

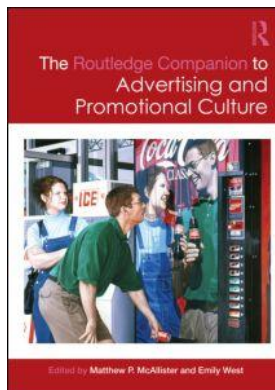
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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON IMAGINARY SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEDIA FIGURES/CELEB- RITIES WHO APPEAR IN ADVERTISING

Neil M. Alperstein

In May of 2011, when Lady Gaga tweeted to her loyal fans, “10 Million Monsters! I’m speechless, we did it! Its [*sic*] an illness how I love you. Leaving London smiling,” she became the first social media user to top 10 million followers on the micro-blogging site Twitter (Bennett 2011). This accomplishment accompanies her acquisition of 10 million fans on Facebook and over 1 billion views on YouTube. The sheer number of fans reached by Lady Gaga demonstrates the alliance between a media figure and fans who use social media to seek closeness, perhaps friendship, or more. The type of social connection, which I refer to as an imaginary social relationship, is exemplified by a woman in her early 20s, who says:

I sometimes believe I know enough about her [Lady Gaga] to be one of my good friends. I know every day where she ate her lunch in Hollywood, who designed her latest outfit, and where her next appearance will be. If Lady Gaga is promoting a certain new product then it has to be cool and of course I want to try it.

The perceived closeness the individual fan feels toward the media figure and the potential impact such an imagined relationship has on the individual, often through the marketing of products and services, is the subject of this chapter.

In contemporary society media figures not only guide us to make important decisions (not unlike the ways in which spirits guided members of traditional societies), but they

also serve as role models, mentors, teachers, BFFs, love interests, father or mother figures, and brother, sister, or cousin figures; in other words, we form social relationships with people we do not know. These relationships formed through media consumption may begin in early childhood, where deep feelings that are developed can be enduring, oftentimes lasting decades, perhaps a lifetime (Hoffner 2008).

There is nothing particularly new about the influence of media figures, as the idea of emulation was the basis during the early part of the twentieth century for the use of theatrical performers and then movie stars in advertising. The development of media like radio and television, as well as gossip magazines, allowed the imaginary relationships with celebrities to proliferate and become a part of consumers' everyday lives. With the emergence of a Web 2.0 participatory culture in the 1990s, the influence that media figures have on consumers, in terms of how figures may model for consumers how to manage their own identities and learn how to operate in their own social world, arguably has intensified. New media have brought about additional changes as consumers begin to redefine what it means to be a friend, including the possibility of achieving a personal connection to a media figure. Social media require a higher level of disclosure on the part of the media figure, and social media require interactions that hold out the possibility of actual connection. Both the idea of imaginary social relationships and the changing nature of new media have implications for the marketing communication system, which is just one component in a referent system through which we make, unmake, and remake meaning in our everyday lives.

Establishing and conducting an imaginary social relationship with a media figure is an idea that grew out of early television research based on observations of parasocial interactions between viewers and media personalities who looked out of the TV set at the viewer, giving the impression the viewer was being spoken to directly (Horton and Wohl 1956). Anthropologist John Caughey coined the term "imaginary social relationships," which he described as one-sided relationships in which the consumer knows a great deal about the media figure, but the relationship is not mutual (1984). Caughey developed a theoretical model that describes how media figures and celebrities may display traits admirers would like to develop or refine within themselves. Implied in this model is a causal link between the celebrity's physical appearance, talents, or special abilities, the values they express, and attitudes they convey and the individual who seeks to bring his or her own self-image in line with that of the celebrity role model, mentor, teacher, and friend, among other roles media figures play in our everyday lives. In this way, Caughey's theoretical model suggests individuals utilize imaginary social relationships with media figures as a way to shape their own identities and their feelings about themselves. The concept of self-transformation is important when considering the implications for a marketing system in which media figures communicate about brands in significant and meaningful ways beyond those experienced through traditional advertising.

