Rojek, Chris. "Supply Side Factors in Celebrity Inflation." *Fame Attack: The Inflation of Celebrity and Its Consequences*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 88–97. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849661386.ch-006>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 13:58 UTC.

Copyright © Chris Rojek 2012. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

6 Supply Side Factors in Celebrity Inflation

The biggest supply side factor in the development of celebrity culture is access. The most important instrument of access is the media. It follows that the expansion of the media with the development of cable, satellite and the Web, is frequently credited as the engine in the growth of celebrity culture. More channels require more content. TV programmers responded to this challenge by developing celebrity game shows, star quiz shows, celebrity interview programmes, celebrity makeover shows, celebrity panels, celebrity chef shows and reality TV. As a corollary, other branches of the media, notably print culture, developed publications like *Hello!*, *Heat* and *Closer* to feed the apparently insatiable public demand for supplementary data about the private lives of stars.¹

The circulation figures for celebrity-lifestyle weeklies are astounding and have become an industry benchmark. While print publications have been suffering from the challenge posed by Internet delivery, celebrity-lifestyle weeklies have gone from strength to strength. *In Touch*, launched in 2002, grew its circulation by almost 50 per cent in the first half of 2005. *US Weekly* grew by 24 per cent to 1.7 million and *Star* reported a 21 per cent increase to 1.4 million readers. It is estimated that over 40 million Americans read *People* magazine each week. In the United Kingdom, 23 million people are estimated to read the top ten bestselling celebrity publications and ten bestselling tabloids (which have a heavy concentration of data relating to the stars). In France *Paris-Match* sells twice as many copies as the national newspapers. With the rise of cable, there are entire channels and dozens of programmes that focus exclusively on celebrity culture (Alexander, 2007; 2010b). In the face of such data, it is hard to ignore the cogency of the argument that celebrity inflation is supply-led.

There are several virtues to this line of argument. The supply of broadcasting has undoubtedly multiplied in the post-war years. The invention of television dates from the 1920s. By the outbreak of the Second World War, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union ran television services. However, compared with today's provision they were skeletal, being confined to high-status echelons in metropolitan centres like Los Angeles, Berlin, St Petersburg and London.

The growth of terrestrial-based national television broadcasting began in the 1950s. The multiplication of public and commercial channels characterized broadcasting history in the 1960s and 1970s. This extended the repertoire of programmes and enlarged and intensified celebrity culture. For very rapidly, commentators observed that the medium of television affords a powerful sense of intimacy between audiences and TV stars. The relationship was described as being akin to a primary relationship, that is a face-to-face encounter between individuals who are related by blood or friendship ties and acknowledge a sense of progression in their social encounters. As we shall see presently, this led to an academic interest in what has come to be known as 'para-social relationships'. That is the culture and psychology of audience clusters relating to mediated (television) stars as if they are on first-name terms with them (Horton and Whol, 1956).

Increasing media access also catered directly to the desire of young audiences to see the new pop and rock and roll stars created by the reinvigorated post-war music industry. When Elvis Presley appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in January 1957 it was estimated that 82.6 per cent of the American viewing public tuned in (Marling 1994: 180). This level of public interest was only matched in 1964 when The Beatles made their debut on the same show drawing an estimated TV audience of 73,700,000. This was the high-water mark of television's power to set public agendas and reflect popular sentiment. Since those heady days the power of television in making celebrity culture has receded. As the *Idol*, *Got Talent* and *X Factor* franchises richly demonstrate, it remains a considerable force. But it is now challenged by the domestic system of fame, especially the facility of the Internet to represent and dramatize events and personalities.

Television employed techniques perfected by the Hollywood studio system between the 1920s and 1940s to portray film stars as regular, attractive, humane representatives of the people. Staged interviews and winning photo-play spreads of stars relaxing, gave audiences the impression of continuity between the life of the celebrity and the ordinary lives of the people. Hollywood photo-plays were scrupulously attached to demonstrating that achieved celebrities were 'one of us' because the link between stardom and the ordinary public was recognized as the goose which lay the golden egg.²

This existed in some tension with the parallel view that stars live a frontier existence, blessed with dazzling opportunities yet prey to pressures that are absent in ordinary walks of life. For all that, it was an effective response to the hunger from audiences to know more about the secret lives of the stars. Staged presentations of off-camera celebrity existence reinforced audience identification by giving the impression that achieved celebrities had not forgotten their roots or their manners (Barbas, 2001).

