

Toward an Understanding of Relationship Formation Between Consumer Collectives and
Celebrities in the Making

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Abstract

We know little about how consumers come to relate to “celebrities in the making,” individuals being brought to the attention of the public but not yet highly visible or meaningful to any audience. We address this gap through a netnographic study of consumers who participate in online forums that discuss fashion modeling reality television, wherein sets of contestants are brought to public attention by the shows’ producers and by media. Our analysis posits that a small subset of potential celebrities gain greater visibility and come to have more distinctive meanings as an unintended byproduct of collective practices of gift-giving, gossiping, and communing. It theorizes that when these practices give rise to relationships based on admiration, empathy and/or derision, one key condition for a more enduring relationship is set. Our study helps to refine our understanding of consumer/celebrity relationships and has implications for theories of value creation by consumer collectives.

Innumerable critics and pundits have contended that we live in a culture obsessed with celebrity (e.g., Boorstin 1961; Gamson 1994; Turner 2004). Curiously, within the field of consumer research, there has been relatively limited attention to the question of how and why we form relationships with particular people who have, or may come to have, some measure of celebrity. One recent paper (Thomson 2006) draws on relationship theory to help explain the varying levels of attachment that consumers feel toward established celebrities, referred to as “human brands” and defined as people who are “well-known” personas. But we require a broader understanding of consumer engagement with celebrity, particularly the emergence of relationships between consumers and those who have the potential to become, but who are not yet, established celebrities. We refer to such potential celebrities as “celebrities in the making,” and our paper investigates how online collectives of consumers come to have more enduring relationships with some than with other not-yet-widely known individuals who have the potential to acquire celebrity.

Our paper makes an important contribution because, in general, our knowledge of consumer-brand relationships is restricted in a way that might be characterized as left-censored: we know vastly more about the nature of, and the factors that support, relationships with established brands (e.g., Fournier 1998) than we do about relationships with nascent brands, be they “human brands” or other kinds. In investigating the emergence of celebrity/consumer relationships, our paper draws conceptual attention to the potential unintended consequences of the practices of consumer collectives. It highlights that collective practices of gift-giving, gossiping and communing, though not initiated to advance the interests of a specific brand, can give

certain potential celebrities much greater visibility and distinctiveness than others. Further, our paper broadens our understanding of “multi-brand” consumer collectives. Much prior research has concentrated on communities that cohere around a single brand (e.g., Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schau, Muniz and Arnould 2009). Our study is set in a context where a wide array of human and non-human brands are potentially focal for consumers. It sheds light on the collective sense-making, entailing deliberate comparison and contrasting between brands, that has the unforeseen consequence of creating the conditions for greater admiration, empathy and/or derision of some human brands than of others. Our paper also makes a significant contribution because it has relevance for the economically and culturally significant phenomenon of celebrity endorsement (e.g., Forehand and Perkins 2005; Heath, McCarthy and Mothersbaugh 1994; Kamins 1990; McCracken 1989), a distinct but related topic. Our insights into how relationships form between consumers and some potential celebrities have implications for understanding the potential for such celebrities to eventually become endorsers.

Before proceeding to the substance of our paper, we note two terminological conventions adopted. First, we use the term fan interchangeably with the term consumer. Second, we use the term collective rather than “brand community” to describe the set of fans we study; we have chosen to do so because these fans’ interests center on fashion modeling reality television. Such programs span multiple brands including *America’s Next Top Model*, other reality TV shows, and the human brands who host, judge, appear during, or compete in these shows. Moreover, it is not clear that this collective is characterized by all the hallmarks of community (i.e. consciousness of kind, shared rituals, and a sense of moral responsibility [Muniz and O’Guinn 2001]).

Having clarified these points we articulate our specific research questions as follows: (1) how do relationships between fans and potential celebrities become initiated? and (2) why are more enduring relationships formed between members of collectives and certain potential celebrities rather than others? We note from the outset the boundary conditions of our investigation: we are not investigating how individuals who are not involved in collectives come to feel emotionally attached to a particular nascent celebrity. Nor are we studying relationship formation with celebrities of all types (variation in types of celebrity will be discussed below). We do, however, develop theoretical insights into what has become a widespread occurrence in contemporary culture: collectives of people interacting online and developing varying relationships with people vying for visibility in a particular field, a few of whom may eventually attain a considerable measure of celebrity.

Based on our analysis of data collected in a two-year netnography focused on online fans of fashion modeling reality television, we theorize that relationship formation between collectives and potential celebrities emerges initially as an unintended by-product of the gift-giving, communing and gossiping practices in which the consumer collective engages. By drawing on materials provided by media, marketers and potential celebrities themselves, consumers enhance their enjoyment of the market-mediated consumption objects they are exposed to, and build bonds with one another. At the same time, they unintentionally lay the foundations for relationships with specific potential celebrities, rendering some more visible and meaningful to the collective than others. We further theorize that these collective practices give rise to relationships with one or more of three emotional bases: admiration, empathy and/or derision. The celebrities in the

making with whom fans form the most potentially sustainable relationships are those who are made most visible and meaningful by the practices referred to above, for whom relationships strongly anchored in at least one of these bases are formed, and for whom renewed cycles of visibility and meaning-making are repeatedly triggered.

Having given this brief overview of our findings, we now turn to a summary of the literatures that inform our work. After this review we describe our methodology and the theoretical insights that comprise our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for understanding consumer-celebrity relationships in contemporary culture, and for more broadly understanding consumer collectives.

INSIGHTS ON CONSUMER-CELEBRITY RELATIONSHIP EMERGENCE

There are several distinct but overlapping literatures that are relevant to the question of how consumers come to form relationships with people who are potential celebrities. We organize these literatures into two groups, one focused on the processes that give rise to celebrity, the other on people's relationships with established celebrities. Before discussing either, we note that we use the term celebrity simply to connote the degree of fame or visibility (Rein et al. 2005) a person has within a general population. This is not to dispute the view that celebrity is a "master status" in society and associated with a variety of culturally informed expectations and reactions (Adler and Adler 1989). It is, however, to make the point that those who might be classified in the master category vary considerably in terms of their fame. Moreover, most who eventually achieve some celebrity are initially relatively unknown, and our concern here is with those whose degree of celebrity is quite modest when consumers begin to form relationships with

them.

What Gives Rise to Celebrity? Although historically celebrity might have been thought to be “related to achievement and quality” (Gamson 1994, 14-15), it is routinely recognized that while celebrity may arise from extraordinary accomplishments, as in the case of storied athletes or astronauts, it may equally have a wide range of other bases, such as inherited status (e.g., the British Royal family), scandal (e.g., Bernard Madoff), oddity (e.g., Octo-Mom) and indeed even “intrinsic ordinariness” (e.g., Susan Boyle) (Deighton and Kornfeld 2010). Regardless of the basis, scholars who study celebrity acknowledge that media play a powerful role in directing the public’s attention toward potential celebrities and increasing their exposure to established ones (Turner 2004). Both traditional and new media face the challenge of creating stories that will capture the attention of audiences; to manage the daily demands for novelty and originality, media participants pay constant attention to the events and actors they think might interest their audiences, and create dramatized representations that help direct and focus audience attention (e.g., Gamson 1994; Rein et al. 2005). Media broadly defined thereby play a leading role in the creation and perpetuation of any given person’s celebrity.

