

Exploring Demand toward Celebrity Memorabilia: Do Celebrities Never Really Die?

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Abstract

Celebrities always seem larger than life; it is when they die that we remember they are only human. With the emergence of the Internet and social networking sites, consumers are able to follow the daily activities of their favorite celebrities. After a celebrity's death, consumers exhibit a stronger interest in the lives of these celebrities and demand for celebrity-related products increases sharply. The aim of the present study is to examine young consumers' responses to celebrity deaths and explore the major factors that lead to increased demand for celebrity memorabilia and merchandise. Specifically, this research will attempt to present why young consumers exhibit such a sudden and strong interest in celebrity-related products after their death and why these products are cherished so greatly. Factor analysis is applied and the results indicate that a celebrity's death increases young consumers' demand for memorabilia due to five major factors. These factors include immortality of the celebrity, keepsake value & deep-felt love as well as uniqueness of the celebrity, prestige and financial value attached with the product and wide availability & increased media promotion. Based on these factors, it can be argued that consumption of celebrity merchandise is motivated by the attachment and significance of the celebrity to the young consumer before death. These results are important for marketers to grasp the effect of death on the consumption of celebrity merchandise. Online and traditional retailers need to understand the major factors attracting consumers to celebrity memorabilia and merchandise so that they can respond quickly and efficiently to sudden demand fluctuations.

Keywords: celebrity memorabilia, consumer demand, celebrity death, young consumers

1. Introduction

Humans have long been fascinated with celebrities. A celebrity is a person, who has a prominent profile and commands some degree of public fascination and influence in day-to-day news media. The term is often synonymous with wealth, implied with great popular appeal, prominence in a particular field, and is easily recognized by the general public. Fascination with the famous seems to be a human phenomenon that goes as far back as recorded history. In ancient Greece and Rome, people created their gods as very human-like beings, complete with character flaws and drama. Through the Middle Ages, the celebrities were royalty and nobility. Human beings are captivated by those they see as glamorous.

In today's global cultural environment, celebrities are viewed like gods, and the issue of fame, hero worship, and voyeuristic tendencies to watch their lives is a fascinating subject for many people. It is perfectly human to compare ourselves to others, and modern celebrity worship is the perfect forum for this behavior. Consumption of media is a huge activity around the world, and television, movies, and the Internet are dominant fixtures in our lives no matter what part of the world we live in.

Celebrities come into our homes and share some parts of our lives with us. They are often with us at dinner, talking to us in the background of our home lives, and sometimes they tuck us in as we drift off to sleep. When they take on such a powerful role in daily life, we feel connected to them, and thus we want to know about their lives in the same way we would a close friend. We begin to relate to them as friends, even though we have never met them.

Perhaps part of the lure of celebrity is the quest for a semblance of immortality, to be known during our lifetime and not forgotten after. The passing of global celebrities like Princess Diana, James Dean, Michael Jackson, Kurt

Cobain, Whitney Houston, Amy Winehouse came as a shock because celebrity deaths often feel almost impossible. Someone who seems to be woven into the fabric of our personal and collective memories may appear superhuman. It may seem as though their heightened existence could protect them from something as common as death.

The present study explores the reasons behind a sudden increase in demand for celebrity memorabilia and merchandise after their death. There are two important contributions of this current research. First, the focus will be placed on discovering the major factors that drive young consumers to exhibit a sharp boost in demand for celebrity-related products. Second, no similar study has been previously conducted in the Turkish market to our knowledge therefore this study will be of value to both academics and marketers. Both online and traditional retailers need to understand the effect of death on the consumption of celebrity merchandise so that they can respond quickly and efficiently to demand fluctuations. Speed is a critical issue here because the sudden demand increases may turn out to be short-lived.

2. Literature Review

Celebrity is a phenomenon that is culturally pervasive. One of the most popular quotes about celebrity is made by Daniel Boorstin where he states “The celebrity is a person who is well-known for their well-knownness. Fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness” (Boorstin, 1961). According to Boorstin, celebrities develop a capacity for fame, not by achieving great things, but by differentiating their own personality from those of their competitors in the public arena. This view still holds true four decades later in McCutcheon’s work where it is discussed that celebrities are known not so much for their accomplishments but for the lives they lead (McCutcheon et al., 2002).

It is possible to say that modern celebrity is a product of media representation. For Rojek, celebrity is the consequence of the attribution of qualities to a particular individual through the mass media (Rojek, 2001). He has developed a system that outlines three broad types of celebrity which are categorized in terms of how celebrity is earned or attributed. According to Rojek’s model, celebrity is “ascribed” through blood relations (the royal family), “achieved” in open competition (sports stars), or “attributed” by the media (television and movie personalities). Attribution of celebrity can occur without any significant achievement as it is increasingly frequent with the media today.

