

The allure of celebrities: unpacking their polysemic consumer appeal

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Polysemic
consumer
appeal

2025

Received 13 January 2017
Revised 30 November 2017
30 April 2018
4 September 2018
Accepted 14 October 2018

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explain a celebrity's deep resonance with consumers by unpacking the individual constituents of a celebrity's polysemic appeal. While celebrities are traditionally theorised as unidimensional semiotic receptacles of cultural meaning, the authors conceptualise them here instead as human beings/performers with a multi-constitutional, polysemic consumer appeal.

Design/methodology/approach – Supporting evidence is drawn from autoethnographic data collected over a total period of 25 months and structured through a hermeneutic analysis.

Findings – In rehumanising the celebrity, the study finds that each celebrity offers the individual consumer a unique and very personal parasocial appeal as the performer, the private person behind the public performer, the tangible manifestation of either through products and the social link to other consumers. The stronger these constituents, individually or symbiotically, appeal to the consumer's personal desires, the more s/he feels emotionally attached to this particular celebrity.

Research limitations/implications – Although using autoethnography means that the breadth of collected data is limited, the depth of insight this approach garners sufficiently unpacks the polysemic appeal of celebrities to consumers.

Practical implications – The findings encourage talent agents, publicists and marketing managers to reconsider underlying assumptions in their talent management and/or celebrity endorsement practices.

Originality/value – While prior research on celebrity appeal has tended to enshrine celebrities in a "dehumanised" structuralist semiosis, which erases the very idea of individualised consumer meanings, this paper reveals the multi-constitutional polysemy of any particular celebrity's personal appeal as a performer and human being to any particular consumer.

Keywords Autoethnography, Celebrity, Consumer appeal, Experiential consumption, Parasocial relationship, Stardom, Human brands

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

For over a century, film and entertainment have presided among the world's most successful industries (Elberse, 2013; Epstein, 2012; Kerrigan, 2017). Since the birth of the Hollywood star system from the 1910s to 1920s, it is the film stars and any other celebrities who have captured consumers' attention and imagination with both their creative performances and private lives (Barbas, 2001; De Cordova, 1990; O'Guinn, 1991). It should therefore come as no surprise that film stars and starlets, directors, rock and pop stars, TV personalities, athletes,



models, novelists, reality TV stars and artists have become an essential part of contemporary culture (Gabler, 1998; Hackley and Hackley, 2015; Turner, 2004) and the market economy (Luo *et al.*, 2010; Thomson, 2006). Their popularity with consumers, however, has over the years also drawn scorn from self-appointed *social reformers* and cultural critics (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972; Baudrillard, 1970/2017; Giles, 2006; Thorp, 1939). In their mind, celebrities are the living proof that our contemporary society has been corrupted by an obsession with superficial fame, glamour and celebrity, where *false heroes* and *human pseudo-events* prevent us from devoting ourselves to the pursuit of *higher, true and authentic* cultural values (Boorstin, 1961). But while this ideology-informed, sociological-theoretical view has dominated much of our scholarly media discourse – including our recent marketing discourse (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2011) – on stardom and celebrity, it is arguable that these same critical theories fail to explain how and why individual consumers consume, relate to and personally engage with individual *celebrities* (people) in daily life while, at the same time, shunning others.

As celebrities play such vital commercial, cultural and personal roles both within the entertainment industries and in consumers' lives (Turner, 2004), a number of interesting questions remain unexplained and warrant further research. For instance, why do consumers devote so much time, money and emotive energy to famous people that they will probably never meet in person and who will probably never know that they exist? What exactly about celebrities is it that resonates so deeply with consumers? And why are they often interested in some celebrities but feel indifferent to others? Unfortunately, it appears that marketing literature, for the most part, tends to examine celebrities as brand ambassadors rather than as brands in and of themselves (Spry *et al.*, 2011; Erdogan, 1999). Recently however – under the auspice of consumer culture theory – researchers have begun to reflect on how the construct of celebrity impacts more widely on society. Kerrigan *et al.* (2011), for instance, via insights gleaned from Andy Warhol's fabled life, cleverly weaves sociological and philosophical perspectives to theorise celebrity as a media spectacle within capitalist consumer culture. Others have explored the roles *celebrities* actually play in consumers' everyday lives (Banister and Cocker, 2014; Hewer and Hamilton, 2012). Wohlfeil and Whelan (2012) also draw on the burgeoning field of stardom and celebrity studies to explore the affective nature of parasocial relationships between consumers and celebrities.

Building on their work, this paper takes an existential-phenomenological perspective to explore the idiosyncratic nature of how individual consumers consume and are affected by certain celebrities. In *rehumanising* the celebrity, we explain how a consumer can either be attracted to or appalled by a particular celebrity while also remaining indifferent to others. Following a critical review of the celebrity and stardom literature in marketing, media studies and film studies, we draw on autoethnographic accounts of the first author's own relationships with his favourite film actress and other celebrities to unpack a celebrity's polysemic appeal as a performer and human being. In so doing, we examine how the identified constituents of a celebrity's individual consumer appeal, acting either alone or in symbiosis, can transform them into demythologised yet beloved people who capture different consumers' interest and have different personal meanings for each of them.

Literature review

To gain a deeper understanding of how a celebrity appeals to and is consumed by individual consumers, settling on a suitable definition of *celebrity* and *celebrities* is essential. Despite appearing obvious to the non-scholarly audience, the answer is actually not that straightforward. Indeed, a substantial gulf exists between how the sociological-theoretical discourse among film, media and, recently, some marketing scholars conceptualises *film*

stars/celebrities as semiotic receptacles of cultural meaning (Dyer, 1998; McCracken, 1989; Schickel, 1985) and how ordinary consumers perceive and consume celebrities primarily as actual people who are famous for being popular actors, musicians, athletes, writers, etc. or in the media for any other reasons (Hills, 2016; Redmond, 2014). Interestingly, many cultural critics (Alberoni, 2006; Boorstin, 1961; Thorp, 1939) have also viewed celebrities as real people who are famous and in the media for what they do or have done; except they felt that what celebrities do is not worth doing. Such a conceptualisation of celebrities should also come as no surprise, as the term *celebrity* stems from the Latin adjective *celebrer*, meaning *being famous*, and the noun *vir celebratus*, meaning a *famous, distinguished and/or praised person* – in other words, someone who is admired and famous for something.

The dominant sociological-theoretical academic stardom and celebrity discourse that defines *celebrities* (= famous people) instead as semiotic systems of media-constructed images, however, only emerged in 1979 from Dyer's theorisation of film stars in his seminal book *Stars*. For Dyer (1998), film stars are socially constructed phenomena that only exist within the narrow context of film (*on-screen*) and other media (*off-screen*) texts, where each film star represents a consistent semiotic system of media-constructed on- and off-screen images instead of the *real person* embodying him/her. His conceptualisation, thereby, not only *dehumanised* the film star but also devalued the actual art and craft of screen acting as being irrelevant. Thus, film stars are distinct from *common* film actors, as they cannot be actors, as they could only play themselves to maintain their recognisable on- and off-screen persona (Dyer, 1998). Film actors, by contrast, are the *unseen labour force* who largely fail to attract the audience's attention with their on-screen performances, as they lack the necessary off-screen media presence (King, 1991). In an effort to support Dyer's *stardom* theory with historical evidence, De Cordova (1990) suggested that film stars did not evolve naturally with the emerging film industry, but had to be *invented* by it and the media through an *emerging knowledge* among the film audience.

According to De Cordova (1990), film audiences supposedly lacked until 1907 the necessary knowledge to identify the people they saw on screen as actors. The *picture personality* only emerged by 1909 when film studios eventually made the names of their actors known to the film audience. It would only be between 1914 and 1918, during which film magazines began to run personal interviews with picture personalities and reports about their *private lives*[1] off the screen, when the star system eventually emerged, on which Dyer based his *stardom* theory. Although Dyer (1998) insisted that stardom should be reserved only to film stars, Schickel (1985) disagreed and extended his central and underlying ideas of the dehumanised film star as a semiotic set of media-constructed images to musicians, athletes, writers, models and all other TV and media personalities by using *celebrity* as an all-encompassing umbrella term and laying the foundation for the dominant sociological-theoretical discourse of the dehumanised *celebrity* as a media personality in today's literature. In recognition that film stars cannot be distinguished from other media personalities, especially since music stars like Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley or David Bowie starred in films while some film stars of the post-Hollywood studio era crossed over into TV or music, the initial distinction between the stardom and celebrity literatures has become blurred over time (Hills, 2016; McDonald, 2000). Still, marketing, media and film scholars have discussed film stars and any other celebrities within the specific context of their discipline-specific agenda quite differently from each other. Thus, a closer look at each of those discipline-specific literatures is needed.