Depending upon the origins of celebrity, actors in other industries may also play critical roles. For example, in the case of celebrities who are actors, it is typical that their agents, their publicists, and film marketers all play interacting roles that contribute to their celebrity (Rein et al. 2005; Turner 2004). In contrast, those who achieve celebrity via reality television do so with the assistance of certain other sets of actors, including but not limited to those in television and other media. For example, the music industry is critical to the creation of celebrities on *American Idol*, and in the case to be studied here,

the fashion modeling industry plays a role in the manufacture of whatever degree of celebrity is achieved by contestants on fashion modeling reality television shows.

While much power is attributed to the collection of industries that produce celebrity, scholars do note that while “celebrity is the product of a commercial process... the public expression of popular interest can operate, at times, as if it was entirely independent of this commercial process. Sometimes no amount of publicity can generate public interest, at other times the public reveals a mind of its own in its reactions to a specific individual no matter what the publicity machine does” (Turner 2004, 55). Analyses of why people pay attention to some but not other would-be stars who are offered for view by the collectivity of media and marketers involved has not been a focal concern for the celebrity literature.

How do Consumers Relate to Celebrities? There is a considerable literature on consumers’ relationships with established celebrities. One strand is grounded in social psychological theories about interpersonal relationships. Many writing within this tradition have stressed, typically with concern, that relationships with celebrities are parasocial, meaning that people imagine connections to celebrities who are actually strangers (e.g., Klapp 1949; Schickel 2000). These relationships “inadequately imitate normal relationships” in the view of much scholarship in this area (e.g., Horton and Wohl 1956; Schickel 2000), and are conceived as a “chronic attempt to compensate for a perceived personal lack of autonomy, absence of community, incomplete identity, lack of power and lack of recognition” (Jenson 1992, 17).

Less dim views of the fan-celebrity relationship have emerged in recent times, even among those who continue to use the term parasocial to describe them. For example,

Rojek (2001) discusses parasocial interaction as a form of “second order intimacy... constructed through the mass media rather than direct experience.” He notes that the sheer volume of mass-mediated representations of a celebrity can compensate to some degree for the social and physical remoteness that is typical between celebrities and audiences, and he acknowledges that relationships of this kind can provide powerful affirmations of belonging, recognition and meaning. This view is reinforced and advanced in work by Thomson (2006) who finds that when a consumer feels a celebrity enhances their feelings of autonomy and relatedness and does not suppress their feelings of competence, the consumer is more likely to feel strongly attached to the celebrity; strong attachments are predictive of people feeling satisfied, trustful, and committed to their relationships with celebrities.

The fan literature offers additional insights into consumers’ relationships with celebrities. First, it highlights that fans are not passive in their relationships with the objects of their affection or attention. While recognizing the highly commercialized context in which relationships develop, scholars like Hills (2002), Jenkins (2006), Baym (1999), Baym and Burnett (2009) and Kozinets (2001, 2007) emphasize that fans are not passive recipients of information about those with whom they feel engaged. People quite frequently source, disseminate, categorize and curate information about those persons or things of which they are fans. Fans thus contribute to sustaining the visibility and expanding the meanings of these people or things.

Scholars grounded in the fan literature also draw attention to the fact that much of this proactive behavior on the part of fans takes place in the context of collectives (e.g., Baym 2009; Henry and Caldwell 2007; Jenkins 2006; Schau 2010), whether offline,

online or both. Thus their work highlights that consumers' relationships with celebrities cannot be well understood without taking into account their relationships with others who share interests in the same people.

To summarize, extant literature usefully acknowledges the roles of media and a variety of interrelated industries that contribute to creating celebrity. It establishes that, despite being parasocial, people's relationships with celebrities can provide them with meaningful emotional rewards. And it emphasizes how members of collectives who share a common interest in a celebrity can engage productively in elaborating or extending their fame. Taken as a whole, however, these literatures stop short of answering the question of how relationships with potential celebrities emerge and how members of collectives come to establish more enduring attachments to some celebrities-in-the-making than to others. We thus undertook the study outlined below.

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

Background

On May 20th 2003, Tyra Banks, African-American supermodel, launched the reality series *America's Next Top Model* (ANTM). Her program creates and portrays the trials and tribulations of aspiring fashion models as they compete for the season's Top Model title, a lucrative contract with a major cosmetic brand, and representation from a renowned modeling agency. ANTM is a global sensation and is syndicated in more than one hundred and seventy countries and licensed as a franchise to seventeen nations which have their own NTM programs (tyrabanks.com). Vying for a chance to compete on ANTM is serious business. In 2007, fifteen hundred hopefuls turned up to a casting call

in New York City alone. Yet, only thirteen to fourteen candidates from more than thirty cities around the United States are usually selected. To be selected, a would-be top model must provide producers with the raw material to create a captivating story (Burnett 2001; Hill and Palmer 2002; Mock-Flacon 2003). Unlike some other reality series (e.g., *American Idol*) ANTM does not rely on audience voting; producers create the set of contestants and control the unfolding of the competition. Yet like other reality television contexts, ANTM is a program in which consumers are exposed to a set of potential celebrities in whom they can invest varying amounts of attention and to some of whom they may form a degree of attachment; thus it is an appropriate context given our interests.

The America's Next Top Model online fandom as a Collective Site

Research setting

As in other studies of online fandom, ANTM fans meet throughout a variety of discussion boards (forums) in a “quasi-coherent network fashion” (Baym 2007). For pragmatic reasons, we narrowed our netnographic (Kozinets 2002; 2010) data collection to four forums dedicated to ANTM and located on four different websites that were central to the collective. We have assigned pseudonyms to each board. The first we refer to as “Tough Love for Television” (TLT); TLT began in June 2004 and is still active in November, 2010 (as an example, activity on this forum on November 3rd 2010 amounted to 858 threads and more than 326,000 posts). The second forum we called “Models’ Hang Out” (MHO); MHO began in September 2006 and is still active. The third we refer to as “Playing with Reality TV” (PRT); it commenced in October 2006 and is still active.

The final one we label “For the Love of Reality Television” (FLRT); FLRT began in May 2003 and the ANTM forum was disbanded May 28 2008, a move that provoked anger and dismay as evidenced in other online sites. It is unclear why FLRT made its decision. It has been suggested that the site’s moderators were unhappy with the many heated arguments that were taking place. Whatever the reasons, the ANTM forum remains closed, although threads posted prior to closure remain accessible. While the celebrities in the making were discussed on all the forums, some practices were more common on certain sites (e.g., gift-giving was more common on FLRT and PRT).

Data collection for this project combines observation, participant observation, and interview methods. Data include messages posted to the forums mentioned above, fan art and artifacts (e.g., pictures, videos), field notes and a set of interviews conducted with fans. The data we report are longitudinal, in that posts were monitored until June 2009.

The main portion of the data for this study includes the messages that fans post to one another via the forums. Discussions and the dissemination of fan art and artifacts about contestants are common in these forums. On TLT, PRT, and FLRT threads or, in other words, sub-forums are created for each contestant every season. This is where most discussions about specific contestants happen. On MHO, the organization of posts is more variable and a contestant may or may not have her own thread. Discussions typically start as soon as new threads are created and often continue years after a season is over. The data collected and analyzed for this study was circumscribed from seasons 8 to 12, between February 2007 and June 2009, for a total of 5 seasons and sixty-seven potential celebrities.

