

# **Becoming Brands: Celebrity, Activism and Politics**

**Edited by**

Jackie Raphael and Celia Lam

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**Dr. Jacek Wasilewski** was awarded a PhD with a dissertation on Polish identity narratives. He is the founder of the Document Studies at the University of Warsaw. He is a semiotician, expert in communication and avid follower of popular culture. He is interested in the intricacies of meaning. He is a storytelling expert in advertising.





## **Foreword:** **The Bridge of the Human Brand**

P. David Marshall

It seems brands and branding in contemporary culture has become both ubiquitous and accepted. The pervasiveness of brands identifies their relation to the way that corporations identify their value. One of the most interesting phenomenon of the twentieth century is how corporate accounting practices changed in the 1980s to calibrate brand value as an asset – and clearly, in many corporations, the brand is its most valuable asset (Moor, 2007).

Understanding branding just from this economic dimension does not capture the full impact of brands however. It is easy to forget how at least historically branding was a quite physical transformation of animals and humans to proclaim ownership: the branding of cattle to claim the livestock as property continues as a phenomenon, while the branding of humans as property and slaves is generally seen as something that is well beyond the acceptable.

So, it comes as an interesting development in the history of branding that it now is often very much a valued and permissible status to transform an individual into a brand. Our most visible human brands are of course celebrities and they collectively identify, when they are branded, a way in which a human is converted into an economic value; a commodity that may have transformative value for other products and services. As Jackie Raphael's chapter in this book identifies through Grant McCracken's foundational work, the celebrity's brand is a form of transference. Celebrities possess emotional connections to their audiences, which is convertible into an affective connection to the associated product that they endorse or embrace in some way. Celebrities as brands can be used to sell forms of entertainment – that is, the star of a film is designed to draw a new audience often based on their past acting work to the new cultural product. But celebrities are also used with regularity in other domains as 'brand' ambassadors or endorsers. Sports stars are 'sponsored' by the companies who produce the products they wear. Online micro-celebrities for instance in fashion or cosmetics similarly establish an affirming relationship with products that aligns these products with what these individuals see as valuable for their audiences.

In a more complex way, the branded celebrity is also used in philanthropic and political causes. As several chapters explore in this book, the celebrity is a key figure in the contemporary attention economy in their capacity to bring the world's attention to particular causes, struggles and issues. But human brands such as celebrities are never just branded products. They contain within them

some competing forms of value, compromising ethics, and perhaps elaborate back and future-stories that make their attachment to issues variegated to say the least.

It is easy to dismiss this pervasive human branding as a negative phenomenon. After all, it appears to be a reduction/conversion of the human spirit and ethos into a commodity for transfer and exchange with other commodities and products. However, as this book explores, the development of the human brand and its pervasiveness as an accepted way of presenting an individual in the contemporary moment contains within it a certain pragmatism and strategizing by both the individuals involved, and the institutions that link themselves to these constructed attention-grabbing identities.

Two further elements complicate the now standard neo-liberal critique of this form of public individuality. The first is that the 'human brand' is not a new phenomenon. It has circulated around and through what could be described as democratic capitalism for the last two centuries. Tom Mole, for instance, described the way in which Lord Byron negotiated his public presence in the world like a brand in the early nineteenth century, although the terminology was certainly not standard at the time (2007). In a recent update of his work, Loren Glass similarly links Mark Twain's late 19th and twentieth century work with branding his identity for greater reach and impact (2016).

Brand culture has similarly invaded our political discourse as we rethink politicians and parties as 'political' brands which have worked to navigate through the attention economy in a manner similar to commercial products, and different patterns of entertainment culture, for as much as 100 years (see Speed, Butler & Collins, 2015; and Marshall & Henderson, 2016). The pop star, the movie star and the current YouTube star are all branded entities used to promote cultural commodities through the now complex attention economy.

From this apparent expansion and standardization of branding into a modern public identity designed for specific – and usually economic – purposes, the second element that complicates the neo-liberal critique of branding emerges. My own recent work has identified that twinned with the expansion of online culture and its generation of social media, as platforms of activity, is the pervasive proliferation of billions of individuals constructing public identities or 'personas' (see for instance Marshall, 2016a). Personas are strategic identities that are used to navigate a public world. Although personas are not identical to a branded identity, they are nonetheless the pathway for individuals to move with relative ease into imagining their public profiles as feeding into a commodified self.

The human brand has become a bridge for the movement of ideas, the realignment and refocus on issues in cultures, the expression of goodwill and

assistance, and, of course - its bedrock - the movement of commodities. The human brand, along with branding more generally, identifies a formation of agency that I have called “industrialized agency” because of its link to this commodity structure and its further alignment with the reconfiguration of the individual into a strategic public entity and identity that can be used – and deployed by others – for particular goals and outcomes (Marshall, 2016b).

This book provides an elaborate and valued study of how the human brand operates as a bridge in contemporary culture. The complexity of meanings that are part of the human brand ensure that one of its primary purposes is to express emotion and congeal that emotion into a human face and identity. In this book, there is a close study of activism and the way in which celebrities provide the bridge to identify the significance of given issues. Human brands sometimes make complex issues personalized and perhaps through that channel, understandable.

