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Posting from beyond the grave: An autopsy of consumer attitudes toward promotional communication in a posthumous context

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ABSTRACT

It is now common for consumers to mourn and commemorate deceased celebrities on social networking sites (SNS). In addition to grieving messages, however, celebrities' posthumous SNS increasingly include promotional content; late celebrities, from Marilyn Monroe to David Bowie, regularly tweet or post promotional messages from the afterlife. The aim of this paper is to explore consumer attitudes toward marketing communication in a posthumous environment. Prior research has consistently documented consumers' rejection of marketing activities in other sacred environments. By investigating the interaction effect of celebrity attachment (fans vs. non-fans) and death salience on celebrities' posthumous SNS, this research is the first to identify a positive response to marketing communication in a sacred environment. Three experimental studies demonstrate that although both fans and non-fans react negatively to promotional messages when death is salient, over time, celebrity attachment diminishes death salience and fosters a positive response of fans toward promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS. Celebrity attachment may favor artificial immortality and, as such, distance the late celebrity from death-related thoughts.

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Just because a celebrity is dead doesn't mean he can't tweet. (Forbes, 2012)

1. Introduction

Celebrities (i.e., individuals who enjoy public recognition; McCracken, 1989) use social networking sites (SNS) to increase their influence and deliver promotional content (Johns & English, 2016). Currently, celebrity SNS remain active well after the death of the individual (Drake & Miah, 2010). Celebrities' official posthumous SNS, accounts that are allowed by Facebook or Twitter to display the blue “verified” checkmark, may reach millions of consumers, as illustrated by the official posthumous Facebook pages of Michael Jackson (76 million fans), Paul Walker (45 million fans), Albert Einstein (19 million fans) and Marilyn Monroe (14 million fans). Interestingly, many celebrities' posthumous SNS are not devoid of promotional content: Marilyn Monroe sells cosmetics on Twitter, and Einstein promotes bobblehead figurines and “I ♥ π” t-shirts on Facebook. As shown by these examples, messages promoting celebrity-related products and memorabilia are generally posted under the name of the deceased celebrities, thereby creating the illusion that they were posted from beyond the grave.

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However, these promotional messages coexist with consumers' grieving rituals on celebrities' posthumous SNS, such as posted messages that commemorate the deceased (Radford & Bloch, 2012). Posthumous SNS thus function as digital gravescapes (Church, 2013) wherein consumers are exposed to death-related information. A significant portion of research in consumer psychology has documented that exposure to death-related information may increase *death salience*, or the level of activation of death-related thoughts in consumers' minds (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Hayes, Schimmel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010). Evidence from various settings has shown that in addition to explicit death-related stimuli (e.g., news of terror attacks; Liu & Smeesters, 2010), implicit death-related stimuli can arouse death salience (e.g., exposure to an insurance brand; Franssen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Das, 2008). By extension, we posit that the death of a celebrity should increase death salience. Then how do consumers respond to promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS?

A strong rejection of commercial content by consumers could be expected since this content should be perceived as a violation of the boundary between the sacredness of death and (profane) marketing practices (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989). Drawing on prior research on grieving processes, however, we posit that as time passes, celebrity attachment positively impacts the acceptability of messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS by reducing death salience. Consumers who display a high degree of celebrity attachment (i.e., the fans) are likely to maintain their beloved celebrities as everlasting figures (Alexander, 2010), thereby dissociating them from death-related thoughts.

Drawing on the literature on grieving processes and the continuing bonds theory, the present research contributes to our understanding of this communication practice by showing that celebrity attachment attenuates death salience over time, thus preventing the clash between death (sacred) and marketing communications (profane). Through three experimental studies, we demonstrate that celebrity attachment triggers a positive attitude toward promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS.

2. Theoretical background

The death of a celebrity increases the level of death-related thoughts associated with the celebrity in consumers' associate memory network (Hayes et al., 2010). In other words, when consumers think of David Bowie or Carrie Fisher, death-related thoughts are activated along with other associations related to the celebrity's life or works. Celebrities' posthumous SNS constitute a unique environment to witness the digitalization of traditional forms of grieving rituals (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013) and, as such, the increased level of death salience after the celebrity's death. Posthumous SNS function as online bereavement platforms where fans mourn the celebrity by posting messages that convey their emotional reactions following the celebrity's death (Church, 2013). However, the death of the celebrity does not prevent the distribution of further marketing content, especially celebrity memorabilia, on posthumous SNS.

Receiving the news of the loss of a celebrity produces intense feelings for fans (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003) because death puts an end to their relationship with the beloved celebrity. As bereaved persons, the celebrity's fans address separation through grief work, which includes missing, remembering or crying (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Radford & Bloch, 2012). Challenging the long-standing Freudian belief that ties to a deceased person need to be relinquished, the continuing bonds theory proposes that maintaining psychological association with the deceased helps to counteract bereavement-related distress (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). After the grief work, during which they are submerged by emotions (Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005), individuals cope with their loss through meaning reconstruction strategies that allow the continuation of the relationship with the deceased person (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Likewise, it is expected that bereaved fans will protect themselves from pain and cope with grief work by restoring meaning to maintain a psychological relationship with the celebrity. Given Radford and Bloch's (2012) proposition that celebrities reach the immortal status of icons after their death, it can be expected that by coping with grief work, fans eventually dissociate the celebrity from death-related thoughts.

In contrast, non-fans would be less likely to engage in grief resolution strategies. Because these individuals did not have a strong relationship with the celebrity, they should be relatively unaffected by the celebrity's death. Despite the passage of time, death-related thoughts are likely to remain strongly associated with the celebrity in non-fans' minds given that no grief work is undertaken to ensure the dissociation of the celebrity from death-related thoughts. As an illustration, Marilyn Monroe may be an everlasting celebrity for her fans, but non-fans may consider her a former (deceased) celebrity. Accordingly, the activation of death-related thoughts should be stronger for non-fans than for fans because the two units (i.e., celebrity and death) would have been dissociated by fans' grieving process.

Prior studies have documented a strong negative response toward market-related activities using or surrounding sacred items (Belk et al., 1989). Infinite values such as death or life contrast with finite commercial or economic values (Curasi, Price, & Arnould, 2004; Kozinets, 2001). To avoid possible profane contamination (including contamination from market-related activities), consumers act protectively toward the items they consider sacred (e.g., values, objects, persons, or activities). For instance, Veer and Shankar (2011) demonstrated that high-religiosity consumers are less inclined to acquire products that have an explicit materialistic nature. Similarly, market-pricing strategies used by religious or healthcare organizations are judged unacceptable by consumers because they mix sacred and profane values (McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012). By extension, because the death of a celebrity should increase death salience, consumers are likely to reject promotional messages on posthumous SNS. However, because celebrity attachment should reduce death salience over time, we predict that it has a positive impact on the acceptability of promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS.

Below, we present three experiments to test this prediction. By employing the actual temporal proximity of the celebrity's death, Studies 1A and 1B show a positive influence of celebrity attachment on the reduction of death salience and attitudes toward

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