

## The Role of Products in Consumer-Celebrity Relationships

John Zimmerman

Carnegie Mellon University, Human-Computer Interaction Institute and The School of Design

5000 Forbes Avenue

Pittsburgh, PA 15213

USA

tel: +1.412.268.1313

fax: +1.412.268.1266

email: [johnz@cs.cmu.edu](mailto:johnz@cs.cmu.edu)

Ellen Ayoob

Carnegie Mellon University, Human-Computer Interaction Institute

5000 Forbes Avenue

Pittsburgh, PA 15213

USA

tel: +1.412.268.1681

fax: +1.412.268.1266

email: [ema@cs.cmu.edu](mailto:ema@cs.cmu.edu)

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# The Role of Products in Consumer-Celebrity Relationships

John Zimmerman and Ellen Ayoob

Carnegie Mellon University

## **Abstract**

Celebrities, designed and packaged to elicit an emotional reaction from consumers, appear to be indistinguishable from products. However, their role as characters in narrative creates a very different type of emotional attachment than products enjoy. By both being and being in narrative content, celebrities allow consumers to vicariously experience many new lives, and it is this fantasy connection that makes the consumer-celebrity attachment both strong and long lasting. In this paper we explore how celebrities effect consumers, and we detail how celebrity products support activities that create and grow consumer-celebrity relationships. In addition, we offer some insight into how understanding these activities can both lead to better design of celebrity products and lead to design of future products that form a similar level of attachment with consumers.

## **Keywords**

Celebrity, celebrity products, product design, design and emotion, product attachment, consumer-celebrity relationship, and brand.

## **Introduction**

The recent explosion in communication technology including the addition of hundreds of TV channels from digital satellite and cable television, the arrival of satellite radio, and the continuing expansion of multimedia content on the Internet has led to an increase in the number of celebrities (Henderson 1992) (Neimark 1995). The increase in capacity has resulted in an increase in content, which has lead to an increase in celebrities. At the same time, a study by psychologists Lynn McCutcheon and James Houran shows that nearly one-third of Americans display signs of “celebrity obsession” (Douglas 2003). Americans not only have more celebrities to choose from, but they appear to care more and more about them.

Consumers create celebrities by consuming the content they inhabit. Repeated consumption of the same person forms a parasocial relationship: consumers begin to feel that they know people they have only experienced through media (Horton and Wohl 1956). Our research explores “celebrity products”: products that directly effect consumers’ relationship with celebrities. By examining how consumers use celebrity products we hope to gain insight into

both how to improve the design of celebrity products and how to design new products that enjoy an emotional attachment similar to the emotional attachment consumers have with celebrities. This paper (i) offers a definition of celebrity as they relate to celebrity products, (ii) examines the emotional attachment between consumers and celebrities, (iii) explores how interaction with celebrity products supports and deepens consumer-celebrity relationships, and (iv) identifies future opportunities for celebrity product design.

### **Celebrity as Character**

Celebrities exist because of mass communication and the media. The arrival of movies, radio, photographic reproduction, television, and more recently the Internet, has made it possible for the words, the sound of voice, and image of individuals to connect with a large and distributed audience. Mass communication allows an audience who has never met each other to share the same experience. They get to meet and get to know the same characters and then share and discuss these experiences with each other. This shared experience creates a community of strangers based on people known only through mediated communication.

Probably the most famous definition of celebrity comes from the cultural theorist Daniel Boorstin. In his 1961 book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, he cynically describes celebrities as people well known for their “well-knownness” (1961). He asserts that celebrities are neither heroes nor leaders, but instead are characters living scripted and directed lives. He describes celebrities as *products* of Hollywood, deceiving consumers into thinking they are “real” people.

More recently, in *Starstruck: Celebrity Performers and the American Public*, Jib Fowles defines “Star Village” as a virtual community housing the current 100 most popular celebrities in America (1992). He details how each member of this village fulfills a societal need for archetypical characters. New stars emerge by either displacing current stars within a single archetype, or by generating a new archetype that society wants or needs.