In the four sections of this book, there is an exploration of the different kinds of bridges that the famed have made in our culture. From an investigation of the contradictions and successes of activism and direct implications into political culture, to working out the place and agency of feminism and philanthropic value, the contributors weave a tapestry of sometimes conflicted engagement. The very successful people discussed in this book have used their ‘brands’ and translated them into different settings with quite different objectives. All of the analyses give us an entrée into the current mechanisms of this human brand bridge and provide insights into this now normalized dimension of our pandemic persona culture: industrialized agency.

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# **Introduction: Becoming Brands**

Jackie Raphael and Celia Lam

## **Bridging Brands**

Popular culture plays a pivotal role in the world, creating political, social and economic influences. The advertising industry relies heavily on celebrities for endorsements, while more and more celebrities are becoming involved with charities to benefit both their own celebrity persona and for altruistic purposes. This means that celebrity and charity brands are often reliant on each other, and the two must be bridged to successfully communicate to audiences. A celebrity's persona becomes their brand and this is sold to fans globally. They then gain the power to inspire change yet, not all use this influence in the same way.

This book discusses the varying levels of success of celebrities who are activists or philanthropists, as well as those who have gained fame for their activism. Part one explores celebrities' various approaches to activism and levels of commitment; part two examines the importance of presentation and fame in politics; part three investigates the way female celebrities enact issues relating to feminism both on- and off-screen; and part four celebrates the impact that iconic dead celebrities have left on the world from philanthropic organizations to awareness of HIV/AIDS. Overall, this book creates a broad discussion on the power of celebrities and how their individual brands can create global change.

## **Bridging Ideas**

### ***Approaches to Activism***

The association between activism and celebrity often occurs in public view through the scrutiny of the media. Indeed, celebrities encourage media interest if it draws attention to their causes and publicizes issues. However, the publicity associated with celebrity involvement in activism can also function as a double-edged sword, working to subsume the cause into the celebrity's broader public persona rather than focusing attention on the issue. The four chapters in this section offer an exploration of the phenomenon of celebrity activism from a variety of perspectives. Firstly, Carla Rocavert interrogates the level of celebrity commitment to activism through the lens of their on-and-off stage activity. Arguing that some celebrity activism is an extension of the performance of their on-stage public persona, Rocavert examines several

celebrity case studies, and questions the ability for activism to enter the offstage space. This discussion is continued in Sally Totman's chapter, in which she explores Angelina Jolie and George Clooney's 'Super Celebrity Activist' status. In this instance their offstage activity cements their commitment as activists. Next, Ellen Finlay and Louise St Guillaume offer a critical perspective on celebrity and activism. They explore Taylor Swift's meet-and-greet sessions with fans with disability. While these sessions generate publicity for Swift and enable the creation of a positive celebrity image, Finlay and St Guillaume argue they serve to reinforce hegemonic attitudes towards disability. They thus challenge the ability of such celebrity interaction to affect change. Finally, Evan Beaumont Center explores how environmental activist, Paul Watson, has commercialised his activism in order to gain celebrity status.

### ***Politics and Presentation***

From celebrity endorsement to celebrity-turned-politicians, the contemporary political sphere seems to be inextricably linked to the sphere of celebrity. Particularly, in a media environment when celebrity is often attributed as much as they are ascribed or achieved (Rojek, 2001), public visibility can be a path to (both desired and undesired) celebrity. For some activists, celebrity can be a hindrance, as is the case of the *pixadores* examined by Alexander Araya López. Contrary to Brazilian graffiti artists, this group has become famous due to their 'subversive' graffiti activity, and are reluctant to adopt the celebrity that accompanies such fame, as it compromises their political integrity. Ronald Strickland's chapter bridges the world of celebrities and politicians through his exploration of the contextual meanings influencing Clint Eastwood's 'failed' speech at the 2012 Republican campaign. He connects Eastwood's identity politics to the broader historical-political context behind his films, and draws a comparison to Donald Trump's campaign four years later. Finally, Tomasz Olczyk and Jacek Wasilewski explore the persona of rock star-turned-politician Paweł Kukiz, for whom political success hinges on his celebrity persona. As a celebrity, he is a political outsider and a rebel. In order to gain political success, he has to regain this 'rebel' identity through a reconnection with his celebrity.

### ***Facing Feminism***

The two chapters in this section offer a dialogue on the role of individual celebrities in political movements, in this instance Feminist movements. Nilay Ulusoy's chapter focuses attention on explorations of gender roles and feminism. Her discussion of two Turkish *Driver Nebahat* films (1960 original and a 1970 remake) explores how the character's masculine cross-dressing is social-politically constructed, and reflects the shifting and complex nature of female roles in the 1950s and 1960s. In contrast to the fictional character

explored by Ulusoy, Kelly M. O'Donnell examines two young female celebrities, Emma Watson and Miley Cyrus, and their 'practice' of feminism, discussing how their different embodiment of feminism engages with contemporary debates about feminism.

### ***Leaving a Legacy***

Concluding the discussion on celebrity and activism are two chapters that focus on celebrities' posthumous images. These celebrities possessed a high celebrity status during their lifetimes. However, since their deaths they have become symbols of activism and philanthropy. Marie Josephine Bennett's chapter discusses how Freddie Mercury, who was reluctant to openly acknowledge his HIV/AIDS status in life, has since become a symbol for HIV/AIDS awareness. Jackie Raphael's chapter explores how Paul Newman's philanthropic activity has created a means for his posthumous image to live on. Both chapters portray the power of a celebrity's brand.

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