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***THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT JENA MALONE:***  
**NEW INSIGHTS INTO HOW CELEBRITIES APPEAL TO  
CONSUMERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Although the public demand for celebrities has grown so strong these days that they have without any doubt become an essential part of our everyday lives and contemporary market economy, the marketing literature has paid scant attention to them beyond their mere potential as product endorsers. Therefore, this paper explores how celebrities capture our attention and appeal to us personally. In doing so, it seeks to explain in particular how and why consumers become emotionally attached to one celebrity, but remain indifferent to many other equally talented, interesting and attractive ones. Drawing on introspective insights from the author's own personal fan relationship with the film actress Jena Malone and consumer responses from previous ethnographic studies of celebrity fans, the paper examines what the substance of a celebrity is and how it appeals to the individual consumer. The study finds that the substance of a celebrity consists of four key human brand attributes through which s/he appeals to consumers as a) the performer, b) the real person underneath the performer, c) the tangible manifestation of both through products, and c) the social link to other consumers.

**Keywords:** Human Brands, Film Stardom, Celebrity Culture, Brand Substance & Appeal, Experiential Consumption, Subjective Personal Introspection

**Track: Arts & Heritage Marketing**

## **Introduction**

For more than a century, the film industry and other creative industries have continuously been some of the commercially biggest industries in the world (De Vany, 2004; Finney, 2010; Hennig-Thurau, 2004; Kerrigan, 2010; Ravid, 1999). It should therefore be hardly surprising that, by virtue of being the creative industries' most visible faces that capture our imagination, film stars and celebrities in general have managed to claim a substantial space within our contemporary popular culture for themselves as well (Gamson, 2006). Indeed, since the dawn of the Hollywood star system in the 1920s, consumers have always been fascinated by the creative performances and private lives of film stars and all other celebrities (Barbas, 2001; De Cordova, 1991; Dyer, 1998; McDonald, 2000). The public demand for celebrities has grown so strong these days that film stars and starlets, directors, rock/pop stars, athletes, TV and radio DJs, models and novelists have without any doubt become an essential part of our everyday lives (Gabler, 1998; Geraghty, 2000; Turner, 2004) and the contemporary market economy (McCracken, 1989; Thomson, 2006). As a result, our popular media discourse and a number of cultural critics have even suggested that we are living now in a superficial world that is increasingly obsessed with fame, glamour and celebrity – or *'fake heroes'* and *'human pseudo-events'*, as they sometimes call it (Alberoni, 2006; Boorstin, 2006; Giles, 2006; Schickel, 1985; Thorp, 1939). However, while our newspapers, glossy magazines, TV and radio shows and especially the Internet are bursting with the latest news, stories and gossip about the careers, private lives and *'scandals'* of the *'rich and famous'*, our favourite celebrities also provide us with many positive and negative emotions to experience.

But why are we, as consumers, so fascinated by celebrities that we devote so much time and money, never mind true emotional feelings, on some famous people that we will most likely never meet in person and who will probably never know that we exist? What exactly is it about them that captures our attention and appeals to us personally in the first place? And more importantly, how comes that we are often fascinated by certain celebrities or become even emotionally attached to a particular one, but remain completely indifferent to many other ones, who are equally talented, interesting and/or physically attractive? These are surely some valid questions that would be of particular interest to marketing and consumer researchers. Yet, while celebrities undoubtedly play a vital commercial role within the creative industries and contemporary culture, surprisingly little marketing or consumer research has investigated how celebrities appeal as human brands to consumers. In fact, marketing scholars have traditionally found it (and often still find it) extremely difficult to view celebrities as products or brands in their own rights (Kerrigan & O'Reilly, 2008) rather than merely as a means of endorsing other products (McCracken, 1989; Thomson, 2006). At best, they studied what role film stars may play in the commercial success of films (Albert, 1998; Elberse, 2007; Wallace et al., 1993; Wei, 2006). Because this scant attention is quite disappointing, the present paper addresses this knowledge gap by providing some new insights into how celebrities appeal to consumers. First, I review the interdisciplinary stardom and celebrity literature by looking beyond the boundaries of marketing and consumer research. Then, I draw introspectively on my own personal fan relationship with the film actress Jena Malone to examine the substance of a human brand. In doing so, I try to identify a celebrity's human brand attributes that attract a consumer's personal attention and even encourage an emotional attachment to the celebrity.

