

'Warhol':

'Celebritisation' as Human Branding

By

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Abstract

During his life and after his death, Andy Warhol was synonymous in arts circles with controversy and celebrity. In 1971 David Bowie sang "Andy Warhol, silver screen!" Warhol was the 'pope of pop' and his iconic status continues to this day, long after his untimely death in 1987. The 1960s, that incipient era of McLuhan and the febrile mass-media eco-system, saw his visionary work transform our understanding of aesthetics, authenticity and art situated in the material culture of the everyday. Like others before him, he reminds us that the institutionalized gaze is dangerously myopic and disenfranchising. In this paper we draw on published accounts of Warhol's career and his rise to fame as the basis of developing an account of human branding as 'celebritisation'. In doing so, we draw on consumer research, studies of celebrity and fame and published texts on Warhol's work and life.

Introduction

52 years ago Motown was born and a young commercial illustrator, Andrew Warhol, left his home town of Pittsburgh to find fame and fortune among the ‘Mad Men’ on Madison Avenue. Within a few short years his name was synonymous in arts circles with controversy and celebrity. In 1971 David Bowie sang “Andy Warhol, silver screen!” Warhol was the ‘pope of pop’ and his iconic status continues to this day, long after his untimely death in 1987. The 1960s, that incipient era of McLuhan and the febrile mass-media eco-system, saw his visionary work transform our understanding of aesthetics, authenticity and art situated in the material culture of the everyday. Like others before him, he reminds us that the institutionalized gaze is dangerously myopic and disenfranchising. In this paper we draw on published accounts of Warhol’s career and his rise to fame as the basis of developing an account of human branding as ‘celebritisation’.

Celebrity the brand

“Some company recently was interested in buying my ‘aura’. They didn’t want my product. They kept saying, “We want your aura.” I never figured out what they wanted. But they were willing to pay a lot for it. So then I thought that if somebody was willing to pay that much for it, I should try to figure out what it is.” (Warhol, 1975:77)

As the audience for all media invention, consumer society is in constant search for spectacle and entertainment. Since the media explosion of the 1990s, it has become ever more image-driven, obsessed with fame and celebrity of all hues (McCracken, 2005; Brownlie and Hewer, 2009b). As Milligan (2004) and Shepperd (2005) argue, to understand the mediatisation of personality, we must consider celebrities and public figures as human brands. Towle (2003) reinforces this concept in “Celebrity Branding” when she emphasized that an actor/actress or athlete or politician has a name, a reputation, an image, and credibility, which are intangible assets. These intangible characteristics are necessary but not sufficient to the manufacture of celebrity which is based upon commodity images and identities which are appropriate celebritised inventions capable of being monetized, in a logic which mirrors that which frames branding.

We use the terms *celebrited* and *celebritisation* in this sense: that if we understand the brand as ‘media object’ - the object or thing that is itself the product of media attention paid to it - an example of what Lury refers to as “*the broadcast distribution of commodities*” (2004:6); and the media object feeds off and into circulating cultural codes, unstable subject positions circulating around, e.g., issues, gender roles and identity themes such as body image; and those subject positions are temporarily stabilized through the deliberate media manipulations of branding and personification; and where, as a media brand a subject position itself is framed and narrativised through the lens of celebrity iconography; THEN, the cultural logic of celebrity (including the celebrity of celebrity), organized recursively as a mode of production, works through discursive practices of *celebritisation*. So, *celebritisation* describes what happens when the logic of celebrity is exploited as a mode of production in the service of economic calculation and marketing ends. In this sense the cultural logic of celebrity (and of the celebrity of celebrity) is at the core of the spectacular (Debord, 1992) consumer society: for, as Warhol famously remarked in 1968, ‘in the future everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes’.

Research in marketing has mainly focused on two dimensions of celebrity: a person as an object of desire (Rojek, C, 2001; Milligan, 2004); and a person as an object, an image of mass-consumption (Pringle, 2004, Schroeder, 2002). Celebrity has been defined as a “*genre of representation and discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industry that produce these representations and their effects*” (Turner, 2004:9). However, to understand the construction of the celebrity, we must analyse its social and symbolic function (Levy, 1959), as well as the development of its cultural and economic production power (Nayar, 2009; Brownlie and Hewer, 2009b; Pringle, 2004). Benjamin (1936/2008) proposed that the move from life theatre to photography and film altered the ‘aura’ between the performer and the audience, by both bringing them closer (via close up shots etc) and more distant (as the audience was no longer in their presence). This seemed to