Both Boorstin and Fowles present a view of celebrity as people who appear as characters. But can the idea of celebrity encompass more than people? In exploring celebrity products we chose to expand our definition of celebrity to include the following:

1. Celebrity performers (Following the Boorstin and Fowles definition, including: actors, musicians, comedians, athletes, hosts, news anchors, politicians, etc.)
2. Celebrity characters

### 3. Synthetic celebrities

An excellent example of a celebrity performer can be found in the actor Tom Cruise. He continually plays different characters with the same basic set of core values. Much like a design language that unifies products within a brand, Tom Cruise's characters can be classified as projecting a value we call "the best." He plays the best teenager in *Risky Business*; the best fighter pilot in *Top Gun*; the best pool player in *The Color of Money*; the best bartender in *Cocktail*, the best brother in *Rainman*, the best veteran in *Born on the Fourth of July*; the best spy in the *Mission Impossible* movies, and the best Samurai in *The Last Samurai*. All of the characters he embodies resonate a core set of values, including rebelliousness, risk taking, independence, trustworthiness, loyalty, patriotism, attractiveness, passion, aggressiveness, confidence, and anger. It is the consistent projection of these core values that continually attracts a repeat audience.

Examples of celebrity characters include James Bond and Batman. Five actors have portrayed the character James Bond over a forty-year span. In the case of Batman, three different actors have embodied the role in four movies and a fourth has been cast for the fifth movie. The tuxedo wearing, gun toting, martini drinking, womanizing James Bond presents a strong enough character to encompass the many faces and voices that have taken his name. When consumers state their desire to see a James Bond movie, the statement has the same value as if they stated a desire to see a Tom Cruise movie. In considering the selection of content, the celebrity performer and the celebrity character appear equal. Both Bond and Batman fans have an attachment to the character that supercedes their attachment to any one actor who has played the role.

Like celebrity performers and celebrity characters, synthetic celebrities are characters, but in less human form. The animated action hero Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider video games provides a good example. She appeared on magazine covers and fans produced fictional accounts of her activities before Angelina Jolie brought this role to the movie screen. Animated characters evoke almost identical reactions from audiences as actors on the screen, allowing some to ascend to celebrity. The fuzzy, red puppet Elmo, a character on the TV show *Sesame Street*, offers another example. In addition to appearing on a TV show, Elmo has many books and stuffed animals that document his adventures. He has also recently testified before the US congress regarding the importance of music education. In this case the

powerful relationship between Elmo and the children who consume Elmo products has earned this puppet enough credibility to influence government. We cannot imagine any current products such as mobile phones, DVD players, or PDAs having this level of credibility and attachment with their users.

In all three cases, celebrities appear to be quite similar to product brands. They are designed and managed to communicate a core set of values with the goal of creating long-term relationships. In addition, consumers interact with celebrity products derived from all three types of celebrities in identical ways.

### **Celebrity Effect**

Defined in 1956 by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl, parasocial relationships involve emotional attachment with people experienced only through media. Through repeated exposure, people feel they know characters from radio, television, etc. as if they were people they had actually met in the physical world. Horton and Wohl note that mediated personalities offer safe, one-way relationships that require no obligation on the consumers' part while providing a rich framework for fantasy (1956). Consumers get to pick and choose celebrities through their content choices without any fear of rejection, and if they decide they no longer like a celebrity, they can drop him or her and move on without any of the messy consequences of human-to-human relationships.

Consumers benefit from celebrities by attaching their identity to the celebrity's identity with the hope of rising as the celebrity gains recognition (Basil 1996). Examples of this include sports and music fans. Sports fans often share the joys of victory or the pain of loss with their favorite team even though they cannot directly influence the outcome of a match. Music fans project this connection in their declarations of how long they have been fans. By sharing the fact that they have been fans from a time before the band or performer was famous, they communicate that their status has risen in parallel.