Offline interviews ranging from 45 minutes to two hours, and message exchanges we initiated online over the course of several months, were conducted with 10 fans. However, since the purpose of this study was not to understand individual fans' interest in potential celebrities but rather to examine discourse of the naturally occurring collective processes, our analysis relies primarily on observational data. The interviews helped sensitize us as we analyzed the observational data (e.g., collective consumption yielding much more value than individual consumption and the range of practices that were facilitated online by other fans).

In keeping with the norms of traditional ethnographies that rely on observation, the first author made extensive use of field notes based on both observation alone, and participant observation. Note-taking began in February 2007 and continued throughout the study. Typically, the first author was online every week, during the day and/or the evening, spending between a few minutes (e.g., 10 minutes) to several hours (e.g., 5 hours) documenting the collective's topics of interests and practices, and critical incidents happening online. In addition, the author subscribed to and consistently read the daily email updates from the different threads devoted to the celebrities in the making under study. Participant observation commenced in June 2007, when an announcement was posted to each forum letting participants know that a study was underway. This post received a number of acknowledgements on each forum, all responding positively to the announcement. Participation entailed engaging in ongoing discussions about potential celebrities with other online fans and providing fans with information that we felt would interest them. For example, the first author attended ANTM's casting call in New York

City and The Tyra Banks Show in the Summer of 2007; posts about this were made to the forums.

Data Analysis. The analysis and interpretation of the data was an iterative process of interpreting, deriving new questions, searching for and collecting new data, rejecting, confirming, and refining our emerging interpretation until reaching sufficient interpretive convergence and theoretical saturation. Following other scholars (e.g., Mathwick, Wiertz and De Ruyter 2007; Muniz and Schau 2005; Schau and Muniz 2007) we adopted ethnographic conventions in our analysis, moving continuously among messages, fan art, artifacts, field notes and occasionally, interviews. Atlas ti. software was used to assist in this process. Focal concepts discussed below (in particular the types of practices, bases for relationships), and relationships between concepts, emerged in the course of the investigation.

FINDINGS

Our findings are organized into two sections. The first deals with the collective practices that, in conjunction with the practices of media, marketers and potential celebrities themselves, lead to greater visibility and more elaborate meanings for certain potential celebrities. The second identifies the different bases of attachments that arise as consumers communicate with one another about particular potential celebrities. Figure 1 guides the reader through the sections.

Insert Figure 1 here

Potential Celebrities are Made Visible and Meaningful via Practices of Collectives

There is abundant evidence that when people sharing an interest in some market-mediated consumption object engage with one another, they exhibit a variety of collective practices (e.g., Baym 1999; Brown 2007; Hill 2002; Holt 1995; Jenkins 1992, 2006; Kozinets 1997, 2001, 2007; Lanier and Schau 2007; Schau et al. 2009). These practices not only enhance the value to consumers of the object(s) of interest; they help those who participate in the collective to derive benefits from the social relationships they form with fellow consumers (Baym and Ledbetter 2009; Schau et al. 2009).

Given that consumers' relationships with celebrities in the making are the focus of our study, we analyzed our data to understand the practices in which these potential celebrities might feature. Our analysis suggests that celebrities in the making were focal in three practices that have previously been documented among consumer collectives: gift-giving (cf. Giesler 2006), gossiping (Baym 1999; Muniz, O'Guinn and Fine 2006), and communing (e.g., Holt 1995). We argue that each practice we highlight not only builds bonds between participants in the collective (like the social networking practices documented by Schau et al. 2009, p. 34) and increases the value (especially entertainment value) derived from engagement with the consumption object, but also contributes to the visibility and distinctive meanings of some of the potential celebrities.

Gift-giving. In offline communities, consumers' practices of gift-giving have been extensively analyzed (e.g., Ruth, Otnes and Brunel 1999; Sherry 1983); they are taken to be a means of both recognizing and reinforcing bonds between kin networks (e.g., Fischer and Arnold 1990), romantic partners (e.g., Belk and Coon 1993), and members of traditional communities (e.g., Mauss 1925/1990). In developing the notion of a gift system via a study of the peer-to-peer file sharing *Napster* community, Giesler (2006)

demonstrated that gift giving is a practice that is not restricted to the offline world nor to communities characterized by kinship, romantic ties or traditional bonds. Gift-giving can occur online, where people are geographically dispersed (often on a global scale), technologically networked, and united by a common ethos and/or shared interests.

In the fashion modeling reality TV collective, the gifts exchanged often take the form of fan art, i.e. “artwork that is based on a character, costume, item, or story that was created by someone other than the artist” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fan_art: last access: 09-21-10), such as consumer-generated ads, video tributes, parodies and, perhaps most commonly, avatars. Such artwork is frequently created based on contestants’ pictures and/or video footage and offered to others for them to enjoy and, potentially, use. For example, Figure 2 contains three avatars of contestant Jenah.

Insert Figure 2

Posted by *squee18* on May 28, 2008, they are prefaced by the explanation: “I made some [avatars for] Jenah fans.” Later that day, poster *antimislove* replies to *squee18* with a request for more: “Would you mind including jenah walking down the runway and posing in the animated avie?” Clearly the offering was appreciated, and the request led to the creation of other art that was valued by members of the collective. Like consumer-created communications featured in brand communities (Muniz and Schau 2005). Fan art (like fan fiction [Lanier and Schau 2007]) is offered with no expectation of explicit remuneration. It is offered for the shared enjoyment of members of the collective, and possibly for the recognition that it will garner for the person who posts it. At the same time, such gifts give certain potential celebrities a higher profile in the collective than others. The decisions made by gift givers about which contestants to create avatars

for, and the requests made for other similar gifts, help to increase the visibility of some contestants relative to others.

The same pattern can be seen in the next example. In our context, consumers have integrated the tradition of Christmas gift giving with the practice of online gift giving, and fan art featuring contestants is a favored offering. Figure 3 shows a posting by *antmluva1234* that pictures five contestants from the then-current season. Her posting was greeted with an enthusiastic reply from *gegeviana*, who asked if she could have one of her favorite current contestant: “i love these ! Can you make one of Heather please?” Poster *wholahey* chimed in with appreciation saying “I like the natasha christmas one and the renee.” Poster *antmluva1234* obliged the request made of her by posting an additional picture (labeled “Heather” Figure 3) with the message “Merry Christmas Gegeviana.” Seeing the picture of Heather, *lrpv1688* notes: “cool! soo pretty! heatherians/heatherettes will use this for sure.”

Insert Figure 3

This example nicely illustrates how gifts and requests, in addition to contributing to fans’ enjoyment and to their sense of connection, help to build the visibility of certain contestants. As the interchange regarding Heather indicates, the gifts may promote a general solidarity and at the same time start to facilitate within-collective groupings of those who are fans of particular celebrities in the making. Such contestant-specific fan clubs both reflect and promote higher visibility for specific contestants.

