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Celebrities

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“Sic transit gloria mundi”

This is commonly translated as ‘thus passes the glory of the world’ and often interpreted to mean ‘worldly things are fleeting.’ The phrase came into popular use due to its inclusion in the coronation ceremony of the popes from 1409 to 1963, to highlight the transitory nature of life and earthly celebrity, and serves our purpose well here.¹

We are living in a celebrity age

This chapter is about how the idea of ‘celebrity’ is used to influence, promote, represent and add value to the marketing process. In contemporary society, celebrities are important – this is something that is hard to argue against. Redmond and Holmes (2007) tell us how we embrace the celebrity myth, exploring the ways in which these magical figures give us strong imagery of identities and social meaning that we aspire to reflect within ourselves. Despite the fact that we are often aware of celebrities as mythical inventions created by the media, they can still represent forms of identity we seek to reflect in our personal identities, beyond other identities we feel we are ascribed by society. In the 1970s the celebrated American Football player O.J. Simpson appeared as the central figure in Hertz rent-a-car’s advertising campaign – this was a break-through celebrity moment as black Americans were given a positive public reference for their identity that was not related to stigmatised stereotypes of black crime or violence² (Williams, 2001). O.J. Simpson went on to cultivate his fame in a way that transcended his popularity and success as

¹ If you are interested in coronation rites and rituals, Woolly, R.M. (1915) *Coronation Rites*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press is the text for you; the event above is described on p. 163.

² When Hertz’s campaign was launched in America, the country was going through a prolonged period of civil unrest in relation to racial equality issues.

a professional athlete and saw him occupy a position as 'a celebrity' in a contemporary way: he was famous because he was famous. This is an example of how ideas of celebrity have evolved over time. We instinctively understand what a celebrity is when we hear the word, but knowing the mechanics of 'celebrity' as a concept and recognising its different manifestations will help develop your ability to use and leverage notions of celebrity in practice.

Celebrity has become a media process, according to Turner (2013: 24), which has turned the idea of being famous into a commodity that can be packaged and sold to audiences who have an appetite to consume it. He presents two categories of fame:

The first is composed of people who possess "political, economic or religious power", whose decisions "have an influence on the present and future fortunes of society which they direct". The second group is what we now think of as celebrities and they are people "whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent, but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable and sometimes even a maximum degree of interest" (Alberoni, 2007: 72)

Something that has shifted in recent times is the sense of agency any member of the public has in theory to elevate their own fame through means such as social media, thus changing our relationship with the idea of fame as not just something to be consumed passively as a 'fan', but something we can aspire towards ourselves. Therefore, we are developing an even greater appetite for celebrities as our relationship with them is more internalised and visceral than ever before. And the result of this from a marketing perspective is that celebrities have more power and influence when it comes to marketing activities (Redmond & Holmes, 2007).

Our appetite for celebrity as a consuming public is now so fierce that we have entered a new realm of what forms a celebrity. Beyond the two concepts presented by Turner (2013) above, Rojek (2001) discusses the idea of 'celetoids', being celebrities who have neither earned their fame, nor had fame ascribed by the public. Celetoids are entirely constructed by media producers or marketers in order to resonate with a particular audience to achieve a particular end, these are what Pierre Bourdieu (1998) describes as 'puppets of necessity'.

Puppets of necessity are a product of what is known as the celebritisation process (Stern et al., 2001). This is seen as the cultural process whereby the idea of celebrity is fostered in response to the audience's appetite for it, and it takes place at a macro level. Celebrification is something that happens to an

individual; it is a process of becoming through media ritual that unifies “the spectacular with the everyday, the special with the ordinary” (Dyer, 1979: 35). In general we can consider ourselves to live in a celebritised age, where the process of celebritisation is all around us and is reproduced through mainstream media channels (such as talent shows like the X-Factor), and in informal and organic ways on social media through viral content.

Celebrity marketing

The pursuit of celebrity status exists in some of the oldest literature; the hero of the epic Gilgamesh, a Sumerian king (c. 2700-2500 BC) sought immortal fame. However, the epic was written to highlight the stupidity of fame as a goal and emphasise that fame for fame’s sake is ultimately self-destructive. Unsurprisingly, in the Ancient World the means for promoting oneself to celebrity were extremely limited. There are well-known historical political figures: Emperor Qin Shi Huang (Emperor of China, c. 220 BC); Boudica (Queen of the British Celtic Iceni, c. 60AD); or religious figures Gautama Buddha (c. 500BC); St Paul (Saul of Tarsus c. 60AD) – but not what would be normally be considered celebrities. However, the cult of celebrity as distinct from being well-known is nothing new, for example, Socrates (Greece 470/469 – 399 BC) was a visible character, spoke well in public, hung out in the right places and, according to contemporaries, had a striking physical appearance. However, celebrities were not a class of their own. Dictators and emperors might fall in love or socialize with actors and actresses but that would never change their status.

Celebrity has its roots in the concept of fame: to spread abroad the fame of, render famous by talk. This comes from the Latin *famare*, meaning ‘to tell or spread abroad.’ The word celebrity originally came into English around 1610 from the Latin *celebritas*, meaning ‘famous’, or ‘thronged’.

Until 1849, the OED attributed two meanings: “Due observance of rites and ceremonies; pomp, solemnity”; and “A solemn rite or ceremony, a celebration”. Both of these definitions link to the Latin roots as they reference ideas of fame and importance. Nowadays our understanding of celebrity includes the assumption that a celebrity is widely known and generates interest among the public by virtue of their personality, i.e. there is intrinsic interest from others in the individual. According to the current Oxford English Dictionary, celebrity as we use it today in English means “a celebrated person, a public character.”