Celebrity and celebrities in marketing

Ever since the birth of the Hollywood star system in the 1920s, film stars have been managed as *celebrity brands* to market the films, TV shows or magazines they appear in (Luo *et al.*, 2010; Schroeder, 2005). Their personal on- and off-screen images, identities,

reflected values and life-styles have often been carefully designed, positioned and managed initially by the Hollywood film studios and nowadays by the powerful talent agencies to suit market needs (McDonald, 2000; Thomson, 2006). The same talent agencies have since the 1930s managed celebrities from other entertainment industries in the same manner. Yet, until recently, marketing scholars have paid scant attention to film stars and any other celebrities beyond their mere contribution to the box office (Albert, 1998; Elberse, 2013; Wallace *et al.*, 1993) or their potential as endorsers of other brands (Erdogan, 1999; McCracken, 1989). Therefore, much of our very limited understanding in marketing of how consumers actually consume and relate to celebrities is still informed by a rather simplistic celebrity endorsement literature that portrays celebrities primarily as semiotic media-constructs with a static universal appeal. Its superficial focus on image congruency, similarity and fit between the celebrity and the endorsed brand (Arsena *et al.*, 2014; Misra and Beatty, 1990; Seno and Lukas, 2007; Spry *et al.*, 2011) propagates a straightforward top-down meaning transfer from celebrity to brand and, then, to consumer (McCracken, 1989).

While it is beyond this paper's scope to discuss the celebrity endorsement literature in further detail, it still dominates the present marketing discourse on celebrities to the extent that even some of those studies, which seek to explore the nature of consumer–celebrity relationships in everyday life (i.e. Banister and Cocker, 2014; Hewer and Hamilton, 2012; Thomson, 2006), often seem to examine how celebrities contribute to consumers' personal and cultural identity projects primarily through their direct and their indirect, largely unintended, associations with products and brands. A handful of consumer researchers, however, have taken a step further and offer insights into how consumers express their devotion for a certain celebrity through shared meanings and values within like-minded fan communities (Henry and Caldwell, 2007; O'Guinn, 1991), experience genuine grief after the death of an admired celebrity (Radford and Bloch, 2012) or even develop a personal *romantic* parasocial relationship with their beloved celebrity by projecting their own dreams and desires onto them (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012). But although these studies correspond with recent developments in the wider stardom and celebrity literatures, very little is still known about how and why the individual consumer experiences a personal attraction to some celebrities while remaining indifferent to many others.

Instead, some critical marketing scholars have drawn on the consumer–brand relationship literature and begun to examine from a sociological-theoretical perspective what role not only *celebrities* themselves but also *celebrity* as a cultural phenomenon play in capitalist consumer culture (Eagar and Lindridge, 2014; Hackley and Hackley, 2015; Mills *et al.*, 2015). While celebrities are thereby discussed as iconic *human brands*, whose construction and portrayal in the media signify materialistic or anti-materialistic values in capitalist society and shape the way consumers make sense of contemporary consumer culture, Kerrigan *et al.* (2011) have drawn among others on Baudrillard (1970/2017) and theorised that *celebrity* would be the hyper-real media-manufactured *celebritisation of entertaining spectacle* in capitalist consumer culture. This recent discourse among critical marketing scholars is not only reminiscent, but very strongly mirrors the historical celebrity discourse of cultural critics and media scholars (Cashmore, 2006; Schickel, 1985).

Celebrity in media studies

The celebrity literature in media studies focuses on the *bigger question* of what meaning(s) fame and celebrity have in our contemporary society rather than on individual celebrities (Turner, 2004), whereby critical scholars examine how the media construction and portrayal of celebrities shape the way in which audiences understand and make sense of the social world (Redmond, 2014). For nearly a century, cultural critics have thereby quarrelled

whether celebrity culture would constitute either a serious cultural decline or a process of social levelling. Proponents of the traditional, but still popular *celebrity-as-cultural-decline* perspective (Cashmore, 2006; Gabler, 1998; Giles, 2006; Schickel, 1985), which is also popular among critical marketing scholars, perceive celebrity as the evil manifestation of an excessive capitalist consumer culture that corrupts people's minds and souls. Underpinning this perspective is Munsterberg's (1916) theory of the vulnerable audience, which implies that consumers, as passive and defenceless recipients of media texts, would be incapable of distinguishing fictional media images from factual reality. Building on this idea, cultural critics like Adorno and Horkheimer (1972), Thorp (1939) or Baudrillard (1970/2017) theorised that the sole purpose of the entertainment industries and celebrity culture is to divert people's attention away from the important things in life and direct them instead towards orchestrated, superficial pseudo-events and media-manufactured spectacles.

Furthermore, Boorstin (1961) argued that, in an idealised past, fame was attributed as the public acknowledgement of a person's special skills and achievements; and, therefore, had scarcity value. Celebrity, by contrast, is awarded to a person without the requirement for any talent or achievement. Hence, Boorstin (1961) concluded 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. His much-cited blanket view that celebrities are just *people-who-are-only-famous-for-being-famous* ignores the fact that their individual claims to fame are actually quite diverse. Indeed, according to Rojek (2001), celebrities can be famous for their artistic talent, creative performances and/or their professional occupations as much as for their personal relationships with other famous people (i.e. as a spouse, lover or offspring) and/or their mere notoriety for an *outrageous* and *scandalous* social lifestyle, extra-marital love affairs, posing nude for photographs in the tabloids or having a home-made porn *leaked* onto the Internet (Gabler, 1998; Turner, 2004). Thus, embedded in Schickel's (1985) original *dehumanised* conceptualisation of celebrities as semiotic systems of media-constructed images, the emphasis of this discourse centres especially on the notoriety aspects.

The proponents of the more recent *celebrity-as-social-levelling* perspective (Hills, 2016; Kanai, 2015; Marshall, 1997; Turner, 2004), however, have taken a more optimistic point of view by building on Alberoni's (2006) original work with the desire to reconcile the celebrity literature with the realities of actual celebrities. For them, celebrity culture is the natural end-point in a long process of democratisation in capitalist consumer culture (Turner, 2004). Alberoni (2006) theorised that film stars and celebrities overall represent a *powerless elite*, who can command the attention and reverence of their audiences and the media alike but lack any real political power. Marshall (1997), however, suggests that celebrities may lack the power to make political decisions, but are still in the position to mobilise the masses for or against certain policies or to direct people's attention towards a particular cause. Drawing on individual celebrities as examples, Marshall (1997), Turner (2004) and Redmond (2014) also argue that celebrities are visual representations of social mobility in democratic societies, where fame is the ultimate reward for a person's effort in self-improvement. Thus, celebrities serve as semiotic signifiers of those very same democratic values and personal freedom that capitalist consumer culture bestows on each of us through a widely available access to media technologies and consumer products (Hills, 2016; Kanai, 2015).

Even if we as consumers do not rise to fame ourselves, we are still empowered as audiences to make or break the career of celebrities through our consumption preferences and choices in highly competitive entertainment markets (Marshall, 1997); be it by buying or downloading their music, watching their films, voting for certain contestants on reality TV shows or by indulging ourselves in their private lives through the exchange of gossip in

popular media outlets (Hermes, 2006; Kanai, 2015). While the two dominant perspectives in media studies differ in their views on the meaning of celebrity in contemporary culture, both share a focus that is centred on the idea that celebrity is mainly a cultural signifier that reflects the human desire for standing out from the crowd (Giles, 2006; Turner, 2004). But neither of them offers any real insights into why consumers are attracted and feel emotionally attached to one celebrity while remaining indifferent to others.

Stardom in film studies

Due to its origins in film studies, the stardom literature has taken a very different direction by presenting film stars essentially as a specific type of film texts. As stated earlier, Dyer (1998) conceptualised film stars as semiotic systems of media images that personify the consumer society's cultural ideals of success, glamour, the extraordinary and even the divine. Thus, the purpose 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). Indeed, despite being literally embodied by real human beings through their name, physical appearance, voice and acting skills (King, 1991; Staiger, 1991), Dyer (1998) theorised that film stars are accessible to us only through their semiotic manifestations in various film (*on-screen*) and other media (*off-screen*) texts, in which they portray a firm, stable and recognisable canon of virtually identical film characters that, as cultural archetypes, personify particular cultural values, ideals and desires (Stacey, 1994; Staiger, 1991). By drawing solely on selected examples from the Hollywood studio era from the 1920s to early-1950s, Dyer (1998) argued that audiences would admire film stars as *flawless, superior* people, who present a consistent public image both on- and off-screen by portraying only those characters in films that would mirror their own *true* personality and lifestyle in real life – and, thus, essentially play themselves (De Cordova, 1990; King, 1991; Kirkland, 2003). As stated earlier, film stars would therefore be very distinct from *common film actors*, who lack any off-screen media presence (Dyer, 1998; King, 1991). McCracken (1989), coincidentally, also defined celebrities/film stars as individualised receptacles of culturally constructed meanings that they accumulate through their fictional roles.