Gossiping. Gossiping probably constitutes the most popular practice in our context. It can be defined as conversing about a third party who is not present (Foster 2004) and is considered one of the ways through which media representations are

integrated into our everyday lives (Miller 1995; Turner 2004). Although some may view this practice as inconsequential or without purpose, gossiping has been theorized to play a fundamental role in the evolution of human intelligence and social life (cf. Dunbar 2004). It is also thought of as one of the fundamental processes employed as a means of social and cultural identity formation (Turner 2004). Gossip has been conceptualized as evaluative social talk that provides network formation and group solidarity and it serves the purposes of entertaining, supplying social information, and establishing, changing, or maintaining group membership, power structure, or norms (cf. DiFonzo and Bordia 2006). Finally, it is a way of sharing social judgments and of processing social behaviors (Turner 2004). Given these documented roles of gossip in other contexts, it is to be expected that in the online collective we study, the practice further contributes to rendering certain potential celebrities visible and meaningful to fans.

Online fans create abundant posts about contestants' behaviors, performances, life stories, and physical appearance. Gossiping generally starts before the series even begins, when fans find bits and pieces of information about new contestants in the media or online while analyzing social network site profiles. That is, as indicated in Figure 1, fans draw on the materials provided by media and by marketers as a resource for the collective practice of gossiping. In particular, gossip is often triggered by something seen on an episode whether when it airs initially or is re-run through syndication. Given that the main characters of fashion modeling reality TV are "real" people whose lives (hopefully) continue once they are off the air, and given that these contestants are attempting to become successful in a business that is based on the production of new images, the material for gossiping is abundant. Contestants provide fans – intentionally or not – with

a myriad of “interesting” material through the pictures they take to show their potential as models, the comments they give to reporters, and the remarks they post online about themselves. The following exchange illustrates typical gossiping in this community. To contextualize, the exchange happened in June of 2008 and concerns Heather a contestant on ANTM Season 9.

The Grand Suite: I was recently informed by a friend of Heather's that Heather has two lesbian mothers. If this was previously reported, than I was unaware.

ZiegMan: I don't think it's true that Heather has 2 lesbian mothers, she mentioned somewhere (I think her Deviantart profile) that her father died when she was young so unless her mom had a lesbian relationship after that then I'm not sure that it's even true.

Note that in this case, some information is provided by a member of the collective who knows a friend of the contestant, and other information is gleaned from a profile that appears to have been created by the contestant herself. As illustrated in this discussion, gossiping does not equate with evaluation. It can be positive talk but is also often critical or neutral (Foster 2004). For established celebrities, gossiping has been posited as a means of challenging traditional power asymmetries between fans and celebrities (Gamson 1994; Turner 2004). In the case of celebrities in the making, where the potential celebrity is relatively powerless, gossip certainly serves to make or keep the contestant visible, and may lead to the reinforcement of perceptions about the individual.

Gossip can also serve to help create or embellish the “brand biography” of a potential celebrity. Avery, et al. (forthcoming) define a brand biography as a dynamic,

historical account of the events that have shaped the brand over time. As is illustrated in the following discussion about contestant Bianca, the gossip in which a collective engages can help to establish elements of a potential celebrity's brand biography. In a post shortly after the first episode of the cycle featuring contestant Bianca, *KimKelly* asks: "which neighborhood in Queens is Bianca from? Just curious--I live in Astoria, and my boyfriend grew up in Ridgewood." This query soon receives a response from *StarbucksLover* who says: "Cool! I live in Queens Village. She's (Bianca) from Hollis." Having supplied this information, *StarbucksLover* receives a request from another fan for more information about Bianca. *StarbucksLover* informs readers: "My sister is around 5'7, and she said when she and Bianca would walk to class, she would have to look up to Bianca. So I'm guessing [Bianca's height is] somewhere around 5'10...." Another poster, *COmputerGeek*, brings up the fact that Bianca has been rejected by a number of agencies, apparently because her voice is irritating. The poster provides a link to support this assertion and states: "I love how someone that was rejected by numerous agencies (Source: <http://www.cwtv.com/video?=-bianca>) made it on to ANTM. Her voice did not bother me." As the season progresses, fans continue to inform one another of facts about Bianca, and thus to raise her visibility, and create meanings by adding to her brand biography

Communing. Prior research reports that consumers commune when they share how they are experiencing a consumption object with others, so that their interaction with the object becomes a mutual experience (see Arnould and Price 1993; Holt 1995). For fans in our context, sharing experiential reactions and making sense of what is happening

is an important consumption element, and much (though by no means all) of the communing centers around contestants.

Communing involving contestants begins from before the start of any given ANTM season and continues after contestants are eliminated and seasons are concluded, especially when new information about a contestant surfaces through media reports, or through the investigative practices of a fan who spots an image of a former contestant and informs the collective. Season finales are times when such practices typically flourish. While finales are being aired, fans share their opinions, anxiety, joys, and/or frustrations minute by minute in online forums. The following exchange gives a glimpse of the communing happening during the first five minutes of one of ANTM's finales.

05-14-2008, 08:02 PM *Dax*: Oh no, they are playing the "don't look like a model in camera" to Anya. That teaser gave everything away.

05-14-2008, 08:03 PM *dongdongahdong*: I can't believe the finale is here! ANYA FOR THE WIN!

05-14-2008, 08:03 PM *duckiies*: Anya, Anya, Anya!

05-14-2008, 08:04 PM *Gabe001*: Anya better win! Tyra and her panel need to redeem themselves for last year's horrible winner.

05-14-2008, 08:04 PM *Kaizen's*: Sigh ... here's to a good winner tonight.

05-14-2008, 08:05 PM *Jenahcious*: fatima is out!

05-14-2008, 08:05 PM *Yanz*: Anya for the win of America's Next Top Model!!!

Where are Whitney's fans? Hehe

05-14-2008, 08:05 PM *Kaizen*: I love anya shes so sweet.

05-14-2008, 08:06 PM *bluegins* Quote: Originally Posted by Yanz “Anya for the win of America's Next Top Model!!! Where are Whitney's fans? Hehe”

RIGHT HERE awaiting for her to be the first PLUS SIZE to win!!!”

In this brief exchange, fans are expressing their support for their favorite out of the three remaining contestants (i.e. Anya, Fatima and Whitney). They are also interpreting some of the unfolding drama as they might do at a sports game or while watching a movie with friends. “Yanz” even playfully teases Whitney’s supporters who may be lurking, provoking “*Bluegins*” to loudly (as indicated by the caps lock) cheer.

Of course, the scripted competitive and dramatic nature of the fashion modeling shows – including but not limited to the choosing of a winner – are designed to provoke strong emotional reactions (as has been noted with regard to other reality TV shows by Aslama and Pantty 2006 and Fairchild 2007) and to foster readings of certain contestants relative to others. As depicted in Figure 1, and as discussed in the review of the literature on celebrity creation, marketers and producers contribute to the visibility and the positioning of potential celebrities, and the storylines within the programs are part of this process. However, as fans commune with others in the collective, sharing their reactions to the show and to particular contestants, they do not merely react to what they watch: they forge interpretations and understandings, in effect co-creating (cf. Vargo and Lusch 2004) the images of the contestants. Indeed, in sharing perspectives and stories, fans create a “communal meta-text” (cf. Baym 1999, 211) that influences which contestants they pay most attention to and what they think about each of them.