### ***The Book of Stars***

Though it is pretty disappointing that the marketing literature has paid such scant attention to film stars and celebrities beyond their mere potential as product endorsers (McCracken, 1989; Thomson, 2006) and their role in a film's commercial success (Albert, 1998; Elberse, 2007), the audience appeal of film stars and celebrities has, nonetheless, caught the interest of film and media scholars. Subsequently, there are significant bodies of literature on stardom in

film studies and on celebrity culture in media and cultural studies, which often tend to complement each other despite their different points of departure.

The focus of the celebrity literature has traditionally been on the '*bigger question*' of what meaning(s) fame and celebrity have in our contemporary culture. Hence, cultural critics have quarrelled for nearly a century as to whether celebrity culture would represent either a serious cultural decline or a process of social levelling (Evans & Hesmondhalgh, 2005). Proponents of the traditional *celebrity-as-cultural-decline* perspective (i.e. Gabler, 1998; Schickel, 1985) are influenced by Munsterberg's (1916) concept of the vulnerable audience, which implies that, as passive recipients of media texts, consumers would be incapable of distinguishing fictional media images from factual reality. Cultural critics such as Adorno & Horkheimer (2006) and Thorp (1939) have then elaborated on this idea further to theorise that the purpose of the creative industries – and, by extension, celebrity culture – would be to divert people's attention away from the important things and direct them towards orchestrated, superficial pseudo-events. But Boorstin (2006) went even a step further. According to him, fame was in the past attributed as a public acknowledgement of a person's special skills and achievements and, thus, had scarcity value. Celebrity, however, would be awarded without the requirement of any talent or achievement. Instead, he argued that celebrity stands for a culture that seeks instant gratification and values surface image, narcissistic self-obsession and fame-for-its-own-sake over substance and the striving for a greater good (Boorstin, 2006). Yet, his much-cited blanket view that celebrities are merely '*people who are only famous for being famous*' is quite unfair, as their respective claims to fame actually are pretty diverse. In fact, celebrities can be famous for their artistic-creative talent, their professional occupation, their personal relationships with (other) famous people (i.e. as a spouse, offspring, relative or love affair) or their notoriety for an '*outrageous*' and '*scandalous*' public lifestyle, such as an excessive social party life, having extra-marital love affairs, posing for nude photographs in the tabloids or having a home-made porn '*leaked*' onto the Internet (Turner, 2004).

Proponents of the more recent *celebrity-as-social-levelling* perspective, on the other hand, have taken a more optimistic view. In their opinion, celebrity culture is the natural end-point in a long process of democratisation in capitalist consumer cultures (Evans & Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Turner, 2004). While Alberoni (2006) still argued that film stars and celebrities would constitute a '*powerless elite*', who can command the attention and reverence of the media and audiences alike but have no real political power, Marshall (1997) suggested that celebrities are visual representations of social mobility in democratic societies, where fame is rewarding one's effort in self-improvement. They, therefore, express the democratic values and personal freedom that capitalist consumer culture offers each of us through the widely available media technologies and consumer products (Evans & Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Turner, 2004). But even if we don't rise to fame ourselves, we are still empowered as audiences to determine through our consumption preferences which celebrities would succeed in a highly competitive market (Marshall, 1997). Yet, despite their different views on the meaning of celebrity culture, both perspectives have in common that their discussion's focus is centred on the idea that celebrity reflects the human desire for being famous and recognised (Giles, 2006; Turner, 2004).