As Dyer's (1998) stardom theory is strongly tied to the Hollywood star system of the 1920s-1940s, during which film studios had contractually tied film actors for many years to them and created, managed and marketed their personal on- and off-screen persona (Barbas, 2001; McDonald, 2000), film scholars have found it difficult to reconcile the stardom theory with the realities of the modern project-based film industry. Hence, they often revert to a selective, ideology-driven reading of a film star's film characters and public image (Kirkland, 2003; Krämer, 2003). Their discourse often ignores the crucial fact that film stars are usually cast by a casting director and the producer(s) to portray their characters according to the director's vision of a pre-written script (Hollinger, 2006). As a result, Geraghty (2000) proposed a differentiation between *film stars as celebrities* (= primarily known for their off-screen persona), *film stars as professionals* (= primarily known for playing identical characters in a specific genre) and *film stars as performers* (= primarily known for their screen acting skills and performances). More importantly, some film scholars (i.e. Baron, 1999; Hollinger, 2006; Krämer and Lovell, 1999) call for the stardom discourse to examine film stars as human performers with a particular emphasis on their art and craft of screen acting. Lovell (2003), in particular, has criticised the traditional stardom literature's failure to acknowledge that most film stars are actually experienced stage and film actors, who just happen to have featured in some commercially successful films, or that audiences may enjoy the acting skills of film stars rather than their mere textual presence on

film (Hollinger, 2006; Lovell, 1999). As the stardom and celebrity literatures increasingly converge into one, media scholars have also begun to examine celebrities (including film stars) in a similar way (Hills, 2016).

As this literature review shows, Lovell's (2003) criticism not just rings true for the stardom literature alone. Due to their focus on examining the attraction of celebrities (including film stars) from an ideology-informed perspective, the traditional stardom and celebrity discourse in the film, media and marketing literatures shared the habit of *dehumanising* celebrities into some semiotic sets of media-constructed images with a universal consumer appeal. Subsequently, they have so far failed to explain how and why individual consumers may feel personally attracted to particular celebrities as performers and/or human beings but remain indifferent to other equally talented, beautiful and/or interesting ones with similar images. Therefore, we propose to align the celebrity discourse in marketing with the recent movement in film and media studies to *rehumanise* film stars/celebrities as famous skilled performers and, based on the origins of the term, conceptualise celebrities in this paper as *real people who are renown, praised and celebrated by their audiences either for their recognised talent, creative or athletic performances, output, achievements and/or media presence*. Celebrities include among others any film and stage actors, musicians, athletes, directors, artists, writers, models, TV and media personalities who happen to be famous with a certain audience.

Methodology

To obtain a deeper understanding of how and why a consumer experiences a personal attraction, *catches fire* and consumes a particular celebrity but remains indifferent to other equally talented, physically attractive, interesting and even more popular ones, it is necessary to focus on how this consumer experience becomes manifest to consciousness (Thompson, 1997). In taking an existential-phenomenological perspective, the role of the researcher is to interpret the everyday meanings and structure of the world as *lived* by the individual consumer. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002), the foundation of human understanding emerges thereby from an underlying field of pre-reflected lived experiences like practical knowledge, emotional experiences and an intuitive understanding of the individual's socio-cultural way of life. The individual's life-world is examined in terms of how he/she perceives his/her historicised self, emotional relationships to others and the cultural settings (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002). As this requires a *fusion of horizons* between the researcher and the consumer, an autoethnographic approach is used to achieve it.

Holbrook (2005, p. 45) defines autoethnography as "an extreme form of participant observation that focuses on impressionistic narrative accounts of the writer's own consumption experiences". It enables the researcher to directly access the subjective nature of human feelings, sensations, daydreams and streams of consciousness that relate to an individual's consumption experience (Gould, 1995; Rambo, 1992). While it is true that some marketing scholars still regard autoethnography with suspicion, a consensus seems to have been reached, following the publication of a recent special issue of the *Journal of Business Research* devoted to the method, that it can provide deep insight into human experience (Gould, 2012). In any case, many of the concerns commonly raised (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993; Woodside, 2004) have already been addressed extensively by other publications (Gould, 1995, 2012; Holbrook, 1995, 2006; Rambo, 1992). Instead, we focus here on how we conducted this particular autoethnographic research, which draws on the lead author's introspective accounts of his emotional relationships (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2002) to his beloved film star and other film and rock/pop stars as our primary data sources.

The autoethnographic data were collected as a mixture of retrospective and contemporaneous data, in four individual data sets. Retrospective data in a detailed 36,000-words essay outline how the lead author first encountered the indie film star Jena Malone, how she appealed to him as an actress and human being and how he slowly became an ardent fan. His everyday lived fan experiences with his admired film star were collected over a period of 16 months as contemporaneous data while they occurred in real time. To obtain further insights into how other individual celebrities appeal to and are consumed by the same individual consumer, retrospective data were collected in a 24,000-words essay, which outline how the lead author responded to the appeal of, engaged with and consumed other film stars, rock/pop stars and an artist, while a another contemporaneous data set was collected over a period of five months to capture his everyday lived experiences with them. Contemporaneous autoethnographic data field the unique advantage of providing a large pool of emotional data that would be inaccessible to any other research method based on either retrospective recall or pure observation and, thus, inevitably lost forever (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012). The data were recorded systematically, unfiltered and on the spot in a specifically assigned diary (Patterson, 2005) to ensure their accessibility for external review.

In total, more than 180,000 handwritten words were collected as raw contemporaneous data supplemented by over 100 useable photographs for hermeneutic analysis. Each of the four handwritten data sets were read in their entirety to gain a first sense of the overall picture of how the lead author not only related to and engaged with his adored film actress but also responded to other celebrities' attraction (or lack thereof) as performers and human beings. This overview also offered a first indication for possible differences in their personal appeal to him. Following the first impressions, the autoethnographic data were broken into manageable, logically coherent chunks to be examined individually in part-to-whole readings (Thompson, 1997). Emerging key themes were then organised into a logical and appropriate context that unpacked the individual identified consumer appeal constituents through which a celebrity offers a particular personal attraction to an individual consumer and to examine how they individually or symbiotically capture a consumer's personal interest.

Findings

The hermeneutic analysis of the autoethnographic data has revealed some interesting insights into how each celebrity offers a different personal attraction to and is therefore consumed by the individual consumer. In contrast to the stardom (Dyer, 1998; King, 1991), celebrity (Marshall, 1997; Schickel, 1985), celebrity endorsement (Erdogan, 1999; McCracken, 1989) and some of the recent marketing (Hackley and Hackley, 2015; Mills *et al.*, 2015) literature, the analysis of the autoethnographic data in this study clearly shows that in line with the recent movement among film scholars that focuses on film stars as performers and their craft of screen acting (Hollinger, 2006; Lovell, 2003), consumers may not be so much attracted to celebrities for what they, as semiotic symbols, (may) represent in society, but instead for what they actually do as performers and who they are as human beings. Subsequently, each celebrity can be *consumed* in highly complex, diverse and heteroglossic manners by offering each individual consumer a different personal attraction based on the latter's inherent interests and desires (Brown *et al.*, 1999; Lovell, 1999).

In this respect, the consumer becomes a co-creator of the heteroglossic texts encompassing the individual celebrity's narrative, much as reader-response analysis has been seen as challenging, if not at times displacing semiotic readings in literary criticism (Scott, 1994). Indeed, the film actress Jena Malone caught the interest of the lead author, first and foremost, as a talented and creative actress, who portrays a variety of very different

characters on film. And he enjoys watching her films irrespective of whether she plays the leading role or just a support character. Moreover, her status of featuring mainly in independent films and, thus, being lesser known to the broader public also provides him with something of a *hip* insider knowledge (Holbrook, 1995) that could be shared with select others or used as a means of differentiation. But he is also attracted to Jena Malone as the smart, interesting, very beautiful and nice woman she appears to be in her private life (at least in his perception). In addition, he also enjoys collecting her films on DVD and her hand-signed autographs.

In a similar way, other actresses like Jennifer Lawrence or Ellen Page also caught his interest through their acting performances in a few films, while punk bands like Stiff Little Fingers, Buzzcocks, Ruts DC or Skids have caught the lead author's attention through their recorded music and live shows. Actresses like Jennifer Lawrence, Ellen Page or Kristen Stewart and the singer Zaz also appealed to him through their beauty and intelligence, while singers like Jack L. and Zaz also provide a *hip* insider experience. In all these cases, he also purchased either some of their films on DVD or their music on vinyl, CD or even saw their performance live on stage. While the behaviour patterns are very similar, the difference between Jena Malone's attraction to the lead author and that of those other celebrities seems to be merely a question of experienced intensity and personal relevance. This suggests that a celebrity's consumer appeal consists of four individual constituents that each, alone or in symbiosis with each other, offer the individual consumer a personal(ised) attraction (or *hook to bite*), capture one's personal attention and elicit emotional responses ranging from curiosity, interest or disgust over empathy, envy and sexual attraction to feelings of friendship or even love (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012). These four constituents of a celebrity's consumer appeal (see Figure 1) are now introduced and discussed in more detail as:

- (1) the performer;
- (2) the private person;
- (3) the tangible possession; and
- (4) the social link.

The celebrity as a performer

The first (and probably strongest) constituent of a celebrity's attraction to a consumer is that of *the performer*, which refers to what the celebrity actually does, what he/she is supposedly famous for and the public media image and gossip surrounding him/her (Geraghty, 2000).