The star system that emerged in the medium of television in the 1950s borrowed the same technologies of psychological identification and social reassurance. Programmers encouraged audiences to formulate and develop the impression that they were on first-name terms with stars and privy to details of their private lives. Interviews and photo-spreads in celebrity magazines and newspaper gossip columns reinforced associations of neighbourliness and intimacy. Audiences responded inquisitively about the private lives of these public figures. They missed them when they were absent, they identified with their reported moods and their romantic, business and medical challenges (Horton and Wohl, 1956). However, it was not until the rise of cable and satellite broadcasting that television became truly global.

The first satellite television broadcast via the Telstar satellite took place in 1962. But the real boom in satellite broadcasting occurred with privatization and deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s. In this period the British Sky Broadcasting Group (BSkyB), USA Network (owned by NBCUniversal), ESPN (owned by Disney and the Hearst Corporation), Nickelodeon and MTV (owned by Viacom) and TBS (owned by Time Warner) emerged and consolidated their position as primary global providers (McPhail, 2006).

Satellite, cable and the Internet proliferated celebrity culture. They produced round-the-clock international broadcasting. This ramped up the ratings wars. More channels meant more programmes and more intense competition for advertising revenues. As a result, niche programming based upon a menu of sport, soft news, music and lifestyle extended its hold over air time (Castells, 2009). Satellite and cable presenters like Georgie Thompson, Natalie Sawyer, Stephen Cole, Lorna Dunkley and Stephen Dixon became household names.

Today, satellite and cable are being challenged by the domestic system of celebrity production. In the last decade new stars have been created from their living rooms and private laptops. Amber Lee Ettinger developed a singing career on the strength of her Internet fame as the 'Obama Girl'. Perez Hilton (aka Mario Armando Lavandeira) is a celebrated Internet blogger whose site achieves millions of hits per day. Lisa Donovan used YouTube to promote her short comedy parodies and became an overnight sensation. Jack Conte has developed a successful singing career by releasing videos through YouTube. The *Back Dorm Boys* achieved fame by posting lip-syncing videos on the Internet and gained advertising work promoting Motorola Cellphones in China and the Beijing media company, Taihe Rye.

The Internet affords new avenues of fame acquisition. So much so that the phenomenon of the celebrity meme is now recognized in the literature. The term 'meme' was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976), to refer to compact units of cultural information or symbols that are accessible and have high impact factor ratings. The celebrity meme refers to catchphrases, dance moves, songs and entire persona

unveiled on the Internet that has instant appeal. A case in point is the popularity of the lip-syncing routines of the *Back Dorm Boys* to the songs of the *Backstreet Boys* and other pop stars. Successful memes spread among global youth audiences like wildfire. They can generate high economic rewards and build a cultural profile for the Internet celebrity.

In some ways the celebrity meme is akin to the celetooid. The exception, and it is crucial, is that celetooids are generally created by the media, whereas celebrity memes emerge from the domestic system of celebrity which seize media attention from below.

But we should be cautious about reading too much into the celebrity meme phenomenon. In particular, the celebrity meme may lead to the inference that fame is now within everyone's grasp. The separation of acclaim from content was anticipated many years ago by Daniel Boorstin (1962) who proposed that the PR-Media hub, technology and visual culture contain an inherent propensity to manufacture 'pseudo events' (fabricated newsworthy items). For Boorstin, the celebrities who personalize these items are also fabricated. Thus, his famous definition of celebrity as 'a person who is known for his well-knownness' (Boorstin, 1962: 67). Despite being a tautology, the definition has rung down through the decades because it encapsulates the pivotal connection between technology, the PR-Media hub and the pre-eminence of visual culture in the social ordering of fame.

Since Boorstin's day, strides in technology have made the link between technology, visual culture and fame at one and the same time more essential and more accessible. The Internet certainly provides access to anyone with a computer and Web connection and, today, access is the foundation of fame. However, a good deal of cold water must be poured on the leap of fancy that the celebrity meme is the future of celebrity culture. It is one thing to see the *Back Dorm Boys* as an overnight sensation. But this is very different from explaining why celebrity culture is ubiquitous. Image accumulation is a phenomenon that accompanies every sensational event in the media. Susan Boyle's audition video for *Britain's Got Talent* was the most watched YouTube video of 2009, with 120 million viewings (Bunz, 2009). The business of transforming image accumulation into viable image aggregation is tricky. A celebrity meme requires the intervention of dedicated public relations staff to manage exposure. In the case of the *Back Dorm Boys* and Boyle, this happened but they are the exceptions to the rule. After the first pang of public interest abates, the overwhelming majority of celebrity memes sink without trace. Yet the celebrity meme approach ignores the social and technical roles of cultural intermediaries in favour of an unlikely biological model that purports to reveal the work of social genetics. This is not the place to go into the many criticisms that can be made of Social Darwinism.³ Suffice to say that any approach to contemporary

celebrity that fails to engage with the imperatives of the business/state interests behind celebrities and the skills of the PR-Media hub is problematic on grounds of credibility.