In the early 1990s I first wrote about the ways in which advertising served as a mediating force in imaginary social relationships that held the potential to both stabilize and destabilize the relationship (Alperstein 1991). My theoretical orientation conceives of individuals as active participants in making sense of their everyday lives through, among other things, the use of media figures. This theoretical position is consistent with a cultural studies approach rooted in conceptualizing audiences as active rather than passive dupes of the media industry (Marshall 2004). I credit individuals with a sense of intelligence as well as a sense of humor and skepticism as they find pleasure and

meaning in the dynamic process of creating, maintaining, and perhaps dissolving imaginary relationships with media figures.

During the subsequent years I have conducted ethnographic interviews with more than 500 individuals regarding the nature of their imaginary social relationships. Informants were first asked to identify ten media figures with whom they are familiar and to whom there is some level of attraction, which could range from loving or liking to extreme hatred. Having tested this method, I found that the only individuals who have not been able to develop such a list are a few who lived in relative isolation outside of Western culture or who paid very little attention to media. In the second step, informants were asked to identify one media figure from their list of ten toward whom they felt a greater attachment beyond merely knowing the media figure. This attachment could be negative or positive. Informants were asked to describe the imaginary relationship, giving as much history and context as they could recall, and to describe their experiences, including various media or non-media experiences, where they might routinely connect with the media figure. Informants were prompted with questions regarding the role the media figure plays in their life, the impact the media figure has on their life, and how they feel when they see the media figure in various contexts, including advertising. Finally, informants were prompted to draw their own conclusions about the significance or meaning of the media figure in their lives; in particular informants were asked to describe any impact or influence the media figure may have had.

It has become evident with the emergence of celebrity-oriented websites, celebrity blogs, Facebook, and micro-blogging site Twitter that new media are impacting the ways in which media figures reach out to fans and the ways in which fans attempt to interact with them. During the past six years I extended this research to ask which new media individuals were utilizing in order to gain information about media figures, the role that new media play in the ways in which that information was gathered, and the nature of the experiences being generated. The cases discussed in this chapter have been selected to illustrate levels of attachment in imaginary social relationships with an eye toward newer ways of communicating within a system of marketing communication that includes social media.

Three Paradoxes: Place, Imagination, and Togetherness

In order to build understanding of imaginary social relationships, this discussion is framed by three paradoxes: place, imagination, and sociality or togetherness. The paradox of place refers to the ability to shift our thinking, allowing us mentally to be in more than one place at a time, as communication technology allows if not promotes movement through multiple realities. The paradox of imagination refers to the imaginary relationships we conduct with media figures we do not know. This may refer to a sports figure, an actor or actress, or even the character they may play, or a pop singer, among others. The paradox of sociality or togetherness refers to the changing nature of our social world in which connections to others are weakened, like the superficial nature of many “friends” on Facebook. We increasingly live in a world where we can be physically alone but connected to others via technology. In other words, an individual can use technology to read their Facebook wall in order to follow their friends. Whether or not individuals utilize technology to connect with others, there is an innate need for connection. Such a human need is the basis for both actual relationships and imaginary social relationships.

The Paradox of Place

Consider the following scenario: You drive to school or work just about every day—what we might call a routine experience. Often times you arrive at the location only to ask: “How did I get here? I don’t remember driving here.” Such an important yet routine activity as driving to the same place every day promotes a shift from what we are supposed to be doing (in this case paying attention to pedestrians and other drivers) to thinking about other things. In a sense we are in two places at once: here in the present, driving, and elsewhere. Obviously, it is important to remain mentally present while driving, and yet we are so well practiced at this task that many of us find our minds wandering to other places to think about other things. It is certainly likely that, if we can employ an attention strategy while driving an automobile that allows for thinking about other things (hopefully without causing an accident), when it comes to media consumption, where there this is little risk, shifting between states of mind—watching, listening, or reading, perhaps simultaneously with multiple media, while thinking—is a much easier task to accomplish within the myriad routines of our everyday lives.

