American Idol and countless other television shows. The third layer, the private self, is not easy to see through the looking glass of celebrities’ manufactured public image. This aspect can only be imagined or glimpsed at by most consumers.

Each of these layers is consumed in its own specific manners. The performer is consumed through the output of his/her profession. The consumption of professional excellence entails a variety of consumption practices. For example, in the case of an actor, such practices include going to a movie theatre in the opening weekend of the star’s new film; watching DVDs of those movies alone, with the partner or with friends; downloading legally or illegally those movies and collecting them. A second way to consume the performer is the integration of their skills. Dancers who imitate Michael Jackson’s moonwalk, young kids’ emulating famous skaters’ moves, drummers who play according to Jimmy Hendrix’s style are just a few examples of how this consumption practice can be expressed. This is particularly frequent in sports, where amateurism is widespread and champion role models are sought after.

Also the character is consumed in multifaceted ways. The consumption of products endorsed, designed or somehow linked to the celebrity is the most visible way of consuming the character. Consumers are willing to buy books, make-up, perfumes, fashion and other products because they are a way to feel close to their idols. However, the character may be consumed in other manners, without the mediation of consumer goods, by reading/watching the news stories regarding the celebrity, by imitating their looks and attitudes and, in some cases, by integrating their ideas and values into one’s own life.

The person behind the media image is both the most difficult layer of celebrity and the most satisfactory object of consumption for a fan. The primary consumption practice involving the private self of a celebrity is the highly cratered personal contact during or, even better, outside of professional contexts. Meeting a celebrity is often a fulfilling moment leading to cherished memories— although consumers may also be disappointed by the real person behind the celebrity’s character. A less intense experience is the indirect contact with the celebrity through acquaintances’ storytelling of personal encounters that give a voyeuristic a look at the idol’s private self. Another related set of consumption activities involves artifacts, pictures of or with the celebrity and autographs being the most recurring ones.

Our emerging research findings extend understanding of celebrities’ role in today’s consumer culture by highlighting the multifaceted consumption practices centered upon the famous, which as we show go much beyond the consumption of endorsed products. We show that shared beliefs, social practices, consumption rituals and cultural meanings circulate also among non-fans, including those who are even annoyed by the media hype centered and consider them as anti-heroes, negative role models and scapegoats for society’s ills. Our findings also have implications for celebrities themselves, who may be viewed as iconic brands (Rein et al. 1987). Specifically, the three layers of celebrity we identify lend themselves to different paths of celebrity legitimization through authentication acts that may converge or conflict among themselves.

Selected References

Logo Image Effects on Consumer Perceptions of Packages
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Extant research has established that package size plays an important role in consumers’ choice, preference and purchase quantity decisions (Raghubir and Greenleaf 2006; Wansink and Van Ittersum 2003). In addition, it has been found that consumers rarely search for and utilize volume information on package labels (Cole and Balasubramanian 1993). Instead, in order to conserve mental effort, consumers make visual judgments of size easily and automatically using external and sometimes unrelated cues (Krishna 2007).