Observers like Cashmore (2006) subscribe enthusiastically to the doctrine that supply creates its own demand. But this grossly underestimates the cultural literacy of audiences. Television is undoubtedly a powerful means of image accumulation. But there is no iron law which states that image accumulation leads directly to image aggregation. The mere supply of images of fame is unable to account for celebrity worship syndrome, the negative public response to celebrity vamping or the current popularity of celebrity as a form of life-coaching.

What Cashmore's approach fails to grasp is the position of celebrity in relation to a search for meaning in the lives of both stars and stargazers. While it is commonplace to portray identification with celebrity as close and intimate, the culture of fame is properly described as second hand, since it consists of recorded data transmitted by the PR-Media hub rather than face-to-face encounters. Yet the prominence and durability of this culture suggests that the world of fame is fulfilling a public need that is not satisfied by traditional relations of family and community. This again may give pause for thought to all those who regard celebrity culture to be froth.

Branding

Another aspect of the supply side of celebrity inflation is branding. Here, a distinction must be drawn with reference to branding. The celebrity brand refers to the images, symbols and associations built around a celebrity. By strengthening the brand, the celebrity builds the fan base. When this is successful, it translates into high impact factors that, in turn, attract advertisers. It is estimated that 20 per cent of American advertisements now feature celebrities (Story, 2006).⁴

A separate meaning of celebrity branding refers to the use of celebrities to endorse products. Celebrity endorsement is the business of 'the brand building the brand'. That is the celebrity brand is applied to provide transferable glamour to other products. The most potent transferable elements are physical appearance, athletic competence, intellectual capacity, emotional intelligence and lifestyle. Optimal celebrity endorsements require compatibility between the brand and the celebrity in criteria of identity, personality and market positioning.

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the link between celebrities and brand endorsement is well established (Pringle, 2004). The list of successful celebrity endorsement campaigns is long and growing. For instance, Louis Vuitton has used Christina Ricci, Chloë Sevigny and Scarlett Johansson to endorse their products. Gap has used Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Marianne Faithfull, Natalie Imbruglia,

Sissy Spaceck and Isabelle Huppert to build an eclectic, edgy image. Nike has employed Lance Armstrong, Kobe Bryant, William S. Burroughs, George Foreman, M. C. Hammer, Dennis Hopper, Michael Jackson, Denis Leary, Spike Lee, Dennis Rodman, Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney, Monica Seles, Maria Sharapova and Michele Wie to enhance the appeal of their commodities. There is no particular need to give more examples.

Corporations would not persist with celebrity endorsement unless they had proof that it enhances brand recognition. Brand endorsement extends the exposure of celebrities. That is why it is grouped under the supply side set of factors to explain the inflation of celebrity. From the standpoint of the corporation, the aim of endorsement is to transfer a measure of the glamour and prestige that the celebrity has achieved in one walk of life onto the commodity. As we have already noted, celebrity endorsement has the potential to humanize commodities. It invests inanimate objects with personal qualities. For example, an Omega watch carries enhanced associations of glamour, social honour, attraction and cultural cachet because billboard campaigns show George Clooney and Nicole Kidman wearing the brand. Even independent validation that a celebrity has touched, let alone owned, a commodity has market value (Newman *et al.*, 2011).

Gillette has used celebrity endorsements from David Beckham (football), David Chappelle (comedy), Dale Earnhardt Jr. (motor racing), Steve Garvey (baseball), Method Man (rap), Redman (rap), Telly Savalas (film/TV), Thierry Henry (football), Roger Federer (tennis) and Tiger Woods (golf). In addition to the success and glamour that they impart, these figures have been selected because they represent male independence, boldness, virility and daring-do.

In Marxist sociology, commodities are treated as things that are separate from humans, as things that satisfy human wants. But Marx himself refers to 'metaphysical subtleties' and 'theological niceties' that emerge only after close scrutiny of how commodities are produced, exchanged and consumed in market culture (Marx, 1977: 76–78). Commodities are inanimate objects, but the process of production and circulation bestows animate qualities upon them. They come to stand over us, persuading us to make this or that decision about how we use our time and spend our surplus income. Yet a commodity does not have legs or possess a brain and a voice. So how might it be said to 'stand over' us or 'persuade' us?