In many cases, communing leads to readings that resist or contradict those of the shows’ producers, as the following example illustrates. During one season a contestant

named Toccara, a plus-size model who had been doing well on the show, was eliminated mid-season in an episode where her self-confidence was challenged. The reasons given by Tyra Banks for Toccara's elimination were that she lacked the personality to endure the hardships she would encounter, and that she didn't photograph well. After her exit from the show, fans debated the real reasons for her elimination; their conclusion is summarized in the following post.

hungry_hippo's: I don't think Toccara's elimination had anything to do with her picture or how she performed that week. I think Tyra and the judges figured it would be better not to bring a plus size-model to Japan cuz all those fashion designers don't make plus size clothing.”

Fans followed Tocarra's fortunes after her elimination from the show and were delighted when she achieved such successes as becoming the spokesperson for clothing lines that cater to the needs of the plus-size market, appearing on the covers of fashion magazines, and being chosen for inclusion in a spread for the highly coveted *Vogue Italia* shot by a world-renowned photographer, Steven Meisel.

As this example illustrates, the process of communing is an opportunity for both socializing and collective sense-making by participants. Communing about contestants helps to build the collective's "meta-text" about fashion modeling reality television, about the field of modeling – and about selected potential celebrities.

To summarize the analysis thus far, we have argued that at least three common practices among collectives of consumers contribute to rendering certain potential celebrities more visible than others, and to making them more distinctive and meaningful. We consider this outcome a largely unintentional byproduct of the practices. As has been

established in prior work, consumers engage in these practices to enhance their enjoyment of focal consumption objects and their connections with one another (e.g. Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). As a whole, collectives are not deliberately striving to make any particular potential celebrity more visible or distinct.

The marketers/media and the potential celebrities also depicted in Figure 1 contribute materials that are used by collectives. As prior research on celebrity has emphasized (e.g. Rein et al. 2005), their actions are deliberately designed to attract the attention of consumers and to influence them to have distinctive perceptions of specific individuals. What consumers do with the "information" provided to them is not, as our analysis has already indicated, a mere passive processing. Rather, collectives attend selectively to certain individuals and contribute to their perceived meanings through the practices we have discussed.

The analysis thus far helps to provide insight on why relationships are more likely to emerge with some celebrities in the making than with others: those contestants whom fans help to make more visible and meaningful are the contestants that have the potential for sustained attachment with collectives. Yet fans are not likely to continue to pay attention to every contestant that features extensively in the gift-giving, gossiping or communing practices that occur during the season in which she competes. To understand which potential celebrities become objects of more sustained attachment, and to address our second research question (which asks what leads to more enduring relationships with some potential celebrities than others), our analysis suggests it is necessary to consider the bases on which fans relate to specific potential celebrities.

Relationships Between Collectives and Celebrities in the Making Have Multiple Bases

For many potential celebrities in the context we studied, the practices of the collective resulted in relatively low visibility and relatively little differentiation: for example, in Season 9, contestant Ambreal generated the lowest volume of posts by members of the collective, despite staying in the competition for more than half the season. The following posts reflect fans' lack of interest in Ambreal:

marc987 (...) I always seem to forget about her. Hopefully when the season starts she wont get on my nerves as bad and maybe I'll remember that she is part of the competition.

Lucius Hip: She's so nonexistent. If that's a word...I think she looks really good, but she keeps slipping from my mind. I don't understand how I can keep on ignoring and forgetting someone who's so gorgeous and has such an odd name... She has a curse, that's the only possible reason.

Goblin: If she didn't come first alphabetically in the list of hamsters, I would easily forget her.

Dhyerwolf: ...she is a sleeping pill in human form.

Among those who do gain greater visibility and accumulate more meanings as reflected in the posts by fans through the process outlined above, there is considerable variability in the bases of the relationships that collectives exhibit toward specific potential celebrities. We distinguish analytically three primary bases on which collectives appear to relate to celebrities in the making: these bases are admiration, empathy and derision, each of which is discussed below.

Admiration as a Relationship Basis. Prior literature on relationships between fans and celebrities has placed heavy emphasis on admiration as a basis for the relationship (e.g., Boon and Lomore 2001, Caughey 1994; McCutcheon, Lange and Houran 2002). In this literature, the term “worship” is often used as a synonym for admiration, and for some consumers’ relationships with established celebrities, admiration may indeed border on worship. In our context, the term admiration seems more apt to capture the basis on which the collective relates to certain celebrities in the making. For example, contestant Toccara, whose fate during and after the show was recounted above, is clearly admired by members of the collective as the following interchange illustrates. This exchange occurred just after the release of the issue of *Vogue Italia* in which Steven Meisel’s photos of her were featured, three years after Toccara was a contestant on the show.

BitchySmurf: Toccara is gorgeous. She's not the industry standard in size or in her face. But I applaud the photographer for picking her. He's trying to make a statement. As if picking all black models weren't enough, he said "I'm going to cast this plus sized reality show girl too, despite what anyone may say because she's hot." And that rocks. Congratulations, Toccara, you're the best plus sized model the show has had!

*sereion..*and Janice [Dickinson, a prior judge on ANTM] said that plus-size models can't do high fashion! Please! Those photos are stunning!

gaia bellavera: It was so wonderful to see Tocarra in *Italian Vogue*. She looked the best I've ever seen her. She looked like Sophia Loren in one photo! Classy, & beautiful. [...] Keep riding the high wave, lady. . .and if America doesn't get it, take it to Europe. . .Josephine [Baker]led the way!”

Another contestant from a later season to whom members of the collective appear to relate with admiration is Bianca. In contrast to Toccara who is admired for being such an attractive plus-size model, Bianca is admired for her mastery of “bitchiness” as the following excerpt indicates.

Lucius Hip (...) I love Bianca. A bitch who says "I know how to bring people down mentally" can't be but excellent. I love the way she plays the game - there's a difference in being an obnoxious brat and being an obnoxious brat with a reason. (...)

Kanine (...) After waves of wishy washy bitches (Renee [S8]), mildly unpleasant and matronly ones (Melrose [S7]) and downright insane ones (Monique [S7]), Bianca's levelheaded, icily strategic evil is fabulous. She's hella entertaining. I hope she tears Saleisha [S9] to shreds in the next episode.

goblyn (...) Bianca might be really bitchy, but she owns the bitchiness, which can't really be said for most of the other bitches this show has had ... Bianca is a type of bitch we haven't seen before, ha. She **is** a fun bitch if you ask me; she revels in it. And all her bitchiness isn't directed at the girl's personally like "I hate you, you stupid bitch!"; it's more of "You think you can win this competition being a stripper? With big thighs?"
Team Bianca!!!

Nell Huxleigh She seems like she has friends at time, too, with some genuine moments of warmth. And she is creative with her insults and will say it straight to someone's face.

As the example of Bianca illustrates, admiration is not necessarily restricted to the potential celebrity's achievements relevant to the domain of modeling. The collective is open to being delighted with an entertaining performance of the "bitch" role. What is interesting to note is that in both cases here, the collective's admiration is based on a relative assessment. Toccara is admired relative to other plus-size models, and Bianca relative to other contestants who have been typecast by themselves or the show's producers as "bitches." More generally, admiration seems to arise from such comparative evaluations of something the audience values – whether performing modeling work, performing an entertaining role, or some other kind of performance.