create a greater desire among people to find out more about these performers. Gabler (1998), applies an economic perspective to the practice of constructing celebrities noting that “demand for celebrities [keeps] growing beyond the capacity of the finite number of movie stars, singers, athletes and conventional entertainments to create new celebrity categories” (*ibid*, 156). The supply of new categories of celebrities is created by the media, as people are eager to forgo their privacy to live part of their lives in the public domain (Braudy, 1986; Nayar, 2009). Pringle (2004) consolidates this concept when he argued that “Celebrity sells”. Building celebrities’ visibility satisfies the demand of the media and the public; generates growth; and increases their brand awareness and consumer attention (*ibid*, 2004). It also, extends the conditions of the celebrity to a medium of communication of their own brand (Brownlie and Hewer, 2009a). The celebrity becomes a media object or celebritized brand (Nayar, 2009; Brownlie and Hewer, 2009a), a social actor of this contemporary materialistic culture (Richins, 1994; Bryman, 2004).

Baudrillard (1988:56) emphasized that celebrities “*are not something to dream about; they are the dream*”. The continuous search, obsession and desire (Belk et al., 2003) to reach those dreams have created a “celebrity culture” (Harmon, 2005:9). It engages new cultural meanings (McCraken, 2005) presented in an everyday life spectrum of values, where the celebrity is used – exploited - as a commodity. Cashmere and Parker (2003) advise that the commodification of human brands is the process by which people become things. These “*things*” are idolized, dreamed, adored and followed, but mainly “produced and consumed” (*ibid*: 215) by the celebrity culture (Cashmore, 2006). This culture survives on the effect of mass media, crosses linguistic and national borders placing the celebrities in an extended range of audiences with a global reach (Levitt, 1983; Pringle, 2004).

Warhol: medium and message

If the celebrity is the medium that represents its own brand, he or she needs to maintain the social attention from its followers in order to develop a sustained visibility (Rojek, 2001). This paper addresses the case of Andy Warhol, a pioneering ‘pop’ artist who built his art and celebrity persona as a brand with a clear commercial mission of commodification and distribution (Lury, 2004). Elements of his branding such as brand image, brand personality, brand associations and cross-cultural legacy will be also analysed under the case of this significant American artist.

Pop art closed the gap between an artistic elite and the common person for whom art was seen as distant and mysterious (Danto, 2002). This movement presented as high art what was commonly known for everybody as part of their ordinary life: soup cans, comics, soap boxes, ketchup bottles and even hamburgers (Stich, 1987). Warhol as its representative liberalized the view of art-making; opening a space where regular living things and art were synonymous (Stokstad, 1995; Swenson, 1963). In this way Warhol aimed to represent American society (*ibid*, 1987).

Warhol made a brand out of himself and is one of the strongest in the world (Schroeder 2005), even today, 25 years after his death. The modern concept of fine art, art marketing and artist branding are concepts linked to his work and his name as a brand (Schroeder, 1992). Throughout his career, in his art and writings, Warhol attempted to blur the limits between fine art and commercial mass production, diminishing the power of the *original* piece of art (Stokstad, 1995). Before that, fine art was perceived just for the elite, the art market was a market of monopolies, a market for precious objects (De Duve and Krauss, 1989). The artist had a different approach to the exclusivity of the prevailing art point of view (Schroeder, 2010), focused on changing the vision of the art world and the way art was marketed and commercialized; commodifying his work.

Any brand, and indeed the Warhol brand, grows as a result of social interaction (Fournier, 1998). It can not be achieved as an isolated, individual process (Mead, 1934; Taylor and Spencer, 2004). In this interaction, the identity of the artist was socially constructed and negotiated (Solomon, 1993). Without the benefit of branding theories, Warhol engaged and applied marketing concepts which allowed him to reach new heights of lucrative branding (Aaker, 1997). The symbolic value (Holt, 2003; Levy, 1959) and consumption of his name, image and art (Schroeder, 2002; Holt, 2003), his diverse, vanguard style and eccentric personality became his brand identity (Aaker, 1997; Belk 1988) and framed the

reasons why Warhol followers were and (still are today) attached to the symbolic meaning constructed around this human brand. He distinguished and positioned his products in a privileged place and in the top-of-mind of the art market since the 1960s and even after his death.

The artist acknowledged the power and equity of his celebritised brand image and became the brand manager (Schroeder, 2005) of his own brand as a pop art pioneer. Warhol never made any secret of his ambition and absolute narcissism; he was pleased to place his art as a commodity, under the law of exchange, by creating himself as a desirable object in a market economy. He understood that financial success was a result of the commoditization of his brand attributes in a consumer society (De Duve and Krauss, 1989).