Marx calls this 'commodity fetishism', which he describes as a condition in which 'the products of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race' (Marx, 1977: 77).

Interestingly, for Marx (1977: 77–8) commodity fetishism is primarily explained as the result of the lack of social contact between producers, which disguises 'the social character of each producer's labour'. Because people experience

a connection with each other only through a world of things (commodities) and money, the social relationships that give rise to this world are obscured. Things and money take on a life of their own.

Celebrity endorsement constitutes a new stage in the process of exchange and a new benchmark in commodity fetishism. There is still a lack of knowledge about the social character of production. Hence, I do not know the producers of Omega watches and they do not know me. Impersonality, which is the core of the 'magical' qualities that Marx claims exist under commodity fetishism, remains intact. However, I do know who George Clooney and Nicole Kidman are. When they wear an Omega watch in an advertising campaign, the magazine photographs and billboards have a personal element based upon our wider, often intense emotional involvement with the star. Celebrity endorsement is designed to transfer the commodified magnetism of the star onto the product. Through the sorcery of celebrity associations, the social character of labour is substituted by the image of the star.

The extraction of an economic margin from the consumer is therefore not simply based on charging a price for the commodity that is greater than the cost of production. Now, for many corporations, it also entails sponsoring the cultural capital that celebrity endorsement brings to the exchange relationship between the retailer and the consumer. The cost of sponsorship is passed onto the consumer by increasing the price of the commodity. That some famous commodities are produced by sweatshop labour in the Third World is beside the point. In a fully developed consumer society what matters is exchange at the point of sale. A visible link between the commodity and the celebrity speaks volumes to consumers. By choosing the right celebrity match to endorse the commodity, the corporation produces an overwhelming positive message of glamour and prestige.

This is not an issue of enhancing the material qualities of the commodity. An Omega watch is an Omega watch is an Omega watch. It is about investing an Omega watch with what, today, we would call the powers of association, and in an older language would have been referred to as the characteristics of idealism. Thus, Omega watches have long held a coveted status in the marketplace. However, a new social status is invested in them when George Clooney and Nicole Kidman are appointed to provide endorsements in billboard campaigns. The human characteristics of physical beauty, integrity, intellectual capacity and emotional intelligence, with which the consumer is familiar through their acquaintance with the public face of the star, merge with the inanimate object to create the impression of a new, transcendent force. In short, there is what Newman *et al.* (2011) refer to as a 'contagion effect' between celebrity association and the value of the commodity.

The social character of labour is a non-issue for consumers, because the halo of star-conducted glamour and prestige cancels it out. In the eyes of the consumer, the

watch is an extension of the star. So the consumption of the watch produces a living relationship with the star and a link with concomitant values of beauty, emotional intelligence, prestige and integrity. This suggests that celebrity culture is complicit with producing a much broader notion of value than is generally recognized by the laws of economics.

In a world dominated by images produced by the PR-Media hub, celebrity images have commodified magnetism. It is this quality that corporations want consumers to relate to when they sponsor stars to endorse their commodities. By identifying with the image of the star and buying the commodity, consumers acquire a layer of appropriated glamour and prestige and adhere it to their ordinary social relationships. It is not that you become George Clooney or Nicole Kidman when you buy and wear an Omega watch; it is rather, that in doing so you recognize yourself as belonging to a prestigious fraternity which, in turn, signifies common pedigree. It is of no consequence that the pedigree has no genetic basis whatsoever. Image is all.

To resume, we have already noted a few of the problems that arise with celebrity endorsement. Corporations select endorsers for their physical appeal, athletic competence, intellectual capacity, emotional intelligence and lifestyle. Where the audience experiences cognitive dissonance between the public face and personal behaviour of celebrities, the result may be a negative feedback loop. This is not confined to the celebrity brand. By association, it carries over to the brands that celebrities endorse. The market losses suffered by Gillette, Accenture, Electronic Arts, Gatorola and Nike after the Tiger Woods debacle, may be referred to as a case in point. This brings us back to the question of the cultural literacy of consumers and the public.