Empathy as a Relationship Basis. In studies of how fans perceive their relationships with established celebrities, it is claimed that many feel a sense of identification with them. Caughey's (e.g., 1987, 1994) interpretive studies of individuals' relationships with sports and film celebrities, for example, frequently stress how people see themselves as sharing characteristics with those they admire, such as a common ethnic background. Consumers may also identify with an established celebrity who has endured a hardship or challenge that the consumer themselves has faced or is facing. For example, Dutch girls studied by Duits and van Fomodt Vis (2009) identified with singer Jennifer Lopez who had had a challenging relationship with her parents.

In our context, where the celebrities are "in the making" and are not yet established, we observed what we have labeled "empathy" to describe the second common relationship basis. While identification was not absent, empathy seemed more pervasive. Empathy can be defined as "as an involuntary and unselfconscious merging

with another's feelings” (Escalas and Stern 2003, 567). Empathy is closely related to identification, but we differentiate between the two in that identification is based on perceived common characteristics or experiences, whereas empathy does not require having the experiences or characteristics in common

One of the clearest examples of collectives relating to a potential celebrity based on empathy is the case of Heather, a contestant in season 9 who had the autism spectrum disorder Asperger’s Syndrome. During the season in which she featured, fans’ posts were supportive of her efforts and congratulatory of her improvements:

YuppieLawyer: Here's what is important to me. Heather is making her way based on her own merit, not on a pity vote. Unless she is getting extra pictures or extra touchups, her pictures speak for themselves. ... I am really loving Heather....

There is a real genuineness to her that I enjoy, and she takes great pictures. I loved it when they had her just look at her picture, and showed what a great shot that profile would have been, too. I thought her posture was already improved greatly. She still needs some work there, but she's getting better. I know I'm going to cry if/when she gets eliminated, unless it's as first runner-up.

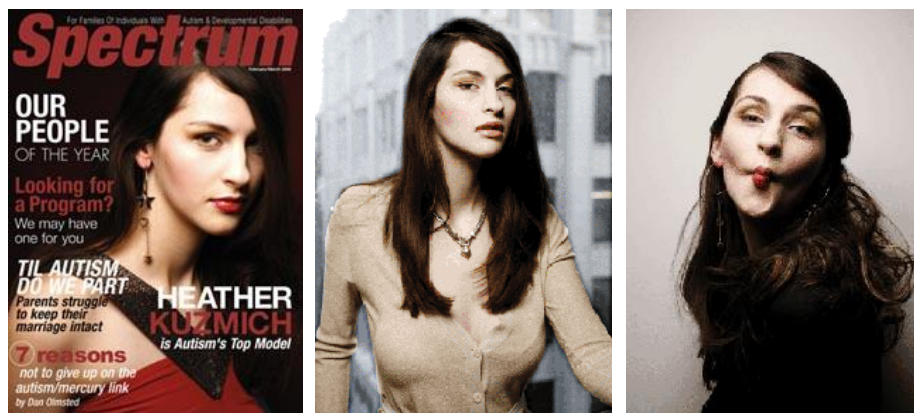
23 Skiddoo : I was quite pleasantly surprised by Heather's runway walk this episode. She was *dreadful* in the first episode's Cruise Ship runway exercise, but during the fashion show I thought she did very well. Obviously she listened to what Jay said to her earlier in the episode, and applied what he told her to her walk during the fashion show.

Interest in, and empathy toward, Heather continued in the weeks and months following the conclusion of the season in which she was featured.

observing: I'm watching the rerun of Season 9 and Heather just got eliminated-- I cried again!! I totally love this girl and think she has the best face in all of the cycles of ANTM. Go Heather! I hope to see you in print or whatever media. You are the best! The most beautiful. Mega love!

ComputerGeek [here are pictures featuring] Heather for Spectrum

Magazine:



I think the second picture is a bad scan. I am not sure what the point of the third picture is, but I did laugh. I like the cover photo.

Observing: I barely recognize her, and I love Heather. Why is she wearing brown contacts when her eyes are so incredibly striking? What's with the 3/4 poses when she is so strong in profile and facing the camera? I do love her, though. Glad to see her working.

While few cases were as extreme as Heather's, in a number of instances, members of the collective expressed similar kinds of empathy based relatedness to contestants whose characteristics or experiences made it more challenging for them to compete in the show, or more generally in the modeling field. It is worth noting, however, that participants in the collective were often divided in that some empathized with an individual while others

did not. In some instances, lack of empathy bordered on derision, the final relationship basis.

Derision as a Relationship Basis. Derision is a relationship basis that emerged in our study but that does not seem to be precisely paralleled in studies of consumer-brand relationships with conventional brands (e.g., Fournier 1998). Our research suggests that while many potential celebrities in this context receive occasional critiques, there are a few to whom fans relate strongly because they “love to hate” them. For these few, we argue, derision, which entails mockery, unflattering commentary, rude name-calling, and sarcastic humor, can be a basis on which the collective relates to the potential celebrity. Prior studies of established celebrities have also noted that fans take pleasure in expressing contempt and derision for certain established celebrities (e.g., Turner 2004; Williamson 2010). Indeed, Williamson argues that derision is particularly likely in the case of “talentless female celebrities who emerge from reality TV” (118).

The broader marketing literature suggests that some popular brands with high emotional resonance may be vulnerable to a backlash in the form of a doppelgänger effect, wherein disparaging associations with the brand circulate through popular culture (Thompson, Rindfliesch and Arsel 2006). In the cases of nascent celebrities, however, derision is not a relational basis that is formed after the brand has acquired some heroic qualities. Instead, from quite early in their rise to visibility through the practices discussed above, fans relate to certain celebrities in the making because they can regard them “villains” or at least as negative archetypes of some kind. In their study of paradoxes that consumers must navigate to enjoy reality television as authentic, Rose and Wood (2005) noted that fans enjoyed feeling animosity toward certain participants in the

shows they watched and felt that the programs would be less enjoyable without them. They note that the consumers they studied appreciated the role of villain as it fit within the larger dramatic cast that is part of conventional narrative structures drawn upon by the show's producers. Our analysis suggests that fans may delight in helping to create such anti-heroic celebrities.

We will illustrate with the case of Saleisha, the eventual winner of Season 9. Although the ANTM producers seemed to have positioned Saleisha from the outset as a strong contender whom fans might admire, the collective began to relate to her based on derision virtually from the moment she came to their attention. Many fans felt that though Saleisha was pretty, she lacked the potential to become a top model.

Nicenessness: Dude, WTF is a Saleisha? Is it like "salacious"? Sale-isha? What?

Haute: Yet another video hoochi. She does not look like a model to me.

Oh My Jesus: Every time I see her name, all I can think of are sausages.'

COmputerGeek: Can someone please explain to me why she was called first? Her photo, along with Chantal, was so craptastic. I hated the expression on her face. Her nose just looked so...prominent and she really should have closed her mouth.

The exchange above suggests that the collective relates to Saleisha derisively because she lacks the physical assets to be a model. In the passage that comes next, the reference to her attending camp "T-Zone" provides a clue as to another reason for the quality of the relationship between Saleisha and the audience.