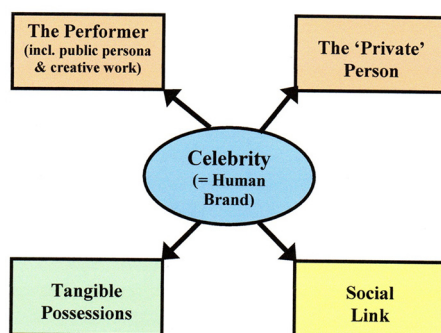


Figure 1.
Constituents of a
celebrity's consumer
appeal

Due to the nature of the creative industries, every celebrity – irrespective of his or her claim to fame – is, as [Barbas \(2001\)](#) emphasises, first and foremost a performer of some kind, i.e. an actor, an athlete, a musician, a model, a media personality or a public figure. Therefore, it is either a creative performance (i.e. a screen or stage acting character, a song or album or a TV appearance) or a media report which first piques the interest of any given consumer. Indeed, the lead author's interest in the film actress Jena Malone was awoken when she caught his eyes as the lead character Mary Cummings in the film *Saved!*. In a similar way, the actress Jennifer Lawrence, for example, first caught his attention with the film *Winter's Bone*, while the French singer Zaz caught his eyes on TV in a BBC documentary on the history of French song, as shown in the following extract:

While trying to get some writing done, I had this BBC documentary on French song running in the background. Since I'm not really into Chansons and don't speak French, I hardly paid any attention [...] until this attractive, but also quite articulate (judging by the subtitles) and engaging young woman named Zaz was interviewed, and also performed a song. I wanted to hear more! [...] Thus, I took a gamble and ordered a vinyl album of her. Fortunately, it paid off. She is really something fresh and different. Too bad, her records aren't available in the UK. (Introspection, 23-06-2017)

Depending on the nature and the intensity of one's personal situational and enduring interest, much of a celebrity's continuous appeal to the individual consumer lies in the enjoyment provided by the celebrity's creative performances ([Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012](#)) and/or in following his or her media appearances, news reports and gossip ([Eager and Lindridge, 2014](#); [Hills, 2016](#)). In this respect, as [Lovell \(2003\)](#) argued, the lead author strongly admires Jena Malone's screen acting performances and, hence, enjoys watching her films repeatedly in the cinema, on DVD and TV, while also searching for relevant news about her forthcoming projects and personal information.

My interest in this movie actually started when I read in an interview with Jena Malone in *Mean* magazine that it was just being filmed [...] As it so happened, in this article she talked not only about her then recent release *The Go-Getter* and her increasing interest in expressing herself in self-produced music and short films, but also that she would soon start to film *Into the Wild* with Sean Penn. (Introspection, 30-12-2006)

While the lead author also appreciates – and in case of Natalie Portman, Jennifer Lawrence or Ellen Page even admires – the acting performances of other actresses, he also criticises others for what he perceives to be poor acting. Furthermore, while he also enjoys watching their films, listening to certain rock/pop musicians' albums and even takes the risk of purchasing the album of an artist he does not know (i.e. Zaz), he is not searching – in contrast to Jena Malone – for relevant news about their forthcoming projects and personal information, but at best “stumbles coincidentally” upon them.

As a punk, I always like the music of Stiff Little Fingers, Buzzcocks or The Damned and such bands. When I heard that Stiff Little Fingers and Buzzcocks were seeking crowdfunding on PledgeMusic to produce a new album, I thought I give it a try. After all, it is just like buying an album on pre-order – with an added bonus. As I order the original autographed copies, they will be more valuable. (Introspective Essay, 10-05-2017)

At first glance, the celebrity's appeal constituent of *the performer* has much in common with what [McCracken \(1989\)](#) and the traditional stardom literature ([Dyer, 1998](#); [King, 1991](#)) have discussed as the film star's *on-screen* (film character) and *off-screen* (public media image) persona. However, the difference to the findings in this study lies in the way film stars and celebrities have been conceptualised. As the traditional literature dehumanises celebrities

into being semiotic media constructs with a consistent public image on- and off-screen, film stars like Rudolph Valentino, Mary Pickford, John Wayne, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Sylvester Stallone or Angelina Jolie are theorised as essentially playing themselves in their films and are consumed for what they mean as a personified cultural archetype (Dyer, 1998; Staiger, 1991). Thus, much of the social media outcry in the UK surrounding Miley Cyrus's *wild sexual behaviour* and nude music video would stem from the fact that performer Miley Cyrus was not separated from her Disney-character Hanna Montana.

The autoethnographic data in this study, however, support instead Krämer and Lovell's (1999) suggestion that the individual consumer actually *consumes* and *values* celebrities as creative performers – and, thus, as real-living human beings rather than as personified cultural archetypes. One source of Jena Malone's personal allure to the lead author is her ability and versatility as an actress to portray a diverse range of female characters that all differ significantly from each other and, especially, from how she presents herself in public and her perceived private persona. But it is not just Jena Malone, as the data also show that he clearly separates any other actress like Winona Ryder, Natalie Portman or Jennifer Lawrence from all the different characters they have portrayed on screen. Further, his entire interest in different punk bands and other singers focuses clearly on their musical performances and outputs. Hence, the celebrity's personal appeal as *the performer* to the individual consumer depends on how the latter perceives:

- the quality of the celebrity's creative work and performances, i.e. an actor's films and portrayed characters or a musician's records and live shows;
- the quality of the celebrity's talent and skills as a performer, i.e. an actor's acting skills or a musician's songwriting, voice and/or virtuosity with a musical instrument; and
- the celebrity's personality and behaviour presented in the media, i.e. TV appearances, interviews, media reports and gossip.

Due to their *dehumanisation* and reduction of the celebrity to a semiotic system of media-constructed images, McCracken (1989) experienced a major problem with explaining the consumer appeal of Meryl Streep, while Dyer (1998) simply denied *character actors* the status of *film star* but failed to transfer his theory to the realities of the post-Hollywood studio-era and today's film stars. In line with film scholars' recent emphasis on the craft of screen acting (Hollinger, 2006; Lovell, 1999), however, the autoethnographic data in this study suggest that a consumer's admiration of those performance skills and talent would strengthen in return the celebrity's appeal as the performer. Indeed, while the lead author enjoys immersing himself into the narratives of her films and relating emotionally to the different lead and support characters she plays, *the performer* Jena Malone appeals to him in particular through the perceived quality of her acting talent by which "she makes all of her portrayed characters appear to be believable and real", as the following extract shows:

I focus mainly on Jena Malone each time she's on the screen. She's simply fantastic and brings Lydia (her character in *Pride and Prejudice*) really to life. Even when she's in the background of a frame, she still dominates the screen. She's simply a brilliant actress [...] and has the ability to bring every character she plays to real life – no matter how different they are. She's so good that you never notice that she is acting at all (no artificial gesticulations, mimicry or pronunciations). (Introspection, 05-10-2005)

Obviously, assessing the quality of a celebrity's performance skills and talent is very subjective and based on the consumer's personal interests, background knowledge and expertise to make such *educated* judgement calls. Nevertheless, it is important to note that,

instead of reading them as one-and-the-same, the lead author clearly distinguishes between the actress Jena Malone (or any other actress) and the characters she plays on screen. In fact, it appears that the lead author goes through great lengths to avoid assigning any archetypical cultural stereotype to her as a *performer* due to the wide range of likeable and dislikeable characters she portrays on screen. But he describes the *private person* Jena Malone, as he perceives her, as a “very pretty, street-smart, confident, but otherwise ordinary down-to-earth tomboy, who happens to be a very talented and creative artist” in the same manner he would describe a woman on the street to somebody else. Thus, in the manner suggested by this introspectee, perhaps it follows that consumers regard celebrities not as the personification of some cultural archetype, but rather as relatively normal flesh and blood entities who simply have achieved a degree of renown based on their status and profession.

Because the primary purpose of a celebrity’s media appearances is to promote the release of a new performance output (i.e. a film or a music album), *the performer* Jena Malone also offers a strong appeal to the lead author through her media appearances at film premieres or film festivals, on TV talk shows or in magazine articles for the following personal reasons:

- as a source of information for the celebrity’s forthcoming performances and projects;
- as a means of staying up-to-date with how the celebrity really looks like when she is not performing a character, any personal news and her relationship status; and
- as a means of catching glimpses of the celebrity’s *true* personality and *private* persona by paying attention to how she moves, speaks, argues, interacts with others, responds in various situations and behaves in general.

But the lead author pays only occasionally and to a much lesser extent attention to the TV appearances of other actors or musicians whose creative performances he enjoys. Despite enjoying reading decent articles about Jena Malone and watching interviews with her, the analysis of the autoethnographic data also reveals the lead author’s sheer contempt for the kind of celebrity gossip that the fashion and tabloid press provide with their obsession for what celebrities wear or, according to self-appointed *style* experts, should not wear, what parties they attend, whom they supposedly date and, of course, their (supposed) affairs and scandals. A principal reason for his contempt is that, in his opinion, those articles tend to be extremely superficial and contain very little truth value, as most of the content either consists of small re-edited bits of information taken out of context from other sources or is completely made up to tell some fictitious stories in connection with paparazzi or red carpet photos.

