

Consumers develop complex relationships with celebrities to construct identity, new study shows

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Consumers look to celebrities such as Dave Grohl of the Foo Fighters to help them construct identity, which influences purchasing decisions. Credit: Scott Flanagin, University of Arkansas

(Phys.org)—Marketers and advertisers know celebrities influence consumers' purchasing decisions, but a new study by a marketing researcher at the University of Arkansas and her colleague in the United Kingdom suggests that consumers take an active role in using celebrities

to help them build their own identities and self-images, rather than merely passively receiving meanings and messages from celebrities and incorporating them into their lives.

"Our primary interest is what consumers do with celebrity and the roles celebrity interactions play in consumer identity construction," said Hayley Cocker, visiting professor in the Sam M. Walton College of Business. "Of course, we're talking about the cultural messages and meanings provided by celebrities, not literal relationships. Rather than a passive, top-down model in which celebrities use their marketing power to pass on cultural meanings to consumers, we found that consumers actually flit between different and often fragmented identities passed along to them by celebrities."

To gain a better understanding of the dynamic between consumers and celebrities, Cocker and Emma Banister, lecturer at Manchester Business School in the United Kingdom, interviewed 11 young adults – six women and five men, all British and between the ages of 18 and 24. Cocker and Banister asked questions about the influence of celebrities in the subjects' efforts to build their identities. To demonstrate the relevance of celebrities in the everyday lives of ordinary young-adult consumers, the researchers chose subjects who experience a range of feelings toward celebrities.

The researchers found that rather than a single message passed down from celebrity to passive consumer, a range of consumer-celebrity relationships conspires to allow consumers to form a [personal identity](#) that matches who they want to be. In effect, the various meanings and messages displayed by celebrities help consumers develop a portfolio of relationships that allow them to function as creators of meaning for themselves. Cocker describes the complex combination of these different and sometimes fragmented relationships as "celebrityscapes" or "celebrity bricolages," within which the consumer has the freedom and

opportunity to engage or not or to manipulate at will.

Cocker uses the example of Zara, one of the interviewees, to illustrate this phenomenon. Zara labeled different aspects of herself as "goofball," "wanting to study," "positive" and "old-fashioned," and she relied upon different celebrities – singer and X-Factor judge Nicole Scherzinger (goofball); Emma Watson, "Hermione" in the Harry Potter films (wanting to study); Victoria's Secret model Miranda Kerr (positive self); and Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge (old-fashioned) – to execute and move between these various identities.

From Cocker's interview notes:

"Zara likes 'organic' products like Miranda. Miranda has her own organic skincare line and every Monday she uploads blogs – which Zara reads every Monday (information on yoga, food and generally stuff she likes). She is Zara's favorite celebrity. She also follows Miranda on Twitter and wants to buy a pair of leather trousers as she saw them on Miranda Kerr. Zara "wouldn't buy day stuff from Kate Middleton" – she buys day stuff using Miranda Kerr and Blake Lively. "Miranda Kerr always has her hair to one side, she never has it on both sides and I always try and do that."

The interviews with all subjects revealed nine types of relationships [young adults](#) develop with celebrities. These relationships fit within three general categories – everyday, inspirational and negative. Everyday relationships include "best friendship," "compartmentalized" and "childhood friendship." The inspirational category includes "aspirational," "admiration" and "illusory" relationships. Negative celebrity relationships include "antagonistic," "not for me" and "guilty pleasures," all of which connote, as the name suggests, some kind of negative quality that motivates the consumer.

"We see [consumers](#) as active producers of symbols and signs of

consumption," Cocker said. "They are creating meaning rather than just waiting around to be told what is important in terms of constructing their identity."

The researchers' findings have been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Marketing Management*.

The study focused on British culture and celebrities. Cocker said she wants to conduct a similar, but larger study of U.S. celebrities.

Provided by University of Arkansas

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