Due to its origins in film studies, the stardom literature has taken a very different direction and views film stars essentially as a specific type of film texts. Thus, film stars are critically examined as complex representative systems of cultural symbols that are constructed through intertextual networks of film ('*on-screen*') and other media ('*off-screen*') texts (Dyer 1998; King 1991). The aim, thereby, is "*not to reveal the true self of the star, but to analyse the explicit and implicit meanings of precisely that mediated image and to read it in the context of wider ideological and social discourses*" (Watson, 2007, p. 130). In his seminal book *Stars*, Dyer (1998) views film stars as systems of semiotic images that personify the consumer society's cultural ideals of success, glamour, the extraordinary and even the divine. Despite

being literally embodied by real human beings through their name, physical appearance, voice and acting skills, Dyer theorised that film stars are accessible to us only through their semiotic on- and off-screen manifestations in various film and other media texts, in which they portray a firm, stable and recognisable canon of virtually identical characters (cultural archetypes) that personify particular cultural values and desires (Dyer, 1998; Hollinger, 2006). Moreover, drawing on selected examples from the Hollywood studio era of the 1920s to early-1950s, Dyer (1998) also argued that film stars would be admired as '*flawless, superior*' human beings, who display a consistent public image both on- and off-screen by portraying only those characters on film that would mirror their own '*true*' personality and life-style in real life (Hollinger, 2006; King, 1991). Though they never referred to each other, McCracken (1989) shared this view by describing celebrities as complex and individualised sets of culturally constructed meanings that they accumulate through their fictional roles. Film stars are therefore seen as distinct and different from '*common film actors*', who merely represent the film industry's professional, but '*faceless*' labour force that would remain unnoticed by the audience (De Cordova, 1991; Geraghty, 2000; McDonald, 2000).

In doing so, the stardom literature fails to accept that most film stars are actually experienced theatre and film actors, who just happen to have played in some commercially successful films, and that audiences may actually enjoy the acting performances of film stars rather than consuming their mere textual presence (Lovell, 2003). It also ignores the fact that film stars portray their characters by following a pre-written script under a director's supervision. Furthermore, despite making an attempt to explain the cultural appeal of film stars, like the celebrity literature, the stardom literature fails to explain why we feel attracted and become emotionally attached to one particular celebrity, but remain indifferent to others.

### ***Into the Wild (Methodology)***

This paper actually emerged as a side-product from a much larger introspective study of a consumer's fan relationship with a film actress. Using a narrative form of subjective personal introspection (SPI), I hereby examined my own personal fan relationship with the film actress Jena Malone. SPI is an extreme form of participant observation that '*focuses on impressionistic narrative accounts of the writer's own private consumption experiences*' (Holbrook, 2005, p. 45). My lived fan experiences in the period from April to September 2005 were collected as retrospective data in a 36,000-words essay, which was written in September 2005 to describe how I became a Jena Malone fan. From 11<sup>th</sup> September 2005 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006, I collected my everyday lived fan experiences with Jena Malone as contemporaneous data while they occurred in real time to ensure a high degree of data accuracy. Contemporaneous introspective data field the unique advantage of providing a large pool of emotional data that would be inaccessible to any other research method that is based on retrospective recall or pure observation and, thus, inevitably lost forever (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2008, 2011). To ensure data accessibility for external review, I have recorded the data systematically, unfiltered and on the spot in a specifically assigned diary (Patterson, 2005). In total, I collected more than 150,000 hand-written words as raw contemporaneous data for hermeneutical analysis (Thompson, 1997). However, while reviewing the transcripts, it became quickly evident that I wasn't attracted to Jena Malone as a simple, homogeneous semiotic textual construct of cultural meaning, as the stardom literature suggests. Instead, she appealed to me quite differently as a creative actress, as her portrayed characters, as the '*real*' person underneath the actress, as the physical manifestation of both the actress and the person, and as a social link to other consumers. This suggests that the substance of a celebrity, far from being just a one-dimensional semiotic receptacle of cultural meaning, would actually be a multi-dimensional textual construct, whose different human brand attributes offer a special individual or combined appeal to each consumer; and, thus, a very personal '*hook to bite*'.