In today’s global media environment, every aspect of celebrities’ lives is put on display in a constant manner. With the help of Internet and social networking sites, consumers are able to track the daily activities of their favorite celebrities and keep in touch with them through blogs and tweets. The really interesting aspect of celebrity is the degree to which it has become integrated into the cultural processes of our daily lives. Radford and Bloch argue that feeling a connection to a celebrity is genuine and can serve as a major component in a person’s self-definition (Radford & Bloch, 2012).

The image of many celebrities is precisely tailored and controlled by their agents and managers. However, this detachment and mystery lead to increased interest and positive responses from their fans (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2012). The possession of celebrity-related merchandise becomes more significant for the fan who may not have direct access to the celebrity. In addition, celebrity endorsement has become a prevalent form of advertising around the world. Findings show that celebrities aid in the recognition of brand names (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schuman, 1983), create a positive attitude towards the brand (Kamins et al., 1989), and create a distinct personality for the endorsed brand (McCracken, 1989). For example, consumers want the wavy hair of a female celebrity. Hence, they purchase the brand that the celebrity uses to achieve her hair’s fullness and bounce. Some other consumers may desire the same soft drink as their basketball team’s best player. When the attachment to celebrities is so strong, it is no surprise that when they use a product or an item, fans instantly want it, too.

The attraction to celebrity-related merchandise increases sharply following the death of a celebrity. When Apple’s CEO Steve Jobs died of cancer, the manufacturer of his iconic black mock- turtle-neck shirts could not keep up with the consumer demand (Yin, 2011). Following Whitney Houston’s death, Nielsen Sound Scan released sales data that stated the biggest-selling album of the week was the 2000 compilation “Whitney: Greatest Hits,” which sold 64,000 units in the week ending Feb. 12, versus 600 the previous week. When Turkey’s most prominent news anchor, Mehmet Ali Birand, died unexpectedly in 2013, sales of his autobiographical book tripled.

Of primary interest here is to discover the major factors that lie behind this sudden boom in the demand for celebrity products. Do these memorabilia products become more sacred or are consumers motivated purely by financial value to be gained? It is important to understand and explain the death-related effects of these product sales. In some cases, consumers may be attracted to the celebrity merchandise as financial investments, believing

that scarcity will increase the monetary value of these products. In most cases, however, the reason for demand can be purely based on psychological benefits. Consumers' collective desire to compensate for the loss of their favorite celebrity may attract them to the meaning transfer available in celebrity products (Richins, 1994).

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample of the Study

The sample for this study included 410 students that were recruited from four public and four private universities in Ankara, the capital city of Turkey. There are currently a total of eighteen universities in Ankara. Due to potential variations in family income levels, stratified random sampling was adopted and universities were classified as public and private. Then eight universities in particular were selected by random sampling. Surveys were administered during the fall semester of 2014. The students were asked to rank the major factors that increased their demand for celebrity merchandise following their deaths.

Prior to preparing the survey instrument for the study, a pre-test was carried out on 150 students. These students were asked open-ended questions about possible reasons that would lead to increased demand for their favorite celebrity memorabilia and merchandise after their death. The survey instrument was compiled based on the answers the students provided.

3.2 Survey Instrument

The survey in the research consisted of three main parts. In the first part, the students were asked to list the type of products they prefer to purchase after the death of their favorite celebrity. In the second part of the survey, 5-point likert type questions (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree) were asked to determine the major factors that increase young consumers' demand for celebrity merchandise following their deaths. The third part of the survey included questions about the demographic profile of the respondents.

Reliability analysis was conducted to test the reliability of the sample, and cronbach alpha coefficient was observed as 0.932 (sign 0.000). Based on this value, it can be stated that the sample is highly reliable.

In this empirical study, factor analysis was applied to determine the major factors that influence the increase in demand for celebrity memorabilia. Prior to factor analysis, construct validity analysis was done to determine the relationship among the variables and to check whether the sample was suitable for factor analysis. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was observed as 0.902. Based on this value, it can be concluded that the sample has a good fit for factor analysis. Bartlett's test of Sphericity (chi square: 3251.79 sig: 0.000) has proven the existence of a general relationship between the variables.

Factor analysis is a set of techniques for determining the extent to which variables that are related can be grouped together so that they can be treated as one combined variable or factor rather than as a series of separate variables. Factor analysis is often used in the empirical research in social sciences (Hatcher, 1994). The most common use of factor analysis in the social and behavioral sciences is to determine whether the responses to a set of items used to measure a particular concept can be grouped together to form an overall index of that concept (Duncan, 2003).