I’m a bit disappointed by the WHO magazine from Australia. It contains lots of useless fashion and make-up stories from the Oscar-coverage. I always thought the Academy Awards are supposed to be all about celebrating the (Hollywood) art of movies. But the pointless fashion camarilla focus only on stupid dresses and so-called “fashion faux-pas”[. . .] A total waste of space! The interview with Jena Malone only contains three questions in relation to *Pride and Prejudice*, which were just copied from previous articles in other magazines!! (Introspection, 03-04-2006)

The enormous popularity of gossip magazines and tabloids (Gabler, 1998), however, suggests that many other consumers have a different view. In fact, unlike the lead author and those consumers that have a personal vested interest in the celebrity as a performer, the celebrity seems to appeal to other consumers primarily as a subject they can gossip about with friends, colleagues and neighbours. According to Hermes (2006), celebrities often serve the purpose of providing consumers with a safe target they can talk about behind their back without risking any potential repercussions. Gossip enables some consumers to forget about their own situation by looking down at the publicised mishaps, failures and wrongdoings of

celebrities with Schadenfreude. For talent agencies, such stories are also a welcome gift when it comes to negotiating for their clients' future projects and salaries (Epstein, 2012).

The celebrity as a private person

The second (and most under-researched) constituent of a celebrity's consumer appeal is that of *the private person*, which refers to what kind of person the celebrity in his/her private life really is (or perceived to be) when he/she is not performing a character on screen or stage, or appearing publicly in the media. In other words, a consumer cannot only be attracted to the celebrity for what they do, but also for who they are as a real-living human being with a unique face, physical appearance, personality, intellect, personal interests, values, beliefs, political views and, of course, sex appeal. In short, the individual consumer can be attracted to the celebrity in the same way he/she would be attracted in everyday life to any other person on the street, in a bar or a nightclub, at school, university or at work (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012). Just like any other person one has never met before, it usually is the celebrity's unique, personal beauty, sex appeal and appearance by which he/she first stands out from the crowd of other talented, attractive and even popular celebrities in the eyes of the individual consumer and, subsequently, can capture the latter's personal interest. Indeed, what awoke the lead author's personal interest in Jena Malone was not only her acting performance, but also that she – unlike other talented, attractive and interesting actresses – concurred with the unique conception of female beauty he held in his mind. In effect, she looked "like the girl I am always dreaming of".

Although Dyer (1998) acknowledged that film stars are embodied by the physical presence of real-living people, who provide a unique face, body and voice that differentiate them from other celebrities, the stardom and celebrity literatures have perceived their human side as irrelevant to their media-constructed *semiotic receptacles of cultural meaning* and fully *erased* it from the academic discourse. This is quite unfortunate, as the celebrity's physical presence provides a consumer with the clear evidence that he/she is not just a personified cultural archetype or human brand that meets market needs (Thomson, 2006), but actually a real human being with a private life, personality, personal views and social relationships, who experiences success and failure or joy and sorrow just like any other person. Yet, besides the odd psychological study that has looked at how certain celebrities like teen pop stars, young male actors or athletes serve teenage girls as *safe objects of affection* that enable them to explore their sexuality in a playful manner (i.e. Karniol, 2001), little is actually known about how a celebrity appeals to and is *consumed* by the consumer as a real-living human being.

Hence, opening the door to a new territory, the analysis of the autoethnographic data reveals that consumers would consume and relate to the celebrity not only as *the performer* or for his/her physical attractiveness but also as the real *private person* underneath the public image in the media. Fans, but also consumers in general, often crave to meet the admired celebrity in person and even to be given *backstage access* to his/her private life to learn much more about how he/she is really like as an actual human being when he/she is neither performing a character on screen or stage nor standing in the public spotlight of the media (Stacey, 1994). At the same time, however, the celebrity may appeal to other consumers as a figure of pity or even sheer contempt. Hermes (2006) argues that those consumers seek backstage access into a celebrity's private life to *expose the hidden truths* about the real person and to gain from it a cathartic experience that makes them feel better about themselves. While there is no evidence of such feelings in the lead author's autoethnographic data, there are nonetheless moments where he experiences contempt and

jealousy towards some celebrities (or their real-life partners) whose fortunes he deems to be undeserved.

The process of getting to know the real *private person* enables the individual consumer, and the fan in particular, to bring the admired but *distant, unreachable* celebrity down to an equal social level and, hence, makes him or her more *accessible*. The celebrity can thereby appeal to and be consumed by the individual consumer either as a role model, as a *friend* or even as a potential love-interest and *ideal partner*, as this autoethnographic extract shows:

I really got hooked by Jena Malone's beautiful eyes and her charming smile [...] Although there are many actresses, who may be more attractive than her, Jena Malone really caught my eye because she's the very type of girl I'm always falling for – a tomboy and natural beauty. And she comes across as extremely likeable, funny, highly intelligent, but also very independent and mature for her age [...] Since reading her interview today, I imagine what it would feel like to actually go out with her, to date and to kiss her. (Introspection, 26-12-2005)

Mulvey's (1975) feminist theory of the *male gaze* would imply that the lead author's interest in Jena Malone and the other female celebrities is a clear example of his sexual objectification, exploitation and consummation of the female celebrity. But Hansen (1986) has already discredited this theory after seriously questioning its credibility and validity; especially after Mulvey vehemently refused to theorise and even denied the possibility of a corresponding *female gaze*; even though several empirical studies clearly show how female consumers often objectify both male and female celebrities (Hansen, 1986; Karniol, 2001; Stacey, 1994). More importantly, the autoethnographic data clearly demonstrate that a consumer's attraction and consumption of a celebrity as a human being is much more complex than Mulvey's (1975) theory implies. While the attention the lead author pays to the physical beauty of female actors and singers like Jennifer Lawrence, Kristen Stewart or Zaz might be interpreted as some kind of objectification (though clearly not in the sense of Mulvey's (1975) *male gaze*), his attraction to Jena Malone is very different. In fact, as has been noted above, one of Jena Malone's most alluring qualities in the eyes of the lead author is that she embodies what he perceives to be *ideal girlfriend* material.

But the insights he gained into her private life also set *the private person* Jena Malone rather in competition with other females he encounters in his everyday life than with other distant celebrities. Unlike those other female celebrities, Jena Malone has transitioned from a distant, admired performer to an adored, ordinary and beautiful woman in his everyday life. His infatuation with Jena Malone as *the private person*, therefore, is hard to distinguish between an infatuation he might develop for the girl-next-door types who populate his everyday life and he views often as equally "out of reach" for him.

[...] The only good thing today is seeing the beautiful girl at university. Like Jena Malone she is the type of girl that always catches my eyes. The even better thing is that I've finally managed to actually talk to her. Okay, I have exchanged a hello and a brief chat about the weather [...] I still don't know her name. But deep inside my heart I also know that she won't have any deeper interest in me anyway. (Introspection, 29-06-2006)

Of course, the big problem with the appeal constituent of *the private person* is that, with very few exceptions, i.e. at a film premiere, by being invited to a meet-and-greet event or even to an after-show party (Plate 1), consumers are highly unlikely to ever meet their favourite celebrities in person – never mind get to know the celebrity's real private self in his or her private life. Subsequently, the celebrity's consumer appeal constituent of *the private person* is a paradox, where the individual consumer, instead of really getting to know the celebrity in his/her private life, constructs his or her own personal image of what he/she thinks or



Plate 1.
The lead author
meeting Jack
Lukeman (left), Steve
Diggle and the late
Pete Shelley (both
Buzzcocks) at after-
show parties

believes the celebrity to be like as a *private person* in daily life outside the media spotlight. This personal image is obviously different for each individual consumer.

Wohlfeil and Whelan (2012) theorise that the consumer internalises the *private* image that he/she creates of the celebrity through a personal selective intertextual reading of interviews and media reports, which he/she perceives to be reliable, private photos taken by other consumers with the celebrity (i.e. during private or public chance encounters) and narrative accounts from those select few that either have met or, much more credible, really know the celebrity personally. This freshly internalised image of the private celebrity is subconsciously loaded with the consumer's personal values, desires, hopes and dreams, and then projected back onto the celebrity – just to be introjected again with any newly obtained *trustworthy* information and images. This continuous process of introjection and projection (Hills, 2016; Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012) can elicit within the consumer a genuine feeling of actually *knowing* the celebrity like a close friend or even a feeling of *love* towards him or her. Still, fans (and sometimes other consumers) often experience this craving for the opportunity to meet the admired celebrity in person – if only to confirm whether one's personal image of the celebrity as *the private person* and his/her private life actually matches the reality:

I'm not really a fan of them. As a punk, they have just been an influential part in the soundtrack of my life. But since I crowdfunded Buzzcocks' last album and Steve Diggle's solo album on PledgeMusic, I was invited to meet them after their Glasgow gig in the backstage area with a few other VIP-guests. I had some great conversations with Steve (Diggle) and Pete (Shelley). They are so down-to-earth and just see themselves as punk – just like their audience. (Introspective Essay, 10-05-2017)

