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Celebrities as human brands: An inquiry on stakeholder-actor co-creation of brand identities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the co-creation of human brands exemplified by celebrities in a stakeholder-actor approach. Combining theoretical frameworks of brand identity co-creation and stakeholder paradigms, demonstrates how human brand identities co-create by multiple stakeholder-actors who have resources and incentives in the activities that make up an enterprise of a human brand, including the celebrities themselves, consumer-fans, and business entities. By utilizing observational, archival netnographic data from popular social media platforms, four exemplars of celebrity identities demonstrate the co-creation of human brands. Findings illustrate key stakeholder-actors' participation in the co-creation process as well as sociocultural codes, including social construction and negotiation of identities, parasocialization, influence projection, legitimization, and utilization of human brand identities. These human brand identity dynamics advance a stakeholder-actor paradigm of brand co-creation that adapts to the predominant consumer culture and human ideals that surround the celebrity. Results inform implications and future research on celebrity brand marketing management and co-creation.

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1. Introduction

Celebrities are human brands – their performances on- and off-stage, off- and online, public or private, are marketing and branding exercises. Their everyday life choices and values are intrinsically private, but performed in public. These actions create brands and branding identities. Consequently, the human brand identities sell product brands through endorsements and persuasions by giving personality qualities to inanimate brands; and they encourage consumption through being an idealized consumer and a commodity vessel (Holmes & Redmond, 2014).

This paper extends “human brands” as “any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communication efforts” (Thomson, 2006, p. 104) by analyzing their identities as a “multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 5). The recent development in branding literature shifts attention from merely focusing on brand image or brand differentiation to include brand identity in the total brand equity (Keller, 2003). The early definition of brand identity (Aaker, 1996) describes the phenomena as a unique set of brand associations that brand strategists aspire to create or maintain. Combining human brand and identities definitions support examining

celebrity's human brand identity as a multi-dimensional classification and mapping of human concepts (“who they are, and who they are seen to be... and who they are in our lives”, Jenkins, 2014, p. 3) because both individuals and community members are relevant to marketing efforts. Human brand identities can take place as collective, collaborative, and performative (von Wallpach, Voyer, Kastanakis, & Mühlbacher, 2016) aspects of a social co-creation process involving multiple providers of identity as stipulated by the service-dominant (SD) logic and adopted by the evolving brand logic (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). Complementarily, the stakeholder paradigm in co-creation is inherently compatible within the framework of human brand identity co-creation process—a set of interrelationships among groups that have a stake in the activities that make up a business. In this case, a celebrity human brand identity forms by co-creation.

Celebrity sponsorship and social media advertising serve as a context of marketing communication to examine how different stakeholders – advertisers, press, talent management, broadcast networks, consumers/fans, and celebrities themselves –gather together in an assemblage of service in co-creating human brand identities. In turn, these communications provide service back to these stakeholders' own incentives. Social media's advent marks a rich avenue of social reality. These outlets for co-creation serve as discursive and dynamic outlets for celebrity stakeholders to create, re-create, persuade, and negotiate identities for social and economic purposes (Boffard, 2014; Burgess & Green, 2009). This paper explores social media's role influencing the co-creation processes involving celebrity human brand

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identities among stakeholder-actors. The hybrid term “stakeholder-actor” refers to the combined functions of a stakeholder who can affect and is affected (Freeman, 1984) by the objectives of the celebrity human brand, and an “actor” who is not strictly a stakeholder (cf. stakeholder theory criteria) but a more sociological sense having the agency according to structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and actor-network theory (Latour, 1988).

The present study seeks to understand a set of interrelationships among parties that have a win-win stake in the activities that make up celebrity human brand identity co-creation. Exploring co-creation under the lens of the SD logic, this study demonstrates that service exchanges and stakeholders' roles in the co-creation process are dynamic in adaptive, identity co-creating service systems, and founded in prevailing consumer culture (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013) mirrored in the social media interaction.

1.1. Stakeholder view in co-creating celebrity human-brand identities

Modern business roles such as publicists, journalists, writers, and other cultural intermediaries create the human-brand identity in celebrities (Marshall, 2006). Moreover, the brand co-creation happens, together with the televised shows and recordings, in interviews, performances, and social media interactions (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007). Ultimately, the entertainment and advertising industries as well as other organizations that profit and benefit from celebrities carefully monitor the performance outcomes of celebrity brand identities. Finally, celebrities as stakeholders (Schroeder, 2005) potentially receive the biggest gains, both financially and in terms of their intangible image and reputation. In other words, the ownerships, connection, and interactions of these stakeholders result to co-creations of human brand identities because each group's motivations and gains differ as a balanced centrality with key actors (Gummesson, 2008).