Media consumption is complicated by the multitasking some consumers do with multiple media, which may be compounded when at the same time they invoke their stream of consciousness or engage in reverie as they elaborate upon, that is extend in their own thoughts and fantasies, images and ideas media put before them. This is a dynamic process in which individuals fluidly shift between media consumption, perhaps focusing on the content, and their own ideas and the images media content invokes; sometimes those ideas and images involve media figures. Just as multitasking with multiple media is a learned behavior, so too is the ability to shift between media content and our thoughts and back again. While consuming multiple media, the individual may engage in reverie, weaving together thoughts and imaginings with the relevant content from the various media they are consuming. In this process the lines between gossip, news, or information, and thought become intertwined, and perhaps the sources—one’s own fantasies or media information—blur together. Sometimes individuals are unable to track back the source of their thoughts, similarly to the driver described above who arrives at the destination not knowing how she or he got there. The complexity of this process is not conducive to retention of advertising messages; with regard to multitasking with multiple media, respondents in one study found it difficult to shift between a television commercial and a computer screen (Alperstein 2005).

Nevertheless consumers are able to fluidly move between multiple realities, energizing the imagination and encouraging engagement in imaginary social worlds. The inner world of the individual is a culturally rich environment inhabited partially by media figures. Media figures not only appear in our fantasies, daydreams, and stream of consciousness, but they also appear in our nocturnal dreams. In a survey of this phenomenon, more than half the respondents reported dreaming of a celebrity, and a content analysis of respondent dreams demonstrated that 17 percent included celebrities who appeared in the dream as the dreamer’s friends (Alperstein and Vann 1997). As media figures are a part of our media referent system, invoking a media figure outside of media consumption during social conversations or self-talk extends the use into everyday life.

The Paradox of Imagination

When individuals shift from the objective world to their inner imaginary world my informants tend to think about the past or anticipate the future. Places, objects, and

people, including media figures, populate the inner world. The paradox of imagination refers to the dual beliefs in Western society that encourage and discourage the use of the imagination. One study reported that 65 percent of children up to age seven reported having imaginary friends at some point in their young lives (Taylor 1999). However, imaginary interactions beyond that age are sometimes deemed inappropriate and are discouraged. Also, there is the familiar story of the young student for whom a teacher sends a note home, dismayed over the child's daydreaming during class. There is culture at work here, as daydreaming, that is imagining, is considered by Western standards non-productive behavior. And young people are taught never to be idle. Therefore engaging in an imaginary social relationship with a media figure is considered non-productive behavior by Western standards. This provides a partial explanation as to why many people have difficulty admitting they conduct such relationships, as they show a side of themselves that is not consistent with dominant cultural beliefs.

Additionally, we employ our weirdness censor when it comes to admitting that we engage in imaginary relationships. Not all imaginary social relationships are normal; in fact sometimes fandom can turn into fanaticism. Connections to celebrities exist on a continuum: at one end we merely know about and perhaps are attracted to a celebrity; however, at the other end of the continuum the fan may move beyond the imaginary to stalk or perhaps do worse, as has been the case for predators like Mark David Chapman, who killed John Lennon, or John Hinckley, who attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in order to impress actress and director Jodie Foster. Celebrity stalkers who are at the extreme end of the continuum of what Spitzberg and Cupach refer to as "disordered forms of fandom" reflect the darker side of the celebrity-fan relationship, making it difficult to discuss attraction to celebrities for fear of being labeled a stalker (2008: 287). Perhaps this reluctance to admit having a relationship with an imaginary other is understandable, as one of the paradoxes of contemporary Western culture is that on the one hand we prize imagination in art, literature, and technological innovation, but hold the imagination in disdain, as would be the case with the daydreaming student. At the same time parents encourage entry into the imaginary social world of celebrity worship in any number of ways. First, many young people have posters of their favorite celebrities hanging on their bedroom walls. Second, parents often accompany their teens and pre-teens to pop concerts, like those of Justin Bieber, for example, simply because it is safer to have a youngster engage in an imaginary relationship than a real one. And, third, engaging in such imaginary relationships at an early age is practice for conducting an actual relationship later in life; therefore social learning may take place even though it is simulated or part of a pseudo-experience.