Warhol: form and function

To understand Warhol's brand personality, it is relevant to comprehend the effect of the continuous interactions of his multiple roles (Roberts and Donahue, 1994), which were the engine that consolidated his "self" and his identity as human brand (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). The role of the each of his celebritised selves –painter, film producer, photographer, writer, TV presenter- (Belk, 1988) determined his human-brand behaviour (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967) and its representation in the different contexts of his everyday performance (Goffman, 1959). In fact, these multiple performances extended his brand awareness where Warhol's and his art were desired and consumed (Whiting, 1987). Warhol's brand identity allowed him to be the centre of attention. Strategically, he also created around him an aura of mystery - "*If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it*" (Warhol cited in Michelson, 2001:1)- driving continued assorted discussions and increasing his brand awareness.

Warhol produced many different objects of art, but two of the most famous Warhol portraits are of Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy. These portraits formed part of his strategy of personal branding. In 1968, after he was attacked and almost fatally injured by Valerie Solanas, Warhol made a crucial change to his production of art; focusing on portraits of prominent and rich celebrities (Bater, 1974). The artist created a genuine gallery of the most famous and influential personalities of his time. Movie stars, politicians (and their wives) and art dealers were among the many named in this extended list, which included Jacqueline Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley and Elizabeth Taylor. His fascination with the life of the celebrities in the "Hollywood Planet" (Pringle, 2004, Olson, 1999) was unmistakably expressed when he said: "*I love Los Angeles, I love Hollywood. They are so beautiful. Everything is plastic, but I love plastic. I want to be plastic*" (Warhol cited in Moffat, 2007:7).

Warhol's iconic pieces of art of famed people including himself (Holt, 2004) established a relationship between pop art, media, commodified human brands (Pringle, 2004) and celebrialisation (Lury, 2004; Nayar, 2009). All these elements were linked under the umbrella of the American culture of materialism (Schroeder, 1992; Richins, 1994) and consumption. Pringle (2004) argues that the environment created by the media can not be separated from the expansion of the celebrity culture where the meaning of the celebrities is created and consumed. With the exploitation of the power of celebrities (Cooper, 2008; Marshall, 1997) and the use of the celebritised brands of other celebrities - celebrity of celebrity - (Brownlie and Hewer, 2009a), Warhol promoted a circular association of meanings (Holt, 2003) and consumption between the work of a celebrity about other celebrities. This mutual endorsement of human brands and co-branding of icons (Sternberg, 1999; Brownlie and Hewer, 2009b) allowed the followers of each of the separated brands to consume a product that contained a shared meaning of both celebrities (i.e. Marilyn and Warhol). McCracken (1989:314) refers to it as a method of "meaning movement" where the meaning of one celebrity turns into the meaning of the created product in the marketing system.

Warhol's tribute to Hollywood's celebrialisation began with "Miss Beauty and Glamour" –Marilyn Monroe, the famous promotional image for the 1953 film "Niagara" was used by Warhol to produce the Marilyn series, which included a reproduction of her image, multiple times on the same canvas. In the case of Jackie Kennedy, Warhol painted the First Lady as a symbol of honour, pride, elegance,

courage and determination. He greatly admired her (Whiting, 1987). Warhol based his paintings of Marilyn and Jacqueline's not on their private lives but upon their public images as a movie star or a mass media icon. Warhol imitated the way the newspapers presented celebrities in photography (*ibid*, 1987). However, he exaggerated the appearance, colours and style of both the subjects provoking a deeper visual consumption of his paintings (Schroeder, 2002; Fillis, 2000a).

Warhol framed Marilyn and Jacquelyn Kennedy's images in the same way he did it with the Campbell soup can or Mickey Mouse, as products that could be mass-produced, sold and consumed (Mamiya, 1992). It was their fame, power, eroticism, public life and tragedy that especially attracted Warhol to Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy. These elements of their brand personalities (Aaker, 1997) inspired him to create a "painted print" series honoring them. Doing so, Warhol applied the concept of endorsement celebritisation (McCraken, 1989) where his name co-branded the fame and power of other celebrities merged to create a piece of art of an icon into an icon (Brownlie and Hewer, 2009b). While each portrait converted a piece of their private life into a public commodity, it also increased the desire for this aesthetic phenomenon (Schroeder, 2002). By linking images of the celebrities, which he portrayed to the cultural context of his brand consumption, Warhol also looked to create and extend the circular meaning of his brand culture (Schroeder, 2005). According to Holt (2003), brand culture summarizes four main "authors": Companies, popular culture, customers and influencers. In the case of Warhol's brand, "The Factory" represents the *company*. The atelier of Warhol had himself as a manager who controlled and supervised the mass production of extended varieties of art under his brand. The "Factory" and Warhol's branded products followed his crystal clear vision and mission of profitability in his business strategy. His brand personality, top-of-mind and fame along with his art creativity became his competitive advantage (Fillis, 2000b; Kotler, 2000). *Popular culture* in the case of Warhol was initially American society and, in fact, after the success of his brand and the effect of the media, he reached foreign and global audiences (Mamiya, 1992). He covered an assorted coverage of customers, his diverse and creative art in films, book, designs and paints enhanced and expanded his reputation and target audiences. *Customers and influencers* were, on several occasions, the same people with whom he shared the status of celebrity (Kurzman et al., 2007).

