
From Hannah Montana to naked on a wrecking ball: Miley Cyrus' issues management, and corporate celebrity debranding/rebranding efforts

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Abstract

Current celebrity focused literature in public relations focuses exclusively on image repair approaches—meaning scholars are analysing the public relations of celebrities after some event of magnitude or crisis. Thus, the literature exists to explain communicative strategies used by the celebrity who is engaging in damage control or strategies the celebrity might be using in an attempt to rebrand herself after some critical event. However, much can be learned about image transitioning (as opposed to image repair/image restoration) branding, celebrity, and public relations by analysing a current celebrity debranding/rebranding effort that does not involve after-the-fact apologia, image repair, or other face-saving discursive strategies. This shift in focus contributes directly to fandom research in an innovative way because the strategies that a celebrity uses to 'rebrand' herself have direct and indirect implications for fans and especially those fans who choose to continue to support said rebranded celebrity. Simply put, the individual as celebrity operates as an organisation (see Boyd & Waymer, 2011; Cheney 1992); as such, shifts in brand quality likely have effects on brand support (that is fandom). Thus, this paper explores fandom from a different perspective—that is from the organisation's (celebrity) perspective. In this study, we use Miley Cyrus as case for analysis. Celebrities in general are a worthy case for analysis in public relations because: 1) celebrities, like organisations, depend on society's warrants in order to exist. 2) Celebrities' images are shaped and influenced by positive and negative feedback from

audiences. Miley Cyrus is chosen in this particular study because she is arguably one of the most successful (former) child stars in recent history (Poniewozik, 2007), and is one of the most popular current celebrities as evidenced by her 2013 Artist of the Year Award from Music Television (MTV, 2013). We conclude with strategies celebrities, especially former child stars, can use in rebranding efforts as well as discuss implications of fandom and brand support.

Introduction and literature review

For many child stars, there comes a time when they are forced with a career-changing branding decision. Do they 'ride out' their child star image, only to exit the industry when they have reached their expiration date? Or do they rebrand themselves, featuring bolder, racier, and more mature messages, behaviours, and performances for a new audience? The former can be thought of as a simple dissolution of a celebrity (organisation) that has run its course whereby societal stakeholders no longer desire the services offered by the celebrity; the latter is an issue to be managed if the celebrity (as organisation) desires to remain a vital entity.

Most public relations research to date related to celebrity tends to look at the various image repair strategies employed by the celebrity following some issue or crisis that the celebrity is trying to minimise, reframe, explain away, deny, shift the blame away from the celebrity, apologise for, or accept responsibility and atone for (Benoit, 1997; Benoit & Hanczor, (1994; Brazeal, 2008; Brown, Dickhaus, & Long, 2012; Walsh, & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). Thus, the literature exists to explain

communicative strategies used by the celebrity who is engaging in damage control or strategies the celebrity might be using in an attempt to rebrand herself after some critical event. However, much can be learned about branding, celebrity, and public relations by analysing a current individual/celebrity as organisation's (see Boyd & Waymer, 2011; Cheney, 1992) rebranding effort that does not involve after-the-fact apologia, image repair, or other face-saving discursive strategies.

In this study, we use Miley Cyrus as case for analysis. Celebrities in general are a worthy case for analysis in public relations because: 1) celebrities, like organisations, depend on society's warrants in order to exist. 2) Celebrities' images are shaped and influenced by positive and negative feedback from audiences. Miley Cyrus is chosen in this particular study because she is arguably one of the most successful (former) child stars in recent history (Poniewozik, 2007), and she is one of the most popular current celebrities as evidenced by her 2013 Artist of the Year Award from Music Television (MTV) and her booming record and ticket sales (Lawrence, 2013). She has faced both criticism and praise for her decision to shed her childhood star persona and rebrand herself as a racy pop star (Greenburg, 2013). Even though the *New York Times* claims she "took the warp-speed path from directionless ex-child star (as the Disney Channel's Hannah Montana) to the most directional of pop stars, sliding easily into the role of pop's enfant terrible" (Caramanica, 2013, para. 1), the authors argue that this was a long strategic process. The authors identify three key phases in her career to date: her life as a popular child star (2006-2009), the beginning of her brand transition (2009-2012) which started with the promotion of her 2009 album *The time of our lives*, and the completion of her brand transformation (2012- present) which began with the campaign surrounding the release and promotion of her 2013 *Bangerz* album. The authors explain how these strategic brand management phases allowed her to eventually shed her childhood star image and rebrand herself as a relevant adult star. We also describe fan reactions to these efforts at all stages of this brand transformation process.

In this study, the authors first discuss the influence that celebrities have on society generally and on publics specifically. Next, the authors review relevant branding literature related to childhood stars and their connected images. Then the authors analyse the case, and critique the documents, images, and artifacts that surround Miley Cyrus, her rebranding efforts, and fan (and critic) reaction to those efforts. Finally, the authors discuss both the practical and theoretical implications of this analysis.

Branding, publicity, and celebrity influence on society celebrities and their influence on society

Celebrities have enormous influence on society (Fraser & Brown, 2002). People who are repeatedly exposed to media celebrities often develop a sense of friendship or intimacy with these celebrities. This act of audiences looking at media celebrities as friends and those who they identify with is often defined as a parasocial relationship (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea 2003a; Brown & Cody, 1991; Levy, 1979; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Although it can be argued that there is nothing inherently good or bad with parasocial relationships, their impact on society is of importance and is explored further.