For most if not all of us who consume media, imaginary social relationships are a part of our cultural experience. Whether we recognize it or not or are willing to discuss it or not, we all engage on some level or at some point on the continuum in an imaginary social relationship with a media figure. The following is a description by a young man, now in his early 20s, who recalls that in his teens he developed a "friendship" with pop music star Kanye West:

I even call him Kanye like I know him and we are on a first name basis. Kanye's style of rocking, of wearing pink polo shirts and setting a preppy yet urban tone with his dress, is something I still claim he stole from me. Kanye and I have the same style, and to an extent the same personality. On top of that I happen to love his music before I knew much about him. I look up to him, but at the

same time I almost view him as a friend. I can turn on my iPod and listen to him whenever I want.

Or in the case of another pop star, Jessica Simpson, a young woman speaks of the celebrity, who is ten years older than she is, as a friend:

Whenever there is a magazine with her on the cover I read it, every single word. I watch *E! News* and always turn it up when something comes on about her. I have every CD she has ever put out, and I have her concert on DVD. I think that if I knew her in person we would be friends. She's got the same kind of dog that I have, and she seems to have the same ideals and values in her life as I do. I would consider myself pretty involved in her life. I admire her for her career and amazing talent. I always dreamt of becoming a professional singer, and this relationship is perhaps an example of my not having let go of that dream completely.

It is most common that the imaginary social relationship takes the form of a friendship such as those described above.

Imaginary social relationships are not always positive, as sometimes individuals hold antagonistic feelings toward a media figure, despising or perhaps hating them. In the following instance, a female who is 19 speaks of her long-term dislike of Britney Spears, whom she finds "tasteless," "fake," and "too sexual." And those feelings of antipathy can easily spill over into a celebrity's appearance in a commercial:

When I saw her [Britney Spears's] commercial for Curious, her perfume, I was further annoyed. The commercial takes place in a hotel, and she is entering her hotel room when she sees an attractive male entering his as well. After entering their rooms, they both reach for their doorknobs and a scene of sexual subject matter flashes, and she pulls away with her voice in the background seductively asking, "Do you dare?" I thought to myself, "Of course her commercial is sexual; she never does anything different."

Conversely, sometimes individuals feel the need to protect the celebrity, defending them in their thoughts or to others at great risk of exposure when a negative story appears in the media. Assuming a defensive posture on behalf of an unmet media figure is one aspect of admiration, a key quality of imaginary relationships. The need to defend the celebrity is evident in the following experience of a female informant who is the same age as Kristen Stewart, with whom she maintains an imaginary social relationship:

There was an incident last year when Kristen and her boyfriend Michael Angarano had broken up and how it was because she was now in love with Robert Pattinson. My friend BBM'd [BlackBerry Messenger, an instant message application] me and told me how much of a witch she was for dumping a great guy who she has dated for years for her co-star. I then responded with, "Well, you can't judge because you don't know all of the facts. They could have been on the rocks for a while and it could have nothing to do with Rob." She then proceeded to ask me: "Are you like her best friend now, defending her?" It was at that moment that I knew I had a problem. I knew more about her life than I did about my friends, and I was defending her against the hatred of others.

As admiration grows in intensity, an imaginary love interest may form between the media figure and the fan. And while such an imaginary relationship is moved forward on the continuum, it is certainly well within the bounds of normal attraction—well short of stalking. The love interest is usually something attributed to adolescent infatuation—the idol worship teen and pre-teen girls and boys display regarding their favorite pop stars. However, such fantasies may become deeper as they carry into post-adolescence and beyond, as this 22-year-old female describes her attraction to tennis star Andy Roddick:

Though I have never met him or interacted with him on any level, I feel like I know him because I research his personal life, watch his tennis matches, and read his interviews. I have had dreams in which I attend the US Open or Wimbledon tournaments and meet eyes with Andy Roddick and we instantly fall in love and live “happily ever after.” Even though I know this would never happen in real life, the dreams keep coming back, and each one feels more real than the last. It has gotten to a point where the line of reality is so blurred that I even imagine myself being romantically involved with a man I have never met.