The objective here was to obtain fewer dimensions that reflected the relationships among the inter-related variables. A total of thirty-four variables were grouped under five major factor groups by using varimax rotation. These five factors are: F1: Immortality of the celebrity, F2: Keepsake value and deep-felt love, F3: Wide availability and increased promotion of memorabilia F4: Uniqueness of the celebrity, F5: Prestige and financial value attached with products. These are the major factors that lead young consumers to display increased demand levels for celebrity memorabilia following the event of death. The five-factors with the respective loading levels are exhibited in Table 4.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 1 below depicts the demographic profile of the young consumers who participated in the research study. In terms of gender, there was an almost equal distribution of male (47.8%) and female (52.2%) students in the sample. About half of the respondents (46.6%) were between the ages of 21-25. This is because half of the students in the sample (50.7%) were in senior and leap year standing. In terms of income levels, 49% of the students had a low monthly income between 500-1500 TL. About a quarter (24.1%) of the young consumers in the sample had a mid-to higher income at 3000TL and over, these would be the students from the private universities.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

Gender	Frequency	%
Female	214	52.2
Male	196	47.8
Age		
16-20	110	26.8
21-25	191	46.6
26 and over	109	26.6
University		
Preparatory Year	54	13.2
Freshman	39	9.5
Sophomore	56	13.7
Junior	53	12.9
Senior	153	37.3
Leap Year (4+)	55	13.4
High School		
Public High School	125	30.5
Private High School	133	32.4
Anatolian High School	106	25.9
Science High School	46	11.2
Income Level		
500-999TL	94	22.9
1000-1499TL	99	24.1
1500-1999TL	30	7.3
2000-2499TL	45	11.0
2500-2999TL	43	10.5
3000TL and over	99	24.1

Respondents were asked to list the category of products they are most likely to purchase after the celebrity's death. The top five product categories are displayed in Table 2 below. Based on this listing, it is observed that almost half (46.1%) of the young participants stated their preferences to purchase books about the lost celebrity. Cds and movies followed books as second and third top category choices. A little over a quarter (28%) of the young consumers in the research indicated they would make both apparel and accessory purchases of their loved celebrities.

Table 2. Which category of products belonging to a deceased celebrity would you mostly likely buy?

	Frequency	%
Books	189	46.1
Cds	121	29.5
Movies	89	21.7
Apparel	58	14.1
Accessories	57	13.9

Table 3. Factor loadings and total variance levels

	Factor Loads	% of Variance
Factor 1: Immortality of the Celebrity		16.887
▪ I purchase products to immortalize the celebrity.	.893	
▪ I purchase products to keep the celebrity's memories alive.	.884	
▪ I purchase products so that the celebrity is never forgotten.	.783	
▪ I purchase products so that I can always feel his/her presence.	.758	
▪ I purchase products so that the celebrity is never forgotten by others.	.466	
▪ I purchase products to keep the views of the celebrity alive and popular.	.448	

Factor 2: Keepsake Value and Deep Felt Love	16.273
▪ I purchase products because of my deep love for the celebrity.	.765
▪ I purchase products because of my deep admiration for the celebrity.	.747
▪ I purchase products because I would like to have a memento of the celebrity.	.723
▪ I purchase products because I would like to share the memories with my kids & grandkids in the future.	.648
▪ I purchase products because I feel they bring meaning to my life.	.564
▪ I purchase products so that I can always feel his/her presence with me.	.513
▪ I purchase products as a last duty in honor of the celebrity.	.440
Factor 3: Wide Availability and Increased Promotion of Media	10.690
▪ I purchase products because I get influenced by the constant media coverage of the celebrity following his/her death.	.812
▪ I purchase products because I get influenced by the ads of the companies that produce special memorabilia items.	.806
▪ I purchase products because I get influenced by the promotional efforts.	.620
Factor 4: Uniqueness of the Celebrity	10.422
▪ I purchase products to keep the celebrity strong among his/her rivals.	.805
▪ I purchase products because I feel that he/she is the best in their field.	.651
▪ I purchase products because I feel that the celebrity is irreplaceable in their field.	.636
▪ I purchase products because I know the celebrity will have no original work ever again.	.468
Factor 5: Prestige and Financial Value Attached with Product	7.961
▪ I purchase products because the memorabilia items become a trend in the society.	.721
▪ I purchase products because I feel that owning the memorabilia items brings me status.	.696
▪ I purchase products because the celebrity's memorabilia items are precious.	.592
▪ I purchase products because the celebrity's memorabilia items are unprecedented.	.506