Someone has already suggested that I should see first-hand how Jena Malone is really like. Of course, I'd love that. But how? [...] I should write her a personal letter to get (really) in contact

with her [...] I don't know [...] Will she actually read it? Also, what impression will the letter give her about me? I don't want to sound creepy – or dull and boring. What if she responds negatively or doesn't care at all? Maybe, I should rather leave everything as it is. (Introspection, 14-12-2006)

This extract from the autoethnographic data reveals a quite surprising, but also interesting personal ambivalence with regard to the lead author's personal desire to meet the admired celebrity in person. Throughout much of the autoethnographic data, he expresses a strong longing and desire for meeting Jena Malone in person and spends a lot of time on daydreaming how such a meeting – or even a relationship – would be like. However, each time when the opportunity arises to make this desire come true and to confront his personal image of Jena Malone with the actual reality, i.e. seeing her on stage in an Off-Broadway play or catching a glimpse of her on the red carpet of a film premiere, he backs away in fear of disappointment. But while he is clearly nervous and insecure when it comes to his admired film actress, he has apparently no such problems with meeting celebrities he is less personally invested in, such as a range of musicians whose albums and live-shows he enjoys. Indeed, [Plate 1](#) shows the lead author meeting the Irish singer Jack Lukeman and Steve Diggle and the late Pete Shelley of the punk band Buzzcocks, with whom he had, according to the autoethnographic account, some interesting conversation. However, when he eventually met his admired actress Jena Malone in person and even though the photo with her looks similar to the others, he confessed in the autoethnographic data that while he was excited to meet her, he was also so nervous and shy that he was barely able to speak a word. To his surprise, she turned out to be exactly the person he has imaged her to be.

The celebrity as a tangible possession

The third constituent of a celebrity's consumer appeal is that of *the tangible possession*, which refers to how the celebrity actually becomes accessible and tangible to the consumer through products. Because celebrities are only human beings and cannot be everywhere at any given time, consumers are normally only able to consume and admire the celebrity's creative works and performances as *the performer* in person, if they manage to be at the right place at the right time with one of those limited tickets. Indeed, the autoethnographic data reveal numerous moments where the lead author voiced his frustrations that some of Jena Malone's independent films were never released in Europe and, hence, inaccessible to him, or that he has been unable to see her performing live on stage in a Broadway play. Because she is less known in Europe, even some well-known global magazines have for their European editions often replaced elaborate articles about her with those about a local reality TV star or socialite, which frustrated him further. The intangible nature of a celebrity's creative performances, work and, especially, private life, therefore, is for the consumer a constant reminder of the celebrity's inaccessibility and even illusiveness as both *the performer* and *the private person*.

However, due to the commercial nature of the creative industries and the need to make a decent living, celebrities (and only too often the management behind them) have a vested interest in making their creative performances and works available to as many consumers as possible by offering them their reproductions in the form of vinyl records, CDs, DVDs, digital downloads, photos, books, magazines and other branded merchandising on the marketplace ([Hackley and Hackley, 2015](#)). This suggests that a celebrity's personal appeal to the consumer would stem to some extent from the possibility for the latter to take physical possession of the celebrity's creative performances and work as *the performer* or even of *the private person* through the acquisition of such products.

According to [Banister and Cocker \(2014\)](#), the meaning and consumption of such celebrity-branded products is quite diverse, as consumers acquire them for very different

personal purposes. For many consumers, the purchase of a CD, DVD or digital download is primarily a means of being able to listen to their favourite recorded music or to watch their favourite film wherever, whenever and as often as they like. Many albums by musicians or films by actors are bought by the lead author for this purpose. In other words, the commercially available reproduction of the celebrity's creative performances and work allows the consumer to enjoy repeatedly what otherwise would only be a once-off temporary experience; and also to share it with others at one's leisure. The lead author also has developed the habit of buying at least one tour t-shirt at nearly every live-gig he attends. A t-shirt obtained at the live-show of a rock/pop band often has the same meaning as a t-shirt obtained at a tourist destination – signalling to others that *I was there!* and, thus, one of the *chosen ones*. In other cases, the purchase of recorded performances also enables consumers to consume and enjoy those creative works and performances of the celebrity that are inaccessible or unavailable in their home region, as the celebrity neither lives nor is able to perform in those areas.

Indeed, the autoethnographic data clearly reveal that the lead author is often highly dependent on acquiring Jena Malone's films on DVD or digital download to enjoy them and her acting performances, because she often features in small, more artistic independent films that are rarely screened in his local cinemas. But as some of those independent film productions do not find an international distributor, they are only available in the US DVD Region 1 format and, therefore, unavailable in Europe. Hence, he eventually bought an external DVD-drive and locked it into the Region 1 area code, so that he could purchase, collect and watch the US DVDs of those films that have not been released in Europe so far at his leisure and to provide him with something of what Holbrook (1995) calls a *hip* insider knowledge. By *taking possession* of her films and, by extension, of Jena Malone as *the performer*, he is able to overcome the initial problem of access and availability. While this might sound extreme, other consumers travel to another city and book a hotel (sometimes even a flight) to watch the live performance of their favourite celebrities – which the lead author has also done to catch bands like Stiff Little Fingers, Buzzcocks or Dead Kennedys in Glasgow and Edinburgh, or even to London, to see a live performance of Jena Malone and finally meet her in person.

For some consumers, however, it is not enough to possess only the one or another recorded album, DVD or book. Indeed, some consumers are collectors who long for *possessing* the entire creative works of celebrities in a certain genre of music, film, literature, etc. (Holbrook, 1995), while other consumers (i.e. fans) have the desire to *possess* the complete creative work of a specific celebrity (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012). The autoethnographic data clearly show that the lead author engages in an extensive collection of Jena Malone photos, media reports and interviews in magazines or on video files and, especially, all of her films on DVD or, if absolutely necessary, on any other media formats. The ability to *take possession* of the celebrity's creative works and performances allows a consumer not only to consume them whenever and wherever he/she likes, but also – like a *museum curator* – to keep them and the celebrity as *the performer* alive even after a music band has broken up, a celebrity has retired from the stage or even passed away (Radford and Bloch, 2012). For the one or another consumer, the celebrity's appeal as a *tangible possession* lies in giving both *the performer* and the creative performance a touch of immortality (Eagar and Lindridge, 2014; Kendall, 2008), as they enable even new generations, who never had the chance to see the celebrity in the flesh, to enjoy the celebrity's creative performances, works and public persona long after he/she has died. For a similar reason, the lead author often tries to purchase a record or CD at a live concert and have it signed by the artist(s) (Plate 2) or pays

Plate 2.
Autographed vinyl
records and CD



on PledgeMusic for one of the limited signed records, as such an autographed item bestows the ordinary record with specialness and, thus, extra collector value.

While it is obvious that the lead author takes *tangible possession* of Jena Malone's acting performances as *the performer* through the purchase of her films on DVD and her public persona through the collection of video clips and articles about her in the media, the physical presence of Jena Malone as *the private person* has also manifested herself over time in the photos and posters that increasingly decorate both his living space and workspace. In other words, the consumer also uses certain types of products such as photos (particularly those that depict the celebrity in his/her private life), posters, t-shirts and, especially, personalised items like hand-signed autographs (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012) and personal artefacts, which the celebrity has previously owned or personally used like film/stage costumes and props (Newman *et al.*, 2011), as proxies to make the illusive celebrity as *the private person* at least symbolically accessible and a part of one's everyday life (Plates 3 and 4).

However, contradicting much of the academic and popular discourse, the autoethnographic data show that fans are not the only consumers, who have a strong interest in a celebrity's original autographs, autographed vinyl records, CDs, DVDs and books, original film/stage props and costumes or even former personal belongings. While the lead author openly defines himself as a devoted Jena Malone fan, he never does it with regard to bands and singers like Stiff Little Fingers, Buzzcocks, The Damned, The Who,



Plate 3.
Original Jena Malone
autographs

Heinz Rudolf Kunze or Zaz, whose albums he has purchased and listens to or to whose live shows he goes to from time to time, because he likes their music. Yet, he is quite keen to pay a bit more on the crowdfunding site PledgeMusic for their hand-signed vinyl records or to purchase CDs and vinyl records at their live gigs to have them signed by them – and, thus, to bestow specialness and rarity value onto them. While an item previously owned by Jena Malone – like an engraved Rolex watch she received from the film producers for her work in the film *Four Star Day* (Plate 4) – has primarily personal value, other items like The Damned's exclusive Spaun snare-drum (Plate 5), of which only 40 exist worldwide, have primarily investment value for him. According to Newman *et al.* (2011), such personal(ised) celebrity items have become subject to a highly competitive collectors and investors' market at reputable auctions, where many celebrity objects – especially those of dead celebrities – fetch sales prices that are out of the league for ordinary fans. Even on eBay, a single hand-signed autograph usually retails between US\$50 and US\$1,000, while an autographed film poster signed by the director and cast at the film premiere often sells for US\$800 to US\$12,000 a piece – depending on the film and cast.