### *Four Last Songs*

Both McCracken (1989) and the stardom literature that followed in Dyer's (1998) footsteps have viewed film stars and celebrities as semiotic receptacles of cultural meaning, which are the textually constructed accumulation of their on-screen film characters and off-screen media appearances. Thus, they would display a consistent public brand image both on- and off-screen by portraying only those characters on film that would mirror their own 'true' real-life personality and life-style (Hollinger, 2006; King, 1991). Yet, the findings that emerged from the introspective data of my personal emotional attachment to the film actress Jena Malone clearly indicate that a celebrity is a much more complex persona that attracts our attention and interest through different attributes, which appeal to consumers individually or symbiotically in a personalised way and, subsequently, elicit various kinds of emotional responses, i.e. curiosity, interest, disgust, sexual attraction or emotional attachment. A closer reading of the consumer responses in earlier ethnographic studies of fan-clubs (i.e. Henry & Caldwell, 2007; O'Guinn, 1991; Stacey, 1994) supports the notion generated by the introspective data that four key human brand attributes provide the main platform for consumers' attraction to a celebrity. As shown in Figure 1 (see Appendix), these human brand attributes refer to: a) the performer and one's creative performances, b) the real person underneath the performer, c) the physical manifestation of both through products, and d) the social link to other consumers.

#### *The Celebrity as a Performer*

Every celebrity, irrespective of his or her claim to fame, is first and foremost a creative performer of some sorts and, thus, appeals to consumers through the quality of one's artistic performances. For example, Jena Malone is a film actress, who primarily stars in interesting and challenging independent films and appeals to me through the quality of her acting skills in "*making all of her portrayed characters appear to be believable and real*". It is thereby interesting to note that I clearly differentiate between the actress Jena Malone and the various characters she portrays on screen. In fact, what particularly appeals to me about Jena Malone as performer is her flexibility to portray a diverse range of characters on screen that all vary significantly from her off-screen persona in the media. Barbas (2001) and Stacey (1994) observed similar patterns among their informants. This strongly contradicts Dyer's (1998) theory that a film star's persona is constructed out of the intertextual semiotic accumulation of film and media texts to be consistent on- and off-screen. Thus, the performer doesn't appeal so much as a semiotic receptacle of cultural meaning, but is valued as a creative artist.

#### *The Celebrity as a Person (or "Physical Presence")*

Even Dyer (1998) acknowledged that a film star is embodied by a real-living person, who gives the performer a unique face, body, voice and personality that differentiates him or her from other performers. But the physical presence also provides consumers with clear evidence that the performer is not only a human brand, but also a real human being with a private life, personality, personal views and social relationships, who experiences joy and pain or success and failure like any other person as well. Thus, it is quite obvious that a celebrity appeals to consumers as a person as well, i.e. as a role model, as an ideal "friend", as a potential mate or just as a figure of contempt. For instance, one particular appeal that Jena Malone is having for me all the time is that "*she presents the very type of girl I'm always falling for*". In other words, in terms of her physical appearance, her personality, her intelligence, her artistic nature and her life-style she is the manifestation of the girl of my dreams, which clearly distinguishes her from other equally talented and attractive celebrities and sets her rather in competition with females in my everyday environment. However, as it is highly unlikely that we ever get to meet our favourite celebrities in person, we construct them instead based on our own values and inner most desires by using the celebrity's *private persona* in the media as raw material.

### *The Celebrity as a Tangible Possession*

The illusiveness of the celebrity for consumers is highlighted by the intangible nature of the performer, the creative performances and the private person underneath. Hence, a specific appeal of the celebrity lies in allowing consumers to take possession of the performer, the creative performances and even the celebrity's physical presence through the acquisition of relevant tangible products. While it is obvious that I made her acting performances tangible through the purchase of her films on DVD and also collected video files of her appearances in the media or in production diaries, where she talks about her work as an actress, Jena Malone's physical presence has manifested itself in posters and photos of her decorating both my private living-space and my office. But my most cherished treasures are Jena Malone's original hand-signed autographs that she has in person dedicated to me personally and, thus, symbolise her physical presence in my everyday life (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2011).

