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Full Length Article

# What drives the market popularity of celebrities? A longitudinal analysis of consumer interest in film stars

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## ABSTRACT

The economic value of celebrity brands is heavily influenced by their ability to generate large-scale consumer interest. We develop a comprehensive framework for the drivers of celebrities' market popularity (in terms of consumer interest generated by celebrities) including variables related to actors, movies, and actor–movie fit. To test the framework, Internet search histories are examined for 161 film stars over the course of more than 6 years (January 2004–June 2010). In particular, we test three hypotheses. First, with regard to actor-related variables, we do not find support for the postulated inverted U-shaped effect from the frequency of movie appearances on the market popularity of film stars (H1). Rather, the results indicate a monotone and positive relationship between a film star's frequency of movie appearances and consumer interest in the film star. Second, with respect to movie-related factors, the findings indicate that both positive and negative abnormal movie revenues increase the popularity of film stars (H2). Third, concerning variables related to actor–movie fit, the results support the hypothesized U-shaped effect from actor–movie fit on the market popularity of film stars (H3). On a managerial level, this study provides insights for film stars on how to enhance their market popularity by increasing the frequency of their movie appearances and by selecting films that are likely to generate abnormal revenues and have a certain fit with their image.

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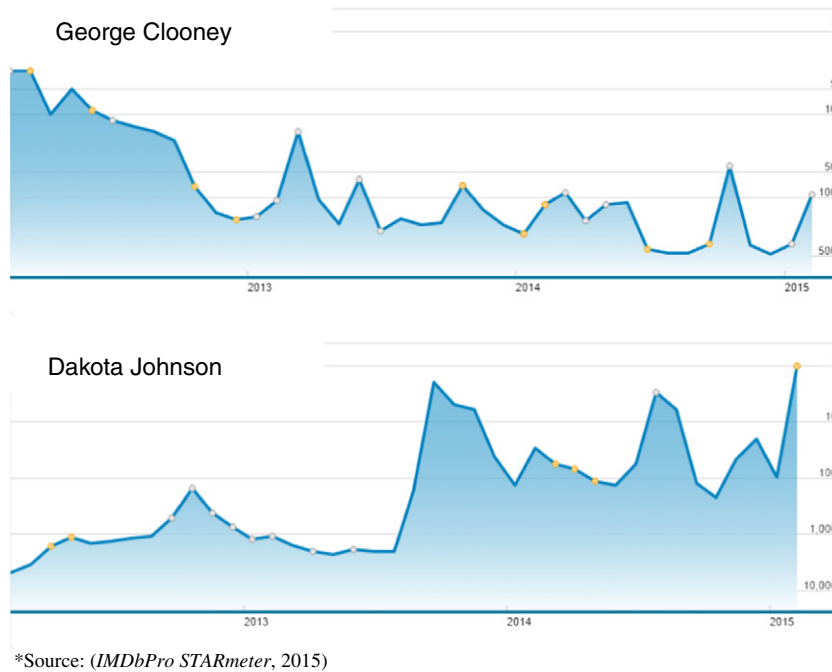
## 1. Introduction

The term *human brand* defines any famous person whose marketing and communication efforts are professionally managed (Thomson, 2006). The media and entertainment industry constitutes a well-known and highly economically relevant playground for such human brands, with annual US revenues of \$479.23 billion in 2012 (Bond, 2013). Celebrity brands such as film stars, musician stars, or star authors are known to be among the key assets in this industry. Through their ability to attract large-scale consumer interest, celebrities such as George Clooney, Stephen King, and Miley Cyrus substantially contribute to the industry's success (Thomson, 2006) and, in turn, earn salaries of several million dollars each year (Pomerantz, 2013a).

In contrast to product brands, the brand equity of celebrities has been argued to be highly dynamic (Chang & Ki, 2005) and subject to significant erosion processes (e.g., Wallace, Seigerman, & Holbrook, 1993; Luo et al., 2010). In Fig. 1, we display the rank positions of two actors based on search activities within the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) starting from 2012 until 2015. The graphs illustrate the STARmeter rank over time and reveal that the market popularity (in terms of consumer

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**Fig. 1.** STARmeter rank positions (logarithmic scale) over time for example actors.  
Source: (IMDbPro STARmeter, 2015).

interest)<sup>2</sup> of these celebrities changes considerably over time. While George Clooney has lost consumer interest over these years, Dakota Johnson gained popularity in early 2015 (due to the release of the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey*).

The strong dynamics of celebrity brand equity demonstrate that the management of celebrities remains a challenging task. Although insights into the management and positioning of celebrity brands that consider the dynamic nature of the brand equity of celebrities are highly relevant to the entertainment industry, existing research on this issue is scarce.

One notable exception is a study by Luo et al. (2010) investigating consumers' favorability ratings of 48 film stars over time. The authors provide initial insights into the drivers of consumers' attitudinal perceptions of stars. Although such an attitudinal measure represents an important dimension of brand equity, it is considerably limited because it does not necessarily reflect marketplace behavior (Smith & Park, 1992; Swaminathan, Reddy, & Dommer, 2012). For instance, an actor with a positive image may have little economic relevance without also claiming the awareness of an audience of significant size (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006). Addressing this limitation, we use a behavioral (as opposed to attitudinal) measure that reflects the interest in celebrities based on the real marketplace behavior of consumers. Therefore, we use weekly online search data provided by the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), which captures the overall actual interest of consumers in film stars and thus reveals the market popularity of these celebrities.<sup>3</sup> Consumers actively searching the Internet for a certain film star are likely to arrive at IMDb, as the site generates more than 160 million monthly user visits (IMDb, 2013a). For each actor in the database, IMDb provides weekly ranking figures (i.e., *STARmeter*) that reflect the number of page views that the actor generates. Because a film star's *STARmeter* ranks his or her market popularity in relation to respective competitors based on behavioral real-world data, we argue that this measure serves as a good proxy for consumers' interest in a film star (Joshi & Mao, 2012; Clement, Wu, & Fischer 2014). The relevance of the *STARmeter* for actors is described by Star Trek actor Douglas Tait (2013): "If you are an actor, having a high IMDb *STARmeter* ranking gets your name listed on top of the IMDb page of the movie you are in. *STARmeter* is basically an online popularity thermometer. It is a number that ranks every person on IMDb's public site [...]. Most actors [...] are ranked in the 100,000 to 1 million range. These pages get very little or no exposure whatsoever. This is why actors pay thousands of dollars to have their profile featured in the front page of IMDb [...]."

We provide a conceptual model of the drivers of the market popularity of celebrities over time. Therefore, we differentiate three dimensions of potential influences on the market popularity of celebrity brands, including celebrity-related, product-related, and fit-related factors. In particular, we test three hypotheses and conduct a dynamic panel data estimation that also includes Gaussian copulas to control for endogeneity (Park & Gupta, 2012). We rely on the weekly *STARmeter* ranks of 161 film stars covering several years.

<sup>2</sup> In the following discussion, we use the terms *celebrities' market popularity* and *consumer interest in celebrities* synonymously. In the present study the term popularity reflects the level of consumers' interest in a celebrity at a given point of time and does not include image components of the celebrity. Thus, a celebrity might attract a high level of consumer interest, but may still have a negative image.

<sup>3</sup> To the best of our knowledge, only one prior study offers initial insights into the potential antecedents of this measure (Karniouchina, 2011). See Section 2 for the findings and limitations of this study.

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