A common imaginary social relationship emerges when the celebrity serves as a role model or perhaps as a mentor to the fan, and it is here that celebrity appearances in advertising are likely to have greater influence. In the following instance an adolescent girl was able to blur the lines between her Barbie doll and a young actress who appeared in advertisements for Barbie. As a result the fan develops a desire to look and act like the celebrity:

When I was a little girl I had an obsession with Barbies [dolls]. I had over 25 Barbies, and any commercial I saw for them I would jump close to the screen and pay full attention to the details of this new doll. In 1994, Amanda Bynes made her first commercial debut in a Cut 'N' Style Barbie commercial. Yes, I was very young at this time, but I can still remember this doll and commercial. I remember thinking how happy and lucky the girls were in this commercial and that I just had to have this Barbie.

It would make sense that, for the imaginary relationship to evolve, or to move beyond mere attraction to role model or mentor, appearances in various media or repeated appearances in a serial program would provide opportunity if not encouragement for the relationship. For the 19-year-old female informant who at a young age began her imaginary social relationship with Amanda Bynes, the following illustrates the intertextual effect of media content coming from different sources:

For years and years I would watch her on Nickelodeon's *All That* television comedy, and she was always my favorite. She was the funniest girl on the show, and I remember thinking that I wanted to be as funny and clever as her. I would go to school and think about funny things that Amanda might say and try these funny jokes out on my friends. When Amanda was then offered her own spin-off of *All That*, properly named *The Amanda Show*, I was thrilled! I tried to watch every episode and just think about how I could be more like her. I think that she had a real influence on my behavior. When I was 13 years old,

I attended a good family friend's party. After cracking some jokes, the mom looked at me and said, "You know who you remind me of? Amanda Bynes." My eyes lit up and I felt so proud. I knew that I tried to be like her and that she was an influence on my life, but never did I imagine someone would associate me with her. As years went by more and more opportunities came for her and I just found her to be an even better role model.

Amanda Bynes's appearance in a Got Milk? commercial further illustrates the intertextual web consumers weave, and illustrates the role that advertising plays in the process: "One of my favorite advertisements she did was the famous Got Milk? campaign. I already loved milk so when I knew that she was supporting drinking milk it made things even sweeter!"

Both women and men use media figures as mentors or role models, and the brands they represent and the advertisements celebrities appear in serve to extend the imaginary relationship, as illustrated by the following description by a 20-year-old male:

Growing up, the Air Jordan brand influenced me to play harder and practice even more. As a young boy, I would shoot hoops in my driveway and fantasize about being Michael Jordan, soaring sky-high to dunk a basketball or to sink a winning three-point shot with no time left on the clock. He gave me the drive to be the best I could be in every sport I played. He formed a healthy lifestyle for me that consisted of working hard and doing my best in everything. This is a lifestyle that I still strive to live by to this day.

With regard to Michael Jordan's appearance in advertising, the fan says:

When I see Michael Jordan in a Nike or Hanes commercial, I have nothing but trust in such brands and their products. If either of these companies were to get negative publicity, I would most likely dismiss it because of my faith in Michael Jordan. I could not imagine Michael Jordan using anything less than the best products out there. From the time that I was in elementary school to the present, I've seen Michael Jordan in many commercials, such as Hanes with Cuba Gooding, Jr. In one of his Nike Air Jordan commercials, no words are spoken, only dramatic music and clips of athletes of all ages, races, and genders making amazing moves and plays. The motto of this commercial is: "Let Your Game Speak"—this is a motto that I live by.

New and emerging media have changed the social landscape enormously, partially because of the proliferation of technological devices and services through which consumers can connect with media figures. Along with the emergence of new media is a new set of requirements: creating the feeling of direct address in the guise of greater intimacy between the media figure and fan, opening up opportunities for fans to interact with the media figure, and providing opportunities to purchase endorsed products. Media figures who wish to create a bond with their fans through new media must operate within the code of authenticity. With social media like micro-blogging site Twitter, as Marwick and boyd (2011) point out, there is no backstage. Therefore there is no place for the celebrity to metaphorically rehearse; what takes place takes place on the stage of social media, making identity construction a performance for the celebrity

(ibid.). In order to lend an atmosphere of authenticity, social media provide the possibility of increased confidence that the media figure is who she or he claims to be, and social media provide the verification or documentation of authenticity through two key markers: first, the absence of privacy, and, second, spontaneity. The illusion engendered by tweets, for example, provides a glimpse into the inner life of the media figure, while at the most basic level fans want to ensure that the person tweeting or posting to their Facebook wall is who he or she claims to be.