Stakeholder theory explains these ownerships, connection, and interactions among stakeholders of human brands in creating value for their varying objectives (Freeman, 1984). From the evolving paradigms on stakeholder theory, the overall idea still holds that a business, or in this context, the identity co-creation process is a set of interrelationships among groups who have a stake in the activities that make up a business. In this case, co-creation influences the celebrity brand identity.

Arguably, celebrity human brand identity co-creation is a social assemblage of a web of actors both humans (i.e., celebrities, consumers, fans, and other spectators) and ‘non-humans’ including organizations and service entities (i.e., media outfits and commercial firms). Successful co-creation of human brands depends upon the translation of social interaction and participation. Actor-network theory provides a theoretical backdrop explaining how a social project such as a celebrity human brand identity is a collaboration of all actors, both human and non-humans (i.e., organizations, businesses). Continuous sociological translations of the material-semiotic elements surrounding the project (human brand identity) achieve durability (Callon & Latour, 1992). Social arrangements, relational effects, and translations from other actor-networks (chains of translations) make the focal project sustainable. Actor-network theory (ANT), the “sociology of translations,” describes the mechanics of actors and their power to construct and maintain a network that involves human and nonhuman actor forces (Callon, 1986; Law, 1992). ANT describes how heterogeneous networks including people, organizations, agents, machines, and other objects transform and translate into a common project (Law, 1991). This theory explores how these networks evolve. This sociological translation involves “all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes on... authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force” (Callon & Latour, 1981, p. 279). Social creation and recreation create the processes for a research project.

Research gaps and calls for theory development support a need to study how the social media co-creation process affects human brand

identities. The present study seeks to broaden the current thought of service exchange and identity co-creation process by understanding a set of interrelationships among parties that desire a win-win stake. In this case, the desired outcome is a positive and congruent celebrity human brand identity co-creation developing in social media terrain. To explicate this theoretical development proposition, this study explores two research questions. First, how does human brand identity co-creation happen in a multi-stakeholder-actor approach? Further, what sociocultural codes guide stakeholders in their co-creation of celebrity human-brand identities?

2. Methods

Netnography (or internet ethnography) is a research technique that explores how social media interactions form the human brand identities among celebrities involving different stakeholders (Kozinets, 2015). Netnography includes a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical, and representational research practices, where a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates and manifests through digital communication data. This study explores the Philippines' celebrity culture both as a scholar and as part of the audience's culture (i.e., ‘autoethnography’, cf. Holmes, Ralph, & Redmond, 2015) by observing how different social media actors (i.e., stakeholders) interact, reformulate, and stabilize celebrity human brands identities. The researcher is a real-time, unobtrusive observant on Facebook and Twitter social media interactions, while an active YouTube user and viewer. This real-time observational research tool reflexively makes the researcher to record both an emic (insider) and an etic (outsider) point of views. Archival netnographic data provide a cultural baseline for analysis, providing a large amount of data. Categories for interpretation emerge from ground up (Kozinets, 2015). Through the Internet, celebrities themselves or the agents that handle them, outside of the corporate streams, directly negotiate their fame and brand presentation. The flow of negotiation is complex that allows for media mobility, interactivity, and achievability of past records of the interactions, akin to an online public diary (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Online brand communities have become acceptable and stable avenues for rich resources of brand creations (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). This evolution occurs because a natural, qualitatively data-rich reservoir provides an unparalleled platform in a less restrictive, realistic, and engaging online presentations of identities, authenticity, power, and value (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). This technique allows documenting and analyzing the co-creating parties in their natural environments. Prior studies demonstrate netnography's reliability as a brand research tool (Giesler, 2006).

Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were selected for data collection. These three social media platforms are among the most popular participatory resources of co-creation inputs from stakeholders. A two-week frame of social media interactions observations among the four celebrity exemplars was set for Facebook and Twitter platforms from March 11–25, 2015. This short timeframe provides a rich archival dataset for the two social media for their active usage and salience among users. ‘Official’ Facebook and Twitter accounts of the celebrity exemplars served as data touchpoints from where account information, posts, and comments were extracted. Meanwhile, a five-year data timeframe from March 2011 to March 2015 was chosen for YouTube video posts from different sources and comments elicited among the viewers. Topics vary accordingly, illustrating how various stakeholders apparently participate in the celebrity identity co-creation. In total, the social media archive data sample comprise of 304 total posts with 34,767 aggregated comments, including ‘retweets’ on Twitter. Apparently, these social media outlets have become discursive and dynamic outlets for celebrity stakeholders to create, re-create, persuade, and negotiate identities for social and economic purposes (Burgess & Green, 2009).

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