One of the memorable 1969 quotes from Warhol was "*in the future everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes*" (Warhol cited in Moffat, 2007:7). Personally, he wanted to extend his moment of fame to an endless "*fifteen minutes of fame*". Before his death, in 1987, Andy Warhol was clear about creating extensions and a product brand architecture (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2005) of his personal and celebritised brand. At the moment of his death, he was under a licensing agreement negotiation with Schlaifer Nance & Co, a marketing corporation recognized for selling \$4 billion worth of Cabbage Patch Kids dolls (The New York Times, 1987).

"The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts" was established in 1987 in accordance with the artist's will. The Foundation took ownership and management of his copyrights and trademarks, being responsible for finalizing this negotiation. The foundation was created to foster freedom of creative artistic process and innovative expression, granting cultural organizations (Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 2010). Fulfilling Warhol's wish to continue the commodification of his brand, in 1993, the Foundation signed an agreement with "The Beanstalk Group", a world's leading brand licensing agency, which became responsible for the Andy Warhol's global licensing program. This program has licensed and extended Andy Warhol's wish to be commoditized: "*I'll endorse with my name any of the following: clothing, AC-DC, cigarettes, small tapes, sound equipment, ROCK 'N ROLL RECORDS, anything, film, and film equipment, Food, Helium, Whips, MONEY!!* (Andy Warhol Foundation Report, 2007:58). The licensing agreements managed by the program have reached audiences in more than 60 countries and have helped the foundation to achieve revenues in excess of \$240 million (Beanstalk, 2010). Even after his death, Warhol's desire to be linked with other iconic brands has been perpetuated. Contemporary consumer brands such as Levi's, Pepe Jeans, Diane von Furstenberg, Rosenthal and multinational retailers such as Harrods, Selfridges, , Urban Outfitters, and Virgin Megastore, had received the benefits of the Warhol's brand endorsement (Beanstalk, 2010; Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 2010).

Conclusion

To achieve a momentum of fame, people embed themselves into a media-led promotional culture with a view of becoming a commoditized celebrity product; nourished by fame and public awareness. Andy Warhol's advantageous use of the power of celebrity, engaged the concept of co-branding with celebritisation and used the media for the benefit of his own personal branding. His brand name gave him fame and celebrity status, which he used to consolidate his economic strategy of commoditization of his products and himself. He focused on achieving the American dream by hard work and projecting his brand personality into a new way of marketing and accessibility of art. He acknowledged the power and equity of his art and celebritised brand image; and managed, with profitable results, his own brand as a pop art pioneer. Warhol turned his persona and mystique into his brand, his chameleonic personality made him the ideal candidate to be branded. As a celebrity product he was the medium that transmitted and extended the awareness of his brand form and function, not only to the American public but also to global and cross-cultural audiences, in life and after his death.

Warhol's legacy is that the worlds he envisioned and manufactured are places we would recognise, for their cultural logics and sensibilities bring analytical form to warholised consumption contexts. In narratives upholding the so-called 'end of history', the Warholised world is typically rhetorically situated as being at the forefront of cultural shifts defining 'postmodernity' through kick-starting the dismantling of master narratives of art and the erasures they empower. By putting in play divisions between high and low art, the artist and the audience, and through his gift for drama and celebrity iconolatry, Warhol's life has become his defining work of art. It offers a model of personal identity as a work in progress, neither pre-given by social position nor fixed by aesthetic boundaries defining culture. Warhol's was a post-figurative hyperreal world in which the work of art and lazy mysticism surrounding creativity were abolished.

And in throwing into clear relief the view that history never did end and that it is very much back on course, recent global events offer to reframe postmodernism's master narratives in terms of the determining economic base and the determined cultural superstructure. To avoid merely reinventing structuralism we may need to rethink the cultural determinism of much recent consumer research, reminding ourselves that cultural and social practices are persistently connected to economy, stupid! Our evolving 'discourse of reasons' may then need more space for economy as well as culture. So, does a post-postmodern reading of Warhol portray an arch modernist? In his cool insouciance and cynical agnosticism it is said he lived a detached life fixated on displays of disinterest and indifference, embodying the compulsion to mechanical objectivity of science. Could that help ease the existential vaudeville haunting some market researchers?

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