The Paradox of Togetherness

What is missing from contemporary life that encourages individuals to pursue relationships with imagined others? In addition to the basic human need to belong, psychologists maintain that imaginary social relationships fulfill the need for affiliation and companionship (Giles 2002). Perhaps one reason why consumers participate in imaginary social relationships can be explained by the concept of anomie, the personal alienation that results from a breakdown in societal norms. When individuals cannot find their place in society without clear rules, they may look to others—in this case media figures—to help guide them. The new media-marketing environment provides an ideal social sphere for individuals to cling ever so tightly to media figures as suitable replacements for or extensions of actual relationships in order to find friendship, moral grounding, and advice, just to name a few ways in which media figures fill the gap in everyday social life. Although they looked at the traditional medium of television, in particular favored television programs, Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg (2009) developed the social surrogacy hypothesis to explain how loneliness motivates individuals to engage in imaginary social relationships. However, these researchers draw no conclusions as to whether the phenomenon is maladaptive or provides positive social support when needed. Beyond the closeness one may feel to a celebrity, the difference between an imaginary social relationship and an actual one is diminished because social media have the potential to convey a strong sense of authenticity and sincerity, qualities that are usually assigned to actual non-media relationships. Marwick and boyd (2011) point out that an article appearing in a magazine does not require the same amount of disclosure by a media figure as a post on Twitter. In other words, newer social media provide opportunities more so than traditional media to interact with celebrities and to delve deeper into the more private aspects of their lives; participation in social media demands greater disclosure on the part of the media figure.

The reality show star and entrepreneur Kim Kardashian is an example of a media figure who developed a sophisticated marketing scheme that begins in traditional media through her cable TV program *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, which averaged 3.7 million viewers during season four. Kim Kardashian has more than 6 million followers on Twitter, and more than 4 million friends on Facebook. She also maintains a dedicated web page, a blog, and an online store that in addition to selling products extends the conversation and perpetuates the dialogue between the celebrity and her fans. At the same time as Kardashian is selling herself, she is also selling her line of clothing, as well as brands like Skechers, for which she appeared in a 2011 Super Bowl commercial. In a sense, the consumer can enter her world vicariously through traditional media, learn intimate details about her life on gossip websites, and engage more actively by reading her Twitter feeds or posts on her Facebook wall. Social media have a participatory quality in that a fan can actively re-tweet, comment, disseminate information or

videos through their own social network, and ultimately purchase and wear products Kardashian promotes. The illusion of intimacy experienced at a distance by the consumer holds the potential to create a sense of closeness, enhanced personal meaning, and deeper emotions through the always available connection, allowing the consumer to become a friend of Kim's, be more like Kim, or become Kim for that matter, as the consumer herself presents her/Kim's "look" to the world.

Lady Gaga is another celebrity who uses social media to effectively connect with fans. It is through her appearances in music videos, awards ceremonies, and concerts that she has built a fan base that she refers to as "little monsters." Lady Gaga's popularity on Twitter, with more than 10 million followers, exceeds that of Kim Kardashian. A 20-year-old female informant who is of Italian heritage and attended Catholic school like Lady Gaga reflects on a storehouse of information she has gathered regarding her "friend" Lady Gaga and the similarities in their backgrounds:

We come from such similar home backgrounds that I actually think we could be friends in real life. Making news every day on Perez Hilton and X17 keeps me in the loop of the everyday life of Lady Gaga. Her outfits change almost as fast as her stories online do, with daily updates on her award show appearances, and shopping excursions.