Consumers develop and grow parasocial relationships by (i) repeatedly choosing to consume a specific celebrity and (ii) by allowing themselves to be influenced. Anecdotal evidence of this influence includes the increased sales of Ford Broncos after 95 million people witnessed the televised police chase of OJ Simpson (Advertising Age 1995) and the increased sales in nipple jewelry after Janet Jackson's famous "wardrobe malfunction" during the televised

2004 Superbowl halftime show (Associated Press 2004). David Basil offers a more detailed view of celebrity influence in his research on identification. He details how high levels of identification between viewers and the basketball star Magic Johnson more strongly influenced viewers to change their behavior with respect to AIDS prevention than messages from medical experts (1996). When the message about practicing safe sex came from Magic, viewers changed their behavior in order to accept Magic's advice and further their relationship with him.

Fowles details how exposure to a celebrity can diminish a consumer's sorrow, doubt and anxiety (1992: 156). Watching a movie with a favorite star transports people to a better place, making them feel better. He also discusses how audiences, through consumption of movies and television, can vicariously experience less socially accepted behavior such as aggression, infidelity, etc., without the risk of societal backlash that real behavior brings (1992: 162). Consumers use celebrities as emotional conduits for experience. Through fantasy they can either "Be" or "Be With" the celebrity (character) of their choice. In "Being" a celebrity, consumers vicariously experience lives more interesting, romantic, and dangerous than their own. In "Being With" a celebrity, consumers can gain an increase in their own social status and can experience intimacy without the risk of rejection.

### **Celebrity Products**

In order to better understand the role of products in the consumer-celebrity relationship, we collected examples of celebrity products. Products needed to display a clear connection with celebrity to be included. Examples include the tea kettle designed by celebrity architect Michael Graves, a replica sports jersey emblazoned with the name and number of soccer star David Beckham, a Princess Diana commemorative plate, and a Walther P99 pistol that fire blanks and is identical to the one used by actor Pierce Brosnan in the most recent Bond films (see Figure 1).



Figure 1, Example celebrity products: Graves kettle, Beckham jersey, Diana plate, and Bond gun.

After collecting examples we clustered them, forming the following six categories:

1. Celebrity Content Products
2. Celebrity Endorsed/Placed Products
3. Celebrity Product Surrogates
4. Celebrity Collectables
5. Celebrity Brand Products
6. Celebrity Designer Products

**Celebrity Content Products** cover content selections made specifically to consume a celebrity. Examples include DVDs of movies starring Tom Cruise movies; David Bowie albums on tape, vinyl and Compact Disk; the Pro Skater video game where players control a virtual, skateboarding legend Tony Hawk; and TV shows, books, and video games designed around Nickelodeon's animated character Dora the Explorer.

**Celebrity Endorsed/Placed Products** cover items that celebrities both explicitly and implicitly promote. Examples include the Ford Bronco implicitly promoted by OJ Simpson; Hanes underwear pitched in TV advertisements by basketball star Michael Jordan; and Levi clothing worn by the teenage cast on the TV show Roswell.

**Celebrity Product Surrogates** cover products that transfer the essence of the celebrity to the consumer and provide an easy method for consumers to construct personal narratives of being or being with the celebrity. Examples include replica's of David Beckham's jersey, which transfers some of his soccer skill to the wearer; the Ray Ban sunglasses worn by Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith in the movie *Men In Black*, which allows any wearer to relive the characters lives in their own world; and Star Wars action figures that allow children and even some adults to construct new adventures for the characters.

**Celebrity Collectables** cover celebrity items either designed for collecting or than have overtime become collectable. These include the Princess Diana commemorative plates, Baseball trading cards, and the Seven of Nine doll, made in the image of the character from the TV show *Star Trek: Voyager*. This TV show was targeted to an adult audience, so it is unlikely that the product designers who created this doll ever considered it as a toy for children.