Factor 1: Immortality of the Celebrity

The primary factor that has been identified in the study is “immortality of the celebrity”. This factor accounts for 16.887 percent of the total variance and consists of six statements. An assessment of factor loadings reveals that the major factor influencing demand for the sales of celebrity memorabilia is the “immortality of the celebrity”. The observed statement of “I purchase products to immortalize the celebrity” proves this finding. However, it is important to ponder about the fact that despite its promise of immortality, celebrity is fleeting. It really is not very enduring. Who is extremely popular and worshipped today may be overshadowed by a different celebrity in the very near future. It is essential to consider the degree of immortality fans associate with their favorite actors, singers, artists and politicians.

Factor 2: Keepsake Value and Deep Felt Love

The second extracted factor that is able to explain 16.273 percent of the total variation is “keepsake value and deep felt love”. This factor indicates that young consumers place a special emphasis on the deep love and admiration they feel for their favorite celebrity and the memorabilia items have a precious keepsake value. There are seven statements in the composition of this particular factor. Many celebrities come into our homes regularly, and they share parts of our lives with us. When they take on such a powerful role in daily life, many people feel connected to them, and want to know about their lives in the same way they would a close friend. Perhaps it is for this reason that when the celebrity passes away, there is a sense of great pain and loss. The deep felt love and admiration together with the urge to possess precious mementos drive consumers to purchase memorabilia items.

Factor 3: Wide Availability and Increased Promotion of Media

The third factor signifies the “wide availability and increased promotion of media” element. This factor accounts for 10.690 percent of the total variation and is reflected via these three statements:

(I purchase products because I get influenced by the constant media coverage of the celebrity following his/her death; I purchase products because I get influenced by the ads of the companies that produce special memorabilia items; I purchase products because I get influenced by the promotional efforts.) The likelihood of buying memorabilia items increases as consumers get exposed to frequent promotional campaigns following the death of a celebrity. The persistent and convincing natures of these promotional efforts compel consumers to make purchases.

Factor 4: Uniqueness of the Celebrity

“Uniqueness of the Celebrity” is the fourth major factor that has been observed in the study. It is made up of four particular statements and is able to account for 10.422 percent of the total variation. Consumers may feel that the doomed celebrity was a one-of-a-kind star who can never be replaced by someone else. The talent and works of this celebrity is perceived as absolutely perfect and no other celebrity could deliver a performance on that level. Such perception leads consumers to get their hands on any available memorabilia product they can find, knowing that these items are unique and authentic.

Factor 5: Prestige and Financial Value Attached with Product

The last factor is identified as “prestige and financial value attached with product”. This factor explains 7.961 percent of the total variation and consists of four statements. Sensible consumers are fascinated by celebrities but they are also involved in meaningful activities and relationships in their own lives, and for these people celebrity worship is usually a harmless diversion. These consumers choose to buy celebrity memorabilia because they believe that financial gains will result from the sale of these items. They believe that the memorabilia items will become hot and valuable in the future so they think of themselves as smart investors. Some consumers may also feel that owning a memento of a fallen celebrity could make them more popular or respected in their social groups. Especially, if they are able to hunt down and buy a truly unprecedented memorabilia item.

5. Conclusion

Fame has become a very strange beast in today’s world. Movie stars, singers, sports figures are all put on pedestals. They are idolized, fascinated fans follow every move they make. Many people are hypnotically enthralled by celebrities. There is a stampede to get the briefest glimpse of actors, artists, sports players or even politicians who are usually bombarding the society with false promises.

In many cultures around the world, celebrity news often takes the headlines above global events. When these celebrities die, the news is even louder. Celebrity deaths trigger a sudden boost in the number of memorabilia items for sale. In commercially driven, celebrity-saturated societies, it should come as no surprise that memorabilia items are devoured after celebrities depart our world. The present research examined the major factors that lie behind the sudden boom in the demand for celebrity products. It appears that in death, a celebrity’s status is elevated and consumers chase after any available memorabilia product in the market. The five major factors that have been revealed in the study are: F1: Immortality of the celebrity, F2: Keepsake value and deep-felt love, F3: Wide availability and increased promotion of memorabilia F4: Uniqueness of the celebrity, F5: Prestige and financial value attached with products.

This study was carried out with young consumers from eight universities in the capital city of Ankara. Future research related to this issue could be carried out with older consumers in rural or urban settings. It would be interesting to see what other prominent factors would be discovered in consumers’ quest for purchasing celebrity memorabilia items. Comparative studies could also be carried out to pinpoint the various motives of memorabilia collectors.

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