### *The Celebrity as a Social Link*

As a celebrity is usually admired (or disliked) by more than one consumer, s/he appeals to consumers by providing them with the opportunity to share and enjoy one's feelings for the performer and/or the person with other like-minded individuals (Turner, 2004) and admire or criticise the performances together. Previous studies by Henry & Caldwell (2007) or O'Guinn (1991), thus, looked in particular at the social interaction between members of fan-clubs in sharing their admiration for a pop singer. Some fandom scholars have even suggested that the participation in fan communities would be the primary motivation for a consumer to be a fan in the first place (Fiske, 1992; Kozinets, 2001). However, I have never shared nor had even the slightest intention to share my admiration for Jena Malone with other consumers beyond recommending her films to friends. In fact, despite endorsing her films (and the quality of her acting performances) to other potential viewers, I still enjoyed watching those films just by myself. The reason for these contradictory behaviour patterns can be explained by focusing on what other human brand attributes of the celebrity consumers are actually sharing or not. The celebrity attributes that consumers tend to share and enjoy with others refer to the performer (i.e. the acting skills) and, especially, the creative performances (i.e. the acting performance and even the quality of the film). However, consumers are less like to share their emotional attachment to the 'real' person underneath the performer with others. After all, who would like to share one's flame, sweetheart or ideal mate with another person?

### **Conclusion**

Despite our growing demand for celebrities, the marketing literature has paid scant attention to them beyond the mere role as product endorsers (McCracken, 1989). Both the stardom and the celebrity literature have also failed to explain how a celebrity appeals to an individual consumer and why we are attracted to one celebrity, but not to another one. In this paper, I have therefore argued that a particular celebrity's attractiveness for an individual consumer would depend on how strongly each of his/her human brand attributes, either individually or symbiotically, appeals to the consumer's personal values, interests and beauty ideals as well as unfulfilled conscious and unconscious desires in particular. If the consumer experiences certain unfulfilled desires, s/he is unconsciously looking for a specific 'hook' that promises to satisfy this specific set of desires. As each of a celebrity's unique attributes is thereby acting as such a hook, every person, who is looking for one's 'personal hook', is in a lake full of different hooks provided by numerous celebrities bound to find the one s/he unconsciously looking for – even if it requires 'trying out' a few others first. But once the right 'hook provider' is found, there is no need for the consumer to look for another one. And this is usually the point where the consumer becomes a fan and experiences a strong emotional attachment and/or sexual appeal to a very particular film star or another celebrity...

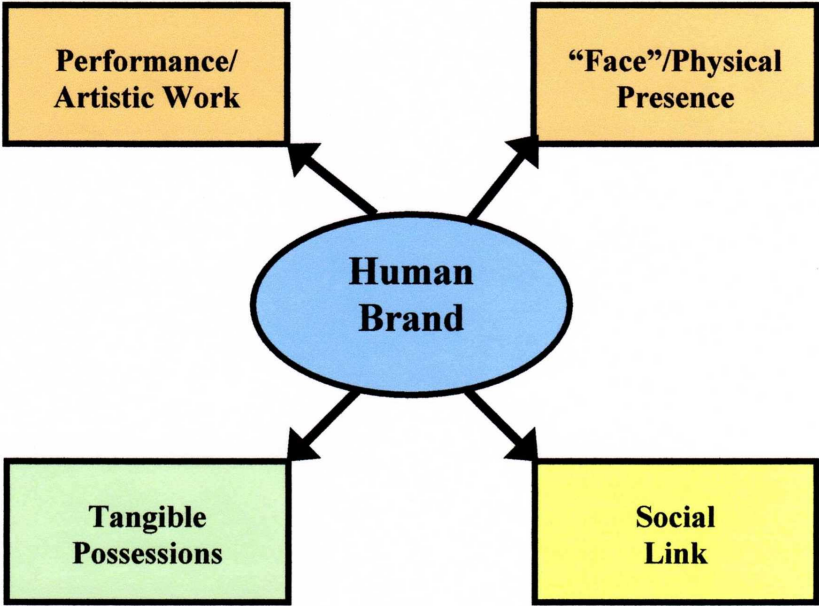
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**Appendix**



**Figure 1: Human Brand Attributes Providing an Appeal to Consumers**