Unfortunately, because it is such a profitable market with such a high demand, an increasing number of fraudsters are trying to take advantage of the trade by flooding the market (especially on eBay) with fake autographed photos, whereby the quality of the celebrity's signature imitation ranges from *amateurish-obvious* to very difficult to

Plate 4.
Engraved Rolex
watch previously
owned by Jena
Malone for her work
in the film *Four Star
Day*



distinguish from the original even for experts. The autoethnographic data reveal that the lead author obtains most of his autographed or personal(ised) items either in person directly from the celebrities or via their PledgeMusic site and from select people who are close to the celebrity, while he has also developed some strategies to test the trustworthiness of online sellers – which the vast majority fail at the first hurdle. Furthermore, while the lead author has acquired a number of Jena Malone's original hand-signed autographs from a few select trusted sources that he had vetted, the analysis of the autoethnographic data also highlight quite forcefully his disdain for the way in which the goodwill of celebrities like Jena Malone and the others, who take the personal time to sign autographs free of charge for their fans, is exploited and commoditised by opportunistic speculators, who pretend to be fans to have the celebrity signing a number of photos that they sell immediately afterwards on eBay. For that reason, some consumers see it as *their duty* as either a devoted fan of the celebrity (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012) or as a serious collector and, thus, *curator* to protect the celebrity as *the performer* and *the private person* and his/her personal items from *falling in the wrong hands* – such as those opportunistic speculators and second-hand traders.

This (trader) is bidding again for an apparently genuine signed Jena Malone autograph. I've seen him repeatedly buying autographs cheaply to sell them not even a week later for at least twice the price – while often claiming then that he's collected the autograph himself supported by a fake proof candid downloaded from the Internet (Obviously, the candid never matches his claims!).

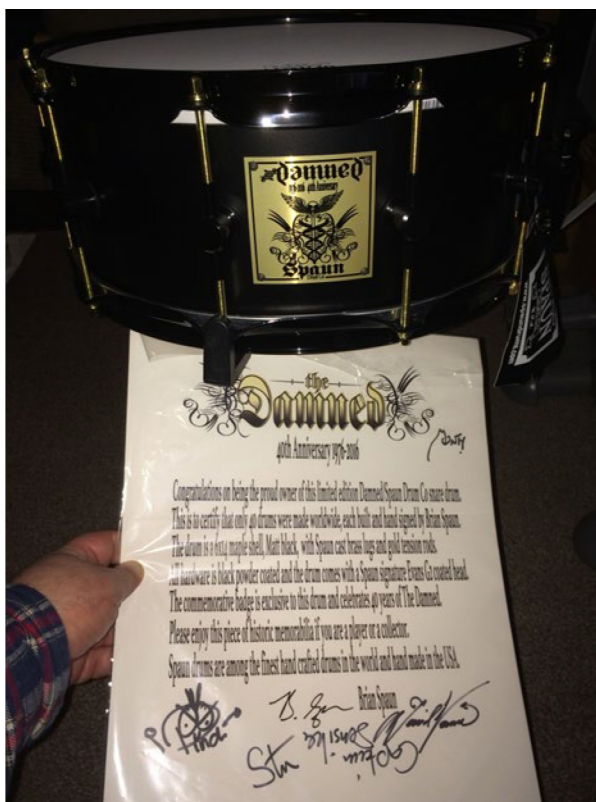


Plate 5.
Exclusive Spaul
snare-drum designed
for The Damned with
band-signed
authentication
certificate

Thus, he's the last person deserving to get his dirty hands on her autograph! I'll spoil it for him by raising the price a bit. (Introspection, 24-05-2006)

The analysis of the autoethnographic data further reveals a clear indication of how a fan or a serious collector seems to place a very different value and priority on a celebrity's original hand-signed autographs, former personal belongings, props and/or costumes than commercial traders, speculators or other, uninvolved consumers would. To prevent the commercial trade of their hand-signed autographs, many celebrities have in recent years begun to dedicate them directly to the collecting person by name, as a dedicated autograph has a significantly lower commercial market value than a generic one. For the lead author, however, it is exactly those original hand-signed autographs that carry a particular value for him. In case of the signed and even dedicated albums, singles, CDs, DVDs or books by numerous celebrities, they not only turn an ordinary mass-produced item into a unique special collector's item but also signify to others that the lead author has actually participated in the production of the band's album or been present at a particular live show where he briefly met them.

The original hand-signed autographs of Jena Malone, and especially those that she in person has dedicated to him personally, on the other hand, represent for him his most valued and cherished treasures – due to their (perceived) personal nature. In fact, the personal hand-signed dedication on these original autographs symbolise to him most strongly her *physical*

presence in his everyday life. The difference is made apparent by the fact that he keeps them carefully in a dedicated space, while the signed records, CDs and books of the other celebrities are stored with the other CDs, vinyl records and books. Indeed, how precious and priceless Jena Malone's dedicated autographs are to him in his everyday life is evident in the following autoethnographic extract:

[...] I'm also a bit worried about having to leave my priceless and precious original hand-signed photos behind, especially the ones that she has personally dedicated to me (my most invaluable treasures). What if something happens to them in my absence? [...] Well, I have finally decided to take my most precious Jena Malone autographs with me. To be safe, I've separated them. The most precious ones are placed in my hand luggage together with my laptop, while the others are carefully stored in my backpack. (Introspection, 15-12-2006)

The celebrity as a social link

The fourth (and in fan studies perhaps most researched) constituent of a celebrity's consumer appeal is that of *the social link*, which refers to how the celebrity serves as a source and site for social interaction between like-minded consumers (Hewer and Hamilton, 2012). Due to the very nature of the creative industries, it is only too obvious that the creative work of the celebrity as *the performer* is usually known, consumed and admired or disliked by more than just one consumer. In our increasingly anonymous and individualised society, where the individual experiences a growing feeling of social isolation from community, a certain appeal of the celebrity to the individual consumer seems to lie in providing the latter with the potential opportunity to link up, meet and even form social bonds with other consumers that share the same interests (Henry and Caldwell, 2007; Hills, 2016). As it seems only natural that many consumers would not only like to enjoy or to criticise a celebrity's performances and creative work in the social company of like-minded consumers, but would also share their mutual admiration (or dislike) for the celebrity as *the performer* and/or *the private person* with each other in so-called fan (or anti-fan) communities (Kanai, 2015; O'Guinn, 1991), it comes as no surprise that the social interaction, dynamics and sharing rituals among fan community members have caught the specific research interests of both CCT (Henry and Caldwell, 2007; Hewer and Hamilton, 2012; O'Guinn, 1991) and fan scholars (Barbas, 2001; Hills, 2002, 2016; Kanai, 2015).

The fan community – whether offline as traditional fan-clubs or online as fan-sites and fan forums – is thereby often presented as the central site where consumers negotiate their personal polysemic meanings of the celebrity and his/her creative outputs with the *proper meanings* championed by the fan community's official *canon* (Hills, 2002), which they share together in social discourse, rituals and the display or *worship* of valued artefacts (Henry and Caldwell, 2007; O'Guinn, 1991). Due to this nearly exclusive scholarly focus on the fan community as the only legitimate site of fandom, several CCT and fan scholars have even implied that the participation in such fan communities may be the sole motivation for a consumer to be a fan in the first place (Hewer and Hamilton, 2012; Hills, 2002; Kanai, 2015). Hence, a celebrity's appeal could for some consumers actually stem from the type of people they expect to be followers of *the performer* and his/her creative performances. Indeed, many teen pop stars' appeal to young consumers often lies in their (perceived) popularity with the popular – or alternative – peers, whose social approval and acceptance they seek (Banister and Cocker, 2014). After all, a major reason why consumers pay attention to and share celebrity gossip is to interact socially with other people (Hermes, 2006).

It is always the same in those so-called online communities. Most people posting comments have barely seen a film with Jena Malone – mainly *Sucker Punch* or *Hunger Games: Catching Fire* and

some older ones have also seen *Donnie Darko* – and know virtually nothing about her (incl. the basic details on IMDb), but feel entitled to tell others how to watch and understand her films. [...] But worse are those endless 6-degree posts or comments on her look. [...] Seriously, I know what Jena Malone, as a person and actress, and her films mean to me and don't need anybody to tell me! I'm much better off watching her films and appreciating her acting just by myself. (Introspection, 01-12-2005)

But as this extract from the autoethnographic data shows, the lead author, at a first glance, has no real interest and very little intentions to share his personal admirations for Jena Malone – and what she, her creative performances and artworks mean to him – within any online or offline fan community or with any other fans and consumers in general. Indeed, irrespective of whether it is Jena Malone as *the performer* and her acting skills, whether it is her films and portrayed characters or whether it is Jena Malone as *the private person*, he clearly prefers to enjoy those personal fan experiences just by himself and on his own terms. Yet, a closer look at the autoethnographic data also reveals that the lead author does like to share his admiration for Jena Malone's acting talent and creative performances and the quality of her (often relatively unknown) independent films with friends, close acquaintances and colleagues – *but* not with other fans.