IsabelPup: (Prior post): 'Her nose just looked so...prominent' (Answer): It's Tyra's old nose. After her last two rhinoplasties, Tyra gave the remnants to the same lab that cloned Dolly the Sheep and told the lab tech, "Make a mini-me. But

she can't be quite as pretty." Unfortunately, the scientist didn't get the memo entirely correct, and ended up making a mini-Tyra, but committed the unspeakable sin of NOT making her ass fat enough. As the mini-Tyra grew up, she was consistently picked on for her lack of badonkadonk ass, which seriously hampered her self-esteem, causing her to need to attend a special camp called T-Zone, where she was taught to be a complete asswipe. And now we're stuck with her, penis-cap hair and all.

When Saleisha was introduced on the show, it was revealed that as a teenager, Saleisha attended T-Zone, Tyra Banks' self-esteem camp for girls. For many fans, this suggested Saleisha might have an unwarranted advantage. Speculations were raised that she was nothing more than an instrument for promoting Banks' social work. One fan wrote: "Her entire participation (and "confidence" about modeling) is such a shameless plug for self esteem camp it makes me want to throw up" (*MJF2*).

About halfway through the season, fans discovered, and brought to the attention of the wider media (for example, see coverage by celebtv.com, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfhXGMslG2M>; last access October 28, 2010) the fact that Saleisha had previously appeared on *The Tyra Banks Show* (Banks' talk show) and had appeared in a catwalk scene in a prior season of *ANTM*, lending weight to the perception that Saleisha had an unfair advantage because Tyra Banks was promoting her. Moreover, one fan found a clip of the popular television series *Ugly Betty* in which Saleisha appeared as an extra cast member. Some fans argued that this should disqualify her from the modeling competition. Later still, fans, on their own initiative, discovered that Saleisha had recently been part of a national television ad for the fast-food chain

Wendy's. Fans argued that Saleisha's commercial was in a clear violation of ANTM's rule of entry number ten: "You must not have previous experience as a model in a national campaign within the last five (5) years".

Saleisha's prior relationship to Banks and her seeming rule violations because of prior acting/modeling experience gave fans the materials they required to cast her firmly in an anti-hero role. Fans competed with one another to help vilifications upon her. Indeed, within the time from of our study, no other contestant on the show was the subject of as many posts by fans. Each new appearance by Saleisha in a fashion magazine or ad campaign elicited fresh rounds of invectives.

Our analysis suggests, then, that derision is a third potential basis for fan-celebrity relationships. Engaging in a derision-based relationship with a potential celebrity doubtless affords fans considerable entertainment (Turner 2004). It may also be foster feelings of superiority (Williamson 2010). Given fan's enjoyment of villainous (cf. Rose and Wood) and other anti-heroic roles in narratives that are created for or co-created by fans, it appears that this type of relationship can be important to facilitating enduring fan-celebrity relationships.

Overall, as Figure 1 indicates, our analysis of which potential celebrities are likely to enjoy the most enduring attention from fans suggests they must have (a) a relationship strongly characterized by at least one of the bases we identify and (b) triggers that promote ongoing visibility and meaning-making. These triggers may be provided by any of the three constituencies depicted in Figure 1 that contribute to visibility and meaning-making, that is, by marketers/media, potential celebrities themselves, and/or fans. For example, marketers may trigger renewed visibility for a contestant by a repeat airing of

an episode in which she featured prominently. Former contestants may promote their own visibility by letting fans know, via their *Twitter*, *Facebook* or *MySpace* accounts, of new work they are doing. And a given fan may renew interest in a specific individual by discovering and posting new biographical information about her to discussion boards. To the extent that the collective then creates new gifts, or engages in new gossip or communing about the individual, the basis of their relationship with that individual can be further reinforced or refined.

Tocarra, who was discussed above, provides a case in point. In the season on which Tocarra came to their attention, fans created and exchanged art, gossiped, and communed about Tocarra. Two relationship bases emerged from this process: empathy and admiration. Fans empathized with Tocarra both because she is plus-size and because she is African American: in the world of modeling, these two characteristics are major obstacles to success. At the same time, Tocarra was consistently regarded as having “what it takes” to be a fashion model. When Tocarra exited the show prior to the end of her cycle, fans discussion of her continued intermittently. It spiked in particular when repeats episodes in which she featured aired, or when a fan notified the collective about some new contracts she had achieved. When Steven Meisel decided to include her in a spread, her visibility was furthered, and the bases of fans’ relationships with her were reinforced. Meisel was quoted as saying “I met Tocarra and thought, she’s beautiful. What’s the deal with her? She’s great and she’s sexy” (Horyn, 2008), validating both the empathy and admiration fans felt toward her, and helping consolidate her position as an “underdog,” that is, a brand having a biography incorporating both disadvantages and a drive to succeed (cf. Paharia et al. forthcoming).

Not all celebrities with whom consumers have sustained relationships need be underdogs. Nor is it the case that the original relationship bases must remain intact for fan's attention to continue; additional bases may be established over time, and the original bases may decline. What is critical is that at least one strong relationship basis emerge from whatever initial visibility and meanings the contestant can accrue, and that there are ongoing triggers that refresh the visibility and meanings, and allow the relational bases to be reinforced or to evolve.

Discussion

We argued at the outset of our paper that the questions we have addressed are important because we know little about the emergence of consumer-celebrity relationships and that the phenomenon of celebrity is generally under-researched in the field of consumer research, especially given the importance of celebrity endorsement. We further argued that we can benefit by studying collective practices in a multi-brand context. Drawing on the theory we have developed in our study, we consider these issues in turn.

Celebrity-Fan Relationship Emergence.

Our work highlights that in contexts such as reality TV, where collectives of consumers have their attention drawn to sets of potential celebrities, the emergence of consumers' relationships with certain celebrities is rooted in practices wherein the collective makes use of materials provided by marketers, media, and contestants themselves to increase their enjoyment of the consumption object that attracts them, and to build bonds with one another. Some potential celebrities are better resources for these

practices than others, in part because of the way they are portrayed by media and marketers and in part because of the manner in which they represent themselves on and off screen. However, as our analysis has indicated, fans are highly selective and proactive in contributing to visibility and meaning-making, which are critical to relationship formation.

Thus we theorize that, in the context under investigation, fan investments in practices (including gift-giving, gossiping, and communing that incorporate materials about potential celebrities) are essential in propelling the process of relationship formation. Without such fan investments, relationships cannot gain momentum, regardless of the efforts that may be made by media, marketers, or potential celebrities themselves. Equally, media and marketers can influence but not control the specific meanings that collectives or factions within them associate with a particular celebrity. Practices that result in collective sense-making (cf. Jenkins 2002) can result in the creation of meanings that differ markedly from those that have been promulgated by promoters. And if the meanings that are created by collectives do not support relationships with at least one strong basis of empathy, admiration or derision, then the chances that relationships will be sustained are limited.

Our study raises, but cannot settle, questions about the role of collectives' practices in the emergence of celebrity-fan relationships in other contexts. We speculate that with the embrace of social media by consumers who are fans of virtually anything and everything, it is increasingly likely that, well beyond the reality TV context, collectives will contribute to the visibility and meaning making processes that lay the foundation for relationship formation with certain potential celebrities. However, we

acknowledge that our study is limited to a particular context and that investigation of contrasting contexts is required for a fuller understanding of how fan's relationships with potential celebrities become established.

Potential Implications for Celebrity Endorsement.