**Celebrity Brand Products** cover products sold under a celebrity's name that gain credibility not from the celebrity's refined taste, but from consumers' identification with the celebrity's values and lifestyle. These include Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen branded clothing, accessories and cosmetics; the Sean John clothing line from the rap musician and record producer P-Diddy (formerly Puff Daddy); and the clothing line of former TV host Kathy Lee Gifford.

**Celebrity Designer Products** cover products sold under the name of celebrities famous for their design expertise. Examples include consumer electronics, computer accessories, and house wares designed by the architect Michael Graves; sheets, towels and curtains sold through the retailer Kmart under Martha Stewart's name; and retailer Target's "Starck Reality" line of everyday products designed by Philippe Starck.

### **Activities Supported by Celebrity Products**

In order to better understand the role of celebrity products in the consumer-celebrity relationship, we examined activities supported by these products. After generating a list of activities we again clustered them, producing the following categories: Consumption,

Projection, Collection, Reflection, and Construction (see Figure 2). We divided the activities into external and internal, noting that all sustain and grow parasocial relationships.

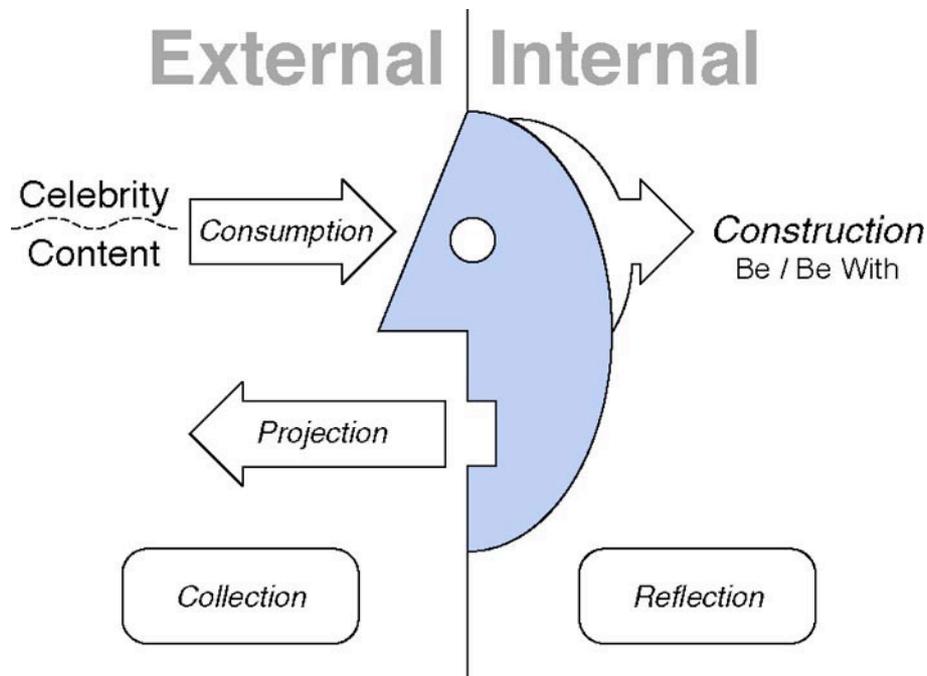


Figure 2, Model of activities surrounding celebrity products that support the consumer-celebrity relationship.

**Consumption** of celebrity content offers consumers both the initial, and then repeated, exposure to a celebrity. Watching movies and TV shows, reading stories, listening to the radio, and surfing the web all count as consumption. Consumers create intimacy between themselves and celebrities by sharing the same emotional experiences. Both feel fear when the character crashes her car, both feel victory when she captures the criminal, and both feel sorrow when the sidekick dies. Consumption produces a reservoir of shared emotional connections that deepens the attachment. Consumption also provides consumers with a connection to other consumers who have had the same shared experiences. When gathered together, fans can share their reservoirs, reliving shared experiences, learning about shared experiences they may want to try, and communicating their status as a fan through the volume and selection of the content they have consumed. As consumers take in more celebrity content, they both deepen their relationship and raise their status as a fan.