The cultural literacy of the public

In her history of fans in movie culture, Barbas (2001) notes that from the earliest days of Hollywood, fans were interested in two critical aspects of star culture. To begin with, public information about celebrities was widely understood to be rationed. Disclosure, revelation and exposure about the private details of the lives of celebrities rapidly carried high cultural and economic value. Fans who were in the know carried aplomb and exerted superiority over fans that were in the dark. By way of recognition, PR-Media hubs established a variety of official and covert means of digging into the secrets of the stars and making them public. Hollywood did not create the gossip columnist, the paparazzi, the celebrity photographer or the culture of informants about star secrets, but it aided and abetted their development.

If fans were acutely conscious of the politics of information rationing, they were also keenly inquisitive about the accuracy of celebrity data. In the 19th century, the

hugely successful, somewhat infamous American showman, P. T. Barnum coined the adage, 'the bigger the humbug, the better the people will like it' (Fuhrman 1989: 16). This worked well with Barnum's circus of curiosities, which included mermaids, the 161-year-old wet nurse of George Washington, bearded ladies and, most famously, the dwarf General Tom Thumb. Barnum spun a web of deceit and intrigue around all of these show turns. He would have agreed with Bernays, who declared: 'The voice of the people expresses the mind of the people, and that mind is made up for it by the group leaders in whom it believes and by those persons who understand the manipulation of public opinion' (Bernays, 1928: 109).

Barnum was certainly adept at manipulation and has gone down in history as one of the greatest celebrity spin doctors of all time. By the age of cinema, blatant chutzpah was wearing thin. Endorsements from celebrity impresarios were subject to more rigorous press scrutiny and a more culturally literate public. To be sure, Hollywood studio bosses and publicists were not above publicity stunts. One of the most famous in the history of motion pictures occurred in 1910. The IMP studio head, Carl Laemmle, issued a press release stating that his leading female star, Florence Lawrence, had been killed in a streetcar accident. The news resulted in wide press coverage. However, it was a hoax. A few days after stargazers had been plunged into mourning, Laemmle issued a counter press release stating that initial reports were false. He capitalized on the resultant publicity by organizing a publicity tour for Lawrence, which drew huge crowds.

Notwithstanding this, the old idea of an omnipotent studio system moulding public opinion at will is untenable. What comes through most forcefully in Barbas's (2001) study is that, as early as the 1920s, movie fans exercised considerable discretion about the Hollywood publicity machine. They were accomplished in organizing their own information networks to extract nuggets about the private lives of celebrities and determine the truth. Through clubs and newsletters they bypassed the Hollywood studio system. Their information was not always solid gold. They were often victims of organized PR-Media misinformation and rumour-mongering.

Nonetheless, they were active agents in challenging Hollywood whitewash.

Perhaps enough has been said to reach some conclusions about supply side explanations of celebrity inflation. The proposition that an increase in supply produces greater demand is partly valid. But it emphatically does not tell the whole story. The post-war expansion of terrestrial, cable and satellite channels undoubtedly expanded the range and numbers of stars. This contributed to making celebrity culture ubiquitous. Not least because it supported an ancillary industry consisting of celebrity print and Internet cultures devoted to screen and TV stars. Given the enormous profile of media celebrities in post-war culture it is hardly surprising that the glamour and prestige of stars emerged as a magnet for corporation investment.

The evidence that celebrity endorsement can boost turnover and increase market value is corroborated. This lends credibility to the proposition that supply side factors are fundamental in explaining the rise of celebrity culture in the West after 1945.

But we would not be talking about fame attack and celebrity worship syndrome, unless we were responding to considerable public disquiet about the onslaught of celebrity culture. As with all supply-led programmes designed to increase value, increasing celebrity broadcasts and extending celebrity endorsements is subject to the law of diminishing returns. From the beginning of the 1920s the Hollywood studio system recognized that public scepticism about some PR-Media releases was a problem. This suggests that the suppliers themselves were wary about the argument that supply creates its own demand. They appreciated that blanket bombardment creates a public reaction that, if left unchecked, will weaken the celebrity brand.

Bernays characterized the public as being capable of nothing more than a 'herd' mentality. But, even in his day, it was cavalier of him to discount the cultural literacy of the public (Bernays, 1928: 126). The inflation of celebrity is not a matter of too many corporately produced celebrities chasing too few fans. At the heart of the matter is the increased propensity of the public to look for personal and group meaning in stars. Celebrity culture would not be ubiquitous unless it answered some need in the public. This need, or group of needs, may exceed the capacity of the PR-Media hub to supply suitable celebrity figures. This observation brings us to the question of celebrity demand, its true nature and its role in the inflation of celebrity culture.