The literature on celebrity endorsement has explored a variety of issues in regard to established celebrities, such as how their meanings transfer to brands they endorse (McCracken 1989); how their perceived trustworthiness, credibility, or "match" with a given product or brand affects the extent to which their endorsement favorably impacts brand evaluations (e.g., Forehand and Perkins 2005; Heath, McCarthy and Mothersbaugh 1994; Kamins 1990); and how their endorsement history may affect consumers attitudes toward them (e.g., Tripp and Jensen 1994).

Our research raises questions about how the origins of an individual's celebrity within a collective might influence how consumers would respond to their eventual endorsement activities. Though our study was not designed to develop theory related to endorsement, it highlights the possibility that celebrities whom fans initially regard as underdogs and to whom fans relate based on a combination of empathy and admiration may have particular potential as endorsers. We suggest this may be the case because a celebrity's underdog, "come from behind" narrative, that fans help to co-create, may serve to establish or reinforce an underdog positioning for products endorsed by the celebrity. Alternatively, however, the "match-up" of an underdog brand with an underdog celebrity might be undermining to a brand, being "too much of a good thing,"

and positioning a brand as weak. Again, this speculative discussion opens up an interesting avenue for future research.

Our identification of derision as a potentially sustainable relationship basis provokes further questions for future research related to celebrity endorsement. While derision alone may be incompatible with successful celebrity endorsements, we note that some established celebrities such as Tyra Banks seem to have relationships with fans that entail, perhaps paradoxically, both considerable derision and considerable admiration. Indeed, the public seems to relate a number of powerful human brands (e.g. Bill Gates (Belk and Tumbat 2005), Steve Jobs) in a similarly mixed fashion. This observation begs future research on how celebrity that entails such paradoxical positionings may be successfully deployed.

Conceptual Connections between Multi-brand Consumer Collectives and Brand Communities.

We conclude our paper by highlighting conceptual links between the kind of collective studied here and the brand communities that have been studied so extensively in prior consumer research. First, we note that the value-creating potential that arises from practices in brand communities (Schau et al. 2009) can also be found in a multi-brand collective. While brand communities have thus far been found to create value primarily for the specific brand of interest within the community, our research, focused on a collective that pays attention to multiple brands, suggests that consumer collectives may, as a byproduct of their practices, create value for numerous brands, be they nascent human brands, established celebrities (such a Tyra Banks in the case studied here), or a

set of related brands (e.g., ANTM and the other fashion modeling reality television programs that are of interest to those in the collective we studied).

A second, more speculative, conceptual possibility is that multi-brand collectives can be a “birthing place” for brand communities. That is, at least some brand communities – such as fan clubs devoted to a particular celebrity – may well come into being through interactions between members of collectives who are interested in a product category – such as reality modeling television – and who engage in various practices in the context of the collective. Based on our analyses, we suggest that practices that facilitate comparison and contrasting between brands in the same category (in the case here, human brands in the same professional field) can lead consumers to become more strongly attached to some brands than others. These strong attachments, shared with like-minded others, can give rise to the formation of distinct brand communities. Thus, our study here may help to shed light not only on the origins of consumers’ attachments to celebrities in the making, but may more broadly help to illuminate at least one point of origin for brand communities.

This concluding observation highlights that our study is one which contributes to our understanding not only of the ways consumers come to engage with human brands, but also to the ways they may come to engage with brands in general.

Figure 1: The emergence and reinforcement of fan's relationships with celebrities in the making

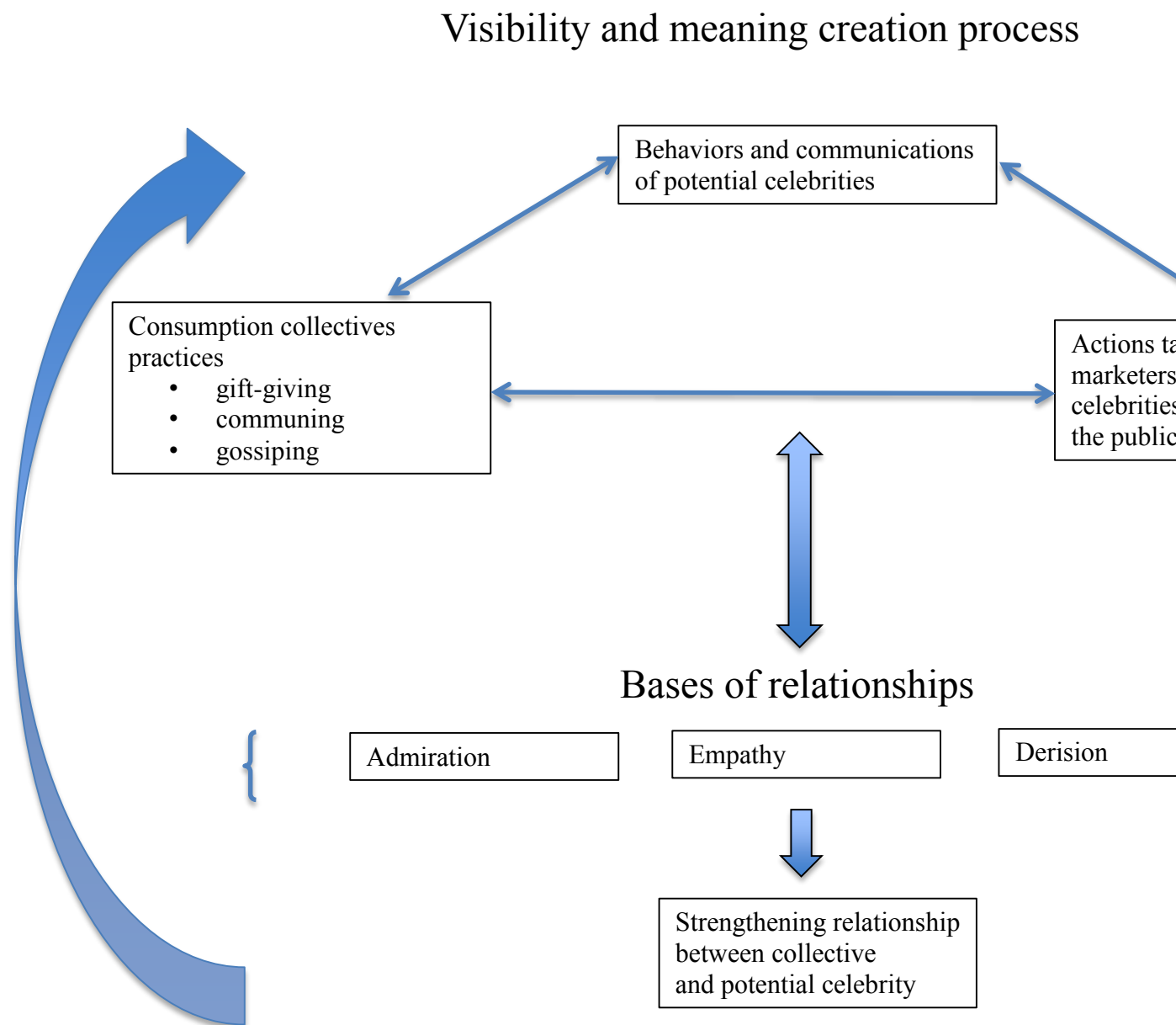


Figure 2: Avatars given as gifts

Post: i made some for jenah fans. 🍷



Figure 3: Celebrities in the making as collective Christmas gifts



Heather

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