**Projection** involves communicating to others an affiliation with a celebrity. Specific examples include displaying Princess Diana commemorative plates in a public room of a

home, wearing a tee shirt with a celebrity image or name, and purchasing and publicly using products that celebrities specifically endorse or prominently use in content. Consumers project their identification with celebrities in the same way they project brand affiliations. Projection allows consumers to demonstrate their loyalty, to quickly communicate a core set of values they share with the projected celebrity, and to meet other consumers who share the same affiliations.

**Collection** involves the act of seeking and purchasing artifacts. Many venues support this activity including auction websites such as ebay that allow users to search for items categorized by celebrity; memorabilia shops that sell items associated with individuals such as sports stars; and even content venues such as concert halls that sell collectible programs, tee shirts, coffee mugs, etc. In general, the celebrity products that support collection fall into two categories: those specifically designed for collection such as bobblehead dolls in the image of celebrities, and items celebrities have personally touched such as the Rap star Eminem's childhood home which was recently offered for sale on ebay (Fraschetti 2002). Collection reveals a consumer's loyalty for a celebrity, but unlike projection activities, collection can be a completely private and personal activity. Collection also allows for construction of intimacy. As consumers collect more and more artifacts, they fill their non-content consumption time with constant reminders of the celebrity and their relationship.

**Reflection**, unlike the previous activities, is internal. Consumers use a variety of products to reflect and revisit moments in their relationship with a celebrity. Donald Norman discusses a similar act of reflection that creates an emotional connection between people and products in his new book *Emotional Design: Why We Love (Or Hate) Everyday Things* (Norman 2003). In his model, the product works as a trigger to reflection on a previous experience that may or may not involve the product itself. However, celebrity products trigger reflection on the relationship between the consumer and the celebrity. Examples include concert tickets that reminds consumers of a time they experienced their favorite band; a movie poster that remind consumers of a shared experience; and CD cases that bring snippets of songs into acoustic memory. Reflection reminds consumers of what they have gained through their relationship with a celebrity.

**Construction** involves the *Be* and *Be With* fantasy consumers construct around celebrities. Many products support active construction of personal narratives, where the consumer

designs a personal story and unique experience either *as* or *with* a celebrity. Nike's Air Jordan basketball shoes offer a good example. When wearing these shoes, consumers can become Michael Jordan. They can be the star who brings victory to their team. Another example can be found in stuffed lions made to resemble the Disney character Simba from the *Lion King*. Children playing with this toy can construct new adventures for their favorite character. They can generate their own personal content for consumption. Construction and celebrity products that support construction help to blur the line between fiction and reality. This activity allows consumers to internalize celebrities and make the one-way relationship a richer experience than consumption alone.

Celebrity products are identical to other products except in the activities they support. At the same time, celebrities themselves appear to be products and/or brands. They are scripted, directed, and constructed for consumer purchase. The critical difference lies in the role of narrative and in the activities of consumption and construction. Celebrities both inhabit content and are content, while products can only inhabit content. As characters in a story, celebrities allow consumers to *Be* and *Be With*. Through consumption, consumers can *Be* and *Be With* the celebrity, having the same shared experiences as the character and as millions of other consumers. Through construction, consumers can make their relationship more personal by creating their own stories where they are or are with the celebrity.

Consumers *consume* Donna Karen clothes by shopping; they *project* their values by driving BMWs; they *collect* art deco furniture; and they *reflect* on their life experiences through the products they interact with. However, consumers cannot *Be* their mobile phone, and they cannot *Be With* a can of Coca Cola. Without the ability to be narrative, consumers can never *Be* or *Be With* products. If, however, products are to gain a similar level of attachment as found in the consumer-celebrity relationship, they will need some method to support activities similar to narrative consumption and construction.