This informant not only holds much information about Lady Gaga, but also demonstrates a strong understanding of the media and marketing system of which Lady Gaga is a part, in particular the need to integrate the use of celebrity, advertising, and new social media with social causes and charitable efforts. The informant was able to recall specific details regarding the success of this product launch for the MAC brand Viva Glam lipstick:

Aside from just the eye-catching ad in the MAC campaign, my friend Lady Gaga did it for a good cause. She has contributed to a number of charities and causes throughout her career. More recently, to benefit Haiti, Gaga donated all of the proceeds from her show amounting to over \$500,000 to charities and rescue efforts in Haiti. She has also been very proactive with raising awareness to young women about the risk of HIV/AIDS. Along with recording artist Cyndi Lauper, Gaga teamed up with MAC AIDS Fund's Viva Glam campaign, which raised over \$160 million to fight against AIDS and HIV, and bring awareness about the diseases to women around the world. Lady Gaga not only inspires me to fight for this cause, but also inspires me to give her MAC products a try. I know Lady Gaga would probably be too busy to hang out with my friends and me, but it is still fun to follow her real life.

The informant concludes that, "by following your friends just as much as you follow Lady Gaga, she becomes one of your friends," in a way that makes this seem "real." The "friendship" with Lady Gaga is fully established through acquisition and integration of information through multiple media sources. One quality that new social media provide fans with is what Marwick and boyd refer to as the "possibility of interaction" (2011: 144). That possibility of interaction can be actual, not imaginary, as a fan or follower may send an @reply to a media figure, who may in turn send an @reply to a fan's Twitter page as a means to "perform connection and availability, give back to loyal followers,

and manage their [the celebrity's] popularity" (145). This, of course, takes the relationship beyond the imaginary, and it is not particularly unique to new media, as there are a growing number of ways, like meet-and-greet events, in which fans gain access to media figures. The mediated world of Twitter, Facebook, and the like constitute an alternative reality, which is socially constructed through relationships, hierarchies, and roles that shift along with news, information, and gossip about the media figure. In other words, there is a social hierarchy within Twitter that may render the fan as mere observer or voyeur as the media figure confines her or his tweets to others within the inner circle.

A media figure may create a sense of intimacy by allowing the fan to eavesdrop by reading tweets that are intended to be between the celebrity and individuals in their social circle, like Kim Kardashian tweeting to one of her sisters. By allowing a fan to vicariously follow such micro-blogging interchanges, the fan feels like an insider. The paradox of togetherness suggests that the kinds of feelings that fans develop with media figures through traditional media are amplified through social media. However, managing the social distance between the celebrity and fan is the responsibility of the celebrity, for whom popularity and the promotion of products and services are at stake.

As new media feed the illusion of greater intimacy, the various roles celebrities play in everyday life continue to extend the nature of all the relationships individuals have with people they actually know and people they do not know, many Facebook "friends" and Twitter "followers" among them. As of 2009, the average Facebook user had 120 "friends", more for women than men ("Primates on Facebook" 2009). The paradox of togetherness suggests that as our online social sphere grows the difference between actual and imaginary relationships diminishes. The huge number of Facebook friends some users of that social network have belies the strength of those relationships. Imaginary social relationships with media figures created and maintained in social media have weak ties. However, weaker ties are not necessarily a bad thing. As Granovetter points out, weak ties are important to one's social integration, as they "serve crucial functions in linking otherwise unconnected segments of a network" (1983: 217). The weak-strong construct is an important conduit for advertisers, who seek both stability (maintaining brand loyalty) and instability (brand switching).

Conclusion: How Celebrities Stabilize and Destabilize Brand Relationships

In this chapter three paradoxes have been explored regarding imaginary social relationships with media figures and the ways in which new media impact those relationships. The three paradoxes—place, imagination, and togetherness—help to explain how imaginary social relationships work in Western culture and some of the work consumers do within those relationships. The ability to be in more than one place at a time in our minds enables individuals to fluidly move through a complex media environment that is both fixed and mobile. The imaginary worlds we create through fantasy, stream-of-consciousness thinking, daydreaming, and nocturnal dreams demonstrate how media figures become intertwined in everyday life and sometimes in decision making. And, while we appear to have hundreds of friends through myriad web connections, consumers in reality are maintaining those weakened social connections in virtual worlds, for example, in greater isolation (Turkle 2011).