Nonetheless, despite recommending her films and praising her acting talent to other *worthy* potential viewers[2], he still tends to enjoy watching those films and acting performances more by himself than in the company of others. More importantly, however, at no point is he ever willing to share his personal adoration for *the private person* Jena Malone with anyone else – and especially not his parasocial romantic infatuation with her. As he is less interested in *the private person* of other actors or celebrities, he is more willing to enjoy their performances together with other people. This observation would suggest that an individual consumer, when interacting with other consumers and like-minded fans in particular, may not fully engage in a negotiated fan discourse or gossip of shared celebrity meaning, as the literature on fan studies and consumer tribalism often implies, but be rather quite selective with regard to what particular attributes or constituents of the celebrity he/she wants to share, how, when and with whom.

The explanation for the contradictory behaviour patterns revealed by the autoethnographic data require a closer focus on which of the other three identified constituents of the celebrity's personal consumer appeal an individual would like to share and which he/she does not. The autoethnographic data would suggest quite unambiguously that a consumer tends to enjoy sharing those attributes of the celebrity with other consumers that refer to the celebrity as *the performer*, i.e. the talent, the creative output and the public media persona, and their manifestations as *tangible possessions*. But a consumer would appear to be less likely to share their emotional attachment to the celebrity as *the private person* with others. Indeed, when the lead author shares his admiration for *the performer* Jena Malone's acting talent and performances with his friends and colleagues and recommends her films to them, he is actually promoting her work to give her more exposure and recognition as an actress (Lovell, 1999; Stacey, 1994). His unwillingness to share *the private person* Jena Malone with others, however, stems from the fact that he views them as rivals. After all, who wants to share one's adored flame or ideal mate with other people – and especially with potential rivals?

Of course, we are hereby mindful of the paradox of his researcher reflexivity in conducting this research and reporting about his parasocial fan relationship with Jena Malone. His *fan/consumer me* that is studied is a relatively self-contained fan/consumer who does not participate in fan communities because he does not want to negotiate his personal image, meaning(s) and views of the celebrity with that of other consumers. Hence, the *fan*

me in this paper still does not share or negotiate his fandom and admiration with others – nor his engagement with other celebrities. Instead, it is his *researcher me* (Rambo, 1992) who reports on his observation and, more precisely, his interpretation of the autoethnographic data and shares his findings on the nature of his fandom, his private *fan me* and consumption of other celebrities with an academic audience (who are most likely not members of the very fan communities he avoids); but not really his fandom itself. That said, there is inextricably a certain inescapable reflexivity between the lead author and readers (including the co-authors) in terms of this research choices and ever-continuing hermeneutic readings and interpretations by all parties involved. In the end, the researcher-fan is informed by two co-creating streams – that of the fan and that of the researcher (Gould, 2012; Rambo, 1992).

Discussion/conclusion

In this paper, we have drawn on autoethnographic data to examine how a celebrity actually appeals to the individual consumer and why a consumer may be attracted to one particular celebrity but feel indifferent to other equally talented, attractive, intelligent, interesting and maybe even more popular ones. The indisputable fact is that different consumers are attracted to different celebrities. Even if they actually like the same ones, they may still be motivated by different desires and, thus, apply different meanings to their experiences with the celebrity. The polysemy of meanings and the heteroglossia of perspectives suggest that viewing the consumer-celebrity relationship solely through a semiotic lens, as the celebrity and stardom literatures have traditionally done, reduces and masks the co-creation of that relationship and the diversity of narratives that blossom rhizomatically (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/2003) in the daily cultural interaction between celebrities and consumers. In aligning the marketing literature with a recent movement in film studies (Baron, 1999; Hollinger, 2006; Lovell, 2003) and rehumanising celebrities as human beings and performers, this paper contributes to the emerging understanding of multi-constitutional polysemy of any celebrity's personal appeal to any particular consumer.

A good metaphor to explain why a celebrity has a different personal appeal to each individual consumer is that of fishing in a lake. The reason why a fish eventually bites a specific hook while ignoring all the other hooks in the lake is simply that this hook has offered something special as bait that this fish desired, which the others did not. Another fish, however, may be attracted to the bait of a very different hook, or may not care for any at all. As celebrities are complex human beings with a personal polysemic, multi-constitutional consumer appeal, each constituent, therefore, acts as such a *hook* in what could be described a very big lake full of individual consumers. When an individual consumer experiences certain unfulfilled desires, he/she starts looking for something that promises to satisfy those personal desires. As a result, some can become *hooked* by the celebrity as a creative performer, while others are *hooked* by celebrity's beauty and/or personality as a private person, etc. Hence, in a big lake filled with a multitude of different *hooks* offered by numerous celebrities, a consumer looking for one's *personal hook* is bound to find eventually the one he/she is longing for – even if it may require *trying out* a few other ones first. Once the suitable *hook provider* (i.e. celebrity) with the right *alluring bait* has been found, this is usually the point, where the consumer experiences a strong emotional attachment or repugnance towards the celebrity and may become a fan or anti-fan while feeling largely indifferent to many other equally talented, attractive and interesting celebrities.

We have therefore argued, and provided evidence from the lead author's own parasocial relationships with his adored film actress and other celebrities as sites of meaning, that any

particular celebrity's personal appeal to the individual consumer would depend on how strongly each of the appeal constituents resonates with the consumer's personal interests, beauty ideals, values and unfulfilled desires. This is quite different than previously theorised by the interdisciplinary celebrity and stardom literature (Dyer, 1998; King, 1991; McCracken, 1989; Thomson, 2006), which has *dehumanised* celebrities by presenting them as mere unidimensional semiotic receptacles of cultural meaning (= archetypes) and suggested that their consumer appeal would stem exclusively from the display of a consistent public image both on- and off-screen. Therefore, by *rehumanising* celebrities in line with recent film studies (Hollinger, 2006; Lovell, 2003) and deconstructing their personal attraction as a human being, we argue instead that any particular celebrity offers any particular consumer a very personal appeal as *the performer* and public media persona, *the* (perceived) *private person* hidden underneath the performer, *the tangible possession* of either manifested through physical products and *the social link* to other like-minded consumers as a site of shared admiration (or even contempt). The individual consumer can thereby show interest in only one of a celebrity's consumer appeal constituents or any given symbiotic combination to feel at least temporarily attracted to this particular celebrity. The implication of this finding is that a consumer's emotional fan relationship, but also just a modest interest or a feeling of disgust is determined by the personal attraction to the celebrity's consumer appeal constituents. The more they, individually or symbiotically, resonate with the consumer's personal desires, beauty ideals, dreams and values the stronger he/she feels emotionally attached to this particular celebrity.

These findings also have some managerial implications for current marketing practices in the management of celebrities in particular, and even of celebrity endorsements that may need reconsidering. First, as the celebrity offers a very different personal appeal and image to each individual consumer, the endorsed brand is unlikely to benefit from this heteroglossia of conflicting meanings – assuming an image transfer occurs (Hackley and Hackley, 2015). Moreover, despite the popular, but ill-conceived myth, consumers are unlikely to purchase products just because they are promoted or associated with an admired celebrity (Banister and Cocker, 2014). Instead, celebrity endorsements only work when the celebrity is known to have the relevant expertise to give interested consumers *professional* advice as the brand's *competent spokesperson*. Here, a celebrity's appeal as *the performer* to the consumer corresponds with his/her interest in the endorsed brand (Erdogan, 1999). Second, the findings question the wisdom that underpins today's popular *blockbuster* strategy (Elberse, 2013) of mass-manufacturing celebrities with a single universal appeal that caters to the target audience's smallest common denominator. As each individual consumer tends to look for something special (one's *personal hook*) in the celebrity that speaks to one's own inherent desires, mass-manufactured celebrities designed to be everything to everybody are unlikely to fulfil them and encourage a genuine and sustainable emotional attachment. Hence, it might be wiser to let the celebrity's unique talent, personality and beauty evolve naturally and speak for them. After all, the most *durable* and commercially successful celebrities have been the non-manufactured ones (Kendall, 2008).

A limitation of the autoethnographic approach taken in this study is its reliance on the lead author as its primary data source. Nonetheless, we do not imply that the presented data can be generalised. What we do suggest is that the obtained depth of data not only compensates for the lack of breadth, but has been sufficient to gain much deeper insights into the polysemic nature of a celebrity's personal appeal to individual consumers. The autoethnographic approach is thereby informed by Merleau-Ponty's (1962/2002) concept of the *lived body*, where the researcher is both the studied individual and the research instrument to study the individual's perceived relationships to others, cultural settings and

historicised self. The lead author's autoethnographic perspective, thus, involves an element of social observation and comparison, in which he perceives and presents some differences in meaning creation between himself and other fans, never mind consumers in general. An important aspect for further research is to build on the presented findings by examining through autoethnographic or phenomenological approaches the narratives of other consumer-celebrity relationships to expand on this emerging understanding of the polysemy of any particular celebrity's personal multi-constitutional appeal as a human being/performer to any particular consumer.

Notes

1. During the Hollywood studio era, the film studios obligated all their contracted film actors (including their major stars) and crew members to live in assigned accommodations on or near the studio ground.
2. Those individuals he deems to be able to appreciate Jena Malone's films and her acting talent like he does

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