### **Product Design Opportunities**

Examining the role of products in the consumer-celebrity relationship provides two benefits for product designers. First, understanding the product types and activities can aid in design of successful celebrity products. Second, understanding the activities and values surrounding celebrity products can aid designers in shaping emerging intelligent products that have potential to achieve similar levels of attachment.

In designing new celebrity products, we recommend that designers focus on matching their products to specific activities. We also recommend a focus on consumption, projection, and construction, as these appear to form the strongest emotional links. As an aid we have generated a chart that maps the different product types to activities, where the darker cells indicate a stronger correlation and the lighter cells indicate a weaker correlation. Examples of celebrity products that did not consider activity include the discontinued Michael Jordan Palm Pilot (Ankeny 2002). This product does not support any activity that clearly builds the relationship. The PDA is not content containing Michael Jordan, so there is no celebrity consumption. Public use of the product does not project the same values consumers identify with the basketball star. Finally, use of the product does not support construction as it is difficult to imagine Michael using this product while playing basketball, the activity that he is famous for.

	Consumption	Projection	Collection	Reflection	Construction
Content	Dark	Light	Medium	Light	Medium
Endorsed/Placed	Light	Medium	Light	Light	Light
Surrogate	Light	Dark	Medium	Medium	Dark
Collectable	Light	Medium	Dark	Medium	Light
Brand	Dark	Dark	Light	Light	Light
Designer	Dark	Dark	Medium	Light	Light

Table 1, Activities broken down by celebrity product type. Darker colors indicate a stronger correlation.

In attempting to design products that exhibit similar levels of attachment as found in consumer-celebrity relationships, designers should consider recent advances in intelligent products that allow for both monitoring of user behavior and more human-like interaction. These products have the potential to generate a “one-way plus” relationship by learning about the consumer and reflecting this intimacy back through product interaction. These mass produced products, experienced by millions, have the ability to get to know individual consumers in a way celebrities currently cannot. One example of an early monitoring product

can be found in TiVo's video recorder. This device observes what users watch and then reflects back this personal knowledge by recording TV shows it thinks users will like. TiVo users have the shared experience of using the device that bonds them to the community of TiVo users, but they also have a personal experience through the intimate and detailed behavior their TiVo observes and reflects. TiVo can achieve a slimmed down version of construction. Users have personal experiences between themselves and the device instead of the completely internal construction they have with celebrities. And while TiVo and other recommender devices are a long way from making deep and long-lasting attachments with a mass audience, they allow a glimpse of a future where people may indeed have long-lasting and personal relationships with devices like mobile phones, that have shared experiences with consumers and hold and share intimate knowledge.

Additionally, advances in voice recognition, text understanding, gesture as a method of interaction, and computer graphics are offering a future promise of more natural and human interaction. Products will soon communicate personality through not only their form, but also their tone of voice, posture, behavior, and/or facial expression. Taking a more conversational approach, these smart devices may allow for the willing suspension of disbelief, allowing consumers to think of them as people in a similar way consumers currently imagine that they "know" celebrities they have never met. Understanding how and why consumers develop relationships with celebrities may aid designers of these new, intelligent products.

## **Conclusions**

The emergence of mass communication has created an opportunity for consumers to create celebrities. And celebrities continue to exist and flourish because they form valuable long-term relationships with consumers. Celebrity products support the creation and maintenance of these relationships through activities that allow consumers to vicariously experience life *as* or *with* the celebrity of their choice. By examining how consumers use and benefit from celebrity products, designers can better support the emotional connection that celebrity products provide and even begin to design new products that support a similar level of attachment as found in the consumer-celebrity relationship. In the future, we plan to continue this work by more closely examining the values derived from each of the activities. We also plan to compare the subtle differences in the long-term relationships consumers have with celebrities and with brands.

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