Individuals seek stability in their social lives. However, owing to the volatility of mediated social links with imagined others, the use of media figures in advertising and

marketing communication holds the potential to be both a stabilizing and a destabilizing force. With regard to it being a stabilizing force, media figures routinely appearing in media, including advertising, are seen by fans as reliable and predictable, as evidenced by the “friendships” formed by some of my informants, especially when such relationships develop over a long period of time. An important aspect of the individual’s meaning-making system involves the reduction of risk associated with developing imaginary relationships. Is the media figure trustworthy? Is the media figure reliable? Do they regularly, perhaps routinely, present themselves in the media? The answers to these questions can only come through time and experience, and as such advertising serves as a mediating factor in risk reduction.

Even when the development of an imaginary social relationship is inspired through traditional media experiences, such relationships, as described by many of my informants, are marked by volatility. In that sense appearances in advertisements, for example, provide a signal to the fan that the media figure is moving up the ladder of success or conversely that the media figure’s career or notoriety is on the wane. As the imaginary social relationship is one-sided, the ability to continue or discontinue the imaginary relationship is within the control of the consumer/fan. Should something happen—a media figure’s failed relationship, illegal activity, poor performance, or career misstep, among other possibilities—that causes a shift, the fan can easily move on. Imaginary relationships, in this sense, are quite dynamic, fueled by the 24-hour news cycle brought about by content providers like TMZ.com or PerezHilton.com. The possibility that something negative might befall the media figure makes advertisers wary. The following illustrates how one male informant affected by the behavior of his football hero merely moves on after learning about quarterback Michael Vick’s conviction for promoting dog fighting:

I have always glorified Michael Vick both on and off the football field. I loved to watch him play on Sundays and couldn’t wait for his sneakers to come out every year. My whole perspective towards him changed when I found out one day while watching television that he was involved in a huge dog fighting scandal on his estate in Virginia. People immediately, including myself, looked at him as a convict instead of a role model/football star. His deal with Nike dropped in a heartbeat and his apparel came off the shelves. He went from on top of my list to the very bottom. Now everything is out the window and I have moved on.

Oftentimes there are, as in the case of Michael Vick and his endorsement deal with Coca-Cola that came to a speedy end, marketers who are willing to take the risk, believing that the ways in which consumers connect to celebrities are imperative for brand recognition, especially in a world of parity products. The 2009 sex scandal involving golfer Tiger Woods highlights the risks that brands take when they align themselves with celebrity endorsers.

Advertising operates within a highly commercialized media referent system in which commercials in traditional media are interlaced with websites, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter feeds, among the content of other social media. Consumers weave a physical web as they click from a gossip blog, like PerezHilton.com, to a celebrity’s Facebook page, and onward. There is an intertextual quality to the experience, as news, information, and product promotion on one website feed off and build on information gleaned from another to create a metaphoric dance of elaboration through which the individual consumer constructs a world of fantasy. Elaboration refers to the thoughts, fantasies, and

self-talk in which individuals engage as they consume media. As the symbolic importance of goods and services becomes increasingly intertwined with celebrity personalities, consumption becomes as much a symbolic act as an actual one. This is masterfully demonstrated by Kim Kardashian's use of social media. She represents a brand or directs fans to her "store," providing confirmation or validation for the product or service. The performative friendship, symbolic in nature, that ensues is an inducement to purchase in the guise of personal experience, an abstraction of what used to be referred to in traditional marketing parlance as personal selling, the one-to-one, face-to-face communication with a potential purchaser with the intention of making a sale.

Within the boundaries of this particular aspect of the imaginary social relationship, individuals engage in identity formation. The space between objective reality and the imaginary social relationship is where culture does its work, a space where we judge and evaluate others and ourselves within a mediated marketing communication system that paradoxically connects us as consumers to media figures that we do not know who offer the illusion of social connection and make us feel closer to our humanity.

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