Regarding celebrities and their societal influence, Fraser and Brown (2002) found that: 1) many ordinary people develop extraordinary psychological relationships with celebrities, whether living or dead; 2) media consumers regard celebrities as role models; 3) fans tend to adopt a celebrity's perceived attributes, including his or her values and behaviours. Of note, but beyond the purview of this analysis, is that it is possible that Miley Cyrus' transformation to a more sexual/mature being is well timed to match that same metamorphosis that her original 'Hannah Montana' fans are feeling. They can relate. They feel like they share her changing values and still view her as a role model (perhaps now even more so than if she had stayed a squeaky-clean pop star). Regardless, parasocial identification with celebrities is not without consequence.

As researchers argue, although people who closely follow the lives of celebrities are more likely to acquire the celebrity's attitudes and beliefs concerning specific social issues, it is also important to note that those followers are less likely to critically assess questionable behaviours and actions of the celebrity (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea; 2003b). For example, fans of former baseball great Mark McGwire "became more concerned about child abuse, one of McGwire's social causes, and were more likely to consider taking androstenedione, the muscle-enhancing drug that McGwire had used" (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003b, p. 590). Celebrities, through this pervasion of exposure, permeate national borders and become role models for people to follow; however, at times their actions and behaviours are far from consistent with their images as role models. Fraser and Brown (2002) asserted that "when celebrities violate moral norms, the public is thrust into a psychological dilemma in which it is natural to reject or diminish the notion that a moral failure has occurred" (p. 185). These actions of rejecting and diminishing a moral failure are enacted by publics in order to preserve or to ensure that little harm is inflicted upon the images of celebrities. But what happens when the celebrity purposefully chooses to alter her image? What if the perceived violation of expected behaviour and norms to some publics is a welcomed transition to other publics? What if the perceived violation is a viable means for the celebrity to remain relevant, thus ensuring longer success of the celebrity brand? Far too often, public relations scholars explore only the trigger events that surround celebrity image crisis—those issues that lead to public outcry and outrage due to some unexpected action or behaviour of celebrities. Little research in the discipline has analysed how celebrities strategically manage their brand prior to or even without a trigger event or crisis. This emphasis on branding and subsequent brand support (fandom) are the focal points and contributions of this study.

Brand identification

The concept of consumer-brand identification (CBI) derives from social identity theory (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010) and concepts surrounding organisational identification (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). In this study, this notion of brand identification is extended to include consumer and/or fan identification with a celebrity and/or her organisational brand. Social identity theory states that people not only identify themselves in terms of their personal identity, but also by identifying themselves as members of different groups or social categories, which can range from race, ethnicity, and gender, to church affiliation, sewing clubs, and sports teams (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Social identity theory is relevant to understanding the relationship between consumers and organisations, or in this case fans and their favourite celebrity, because although the individual consumer likely will not interact personally with other consumers, she still may consider herself to be part of that 'social' group (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008)—that is a fan in this case. Moreover, according to social identity theory (Brewer, 1991), people can identify with an organisation or group without actually being formal members of that organisation or group. In terms of organisational identification, that literature builds on social identity theory, and the crux in this particular vein of research is to examine how individuals associate themselves with specific, defined organisations. Organisational identification is defined as the degree to which members of an organisation perceive themselves and the focal organisation as sharing the same defining attributes. (Dutton, et. al, 1994). In this particular case fans of celebrities can fall into both camps: identifying with a group of others that support a celebrity—that is being a fan—as well as officially holding membership in a celebrity's fan club.

Child star celebrity and branding

Brands, which are built over extended time periods (Dowling, 2002), play a pivotal role in building a sustainable bond between the branded company and its customers

(Wiedmann, Hennigs, Schmidt, & Wuestefeld, 2011). The specific bond between a consumer and a brand must be regarded as an active relationship at the level of lived experience (Fournier, 1998). This means that since this relationship is ongoing and active, organisations and/or celebrities must take these factors into account when deciding whether to alter their brand.

In the case of child celebrities, the typical child star makes their transitional branding decision at or around the age of 17 (Lamb & Brown, 2006). For female child stars, this transitional branding often means that these female stars are recrafted to appeal to an adult male audience via the means of oversexualisation, which often requires their donning of revealing clothing as well as their involvement in sexually suggestive content (music, video scenes, movie scenes, or commercials). Because this transitional state is sometimes expedited, some critics have argued that (dating as far back as the Victorian era) children stars have been turned into centrefolds who are ogled like their adult counterparts, even though their age remains in a youthful state (Kincaid, 1998, 2010).

Lamb, Grailing, and Wheeler (2013) considered the 'adolescent' stage, the short, transitional age between childhood and adulthood, difficult to navigate in terms of innocence and sexuality because that narrow timeframe leaves little room for graceful transition. Thus, the result is the surprising and abrupt image changes for adolescent celebrities, should they choose to rebrand. The public's exposure to this transition is often via a series of publicity events that allow the newly branded celebrity to showcase their modified identity.

Celebrity (image) and publicity

Popular celebrities constantly deal with the intricacies of an image negotiation process which takes place between them, as celebrities, and various audiences. The celebrities recognise that through the media they perform their images. However, through responses like boycotts, as well as protests that receive media attention, or no longer supporting a celebrity

via record purchasing or concert going, audiences can voice their disdain toward the celebrity's performance of his image or the negative actions that he may engage in. In short, the celebrity is whatever the audience says he is because it is through their support and criticism that his image and public persona is forged.

On the contrary, celebrities also can take the approach that they define who they are and their own image. In a recent *New York Times* article, here is Miley Cyrus' response to this conundrum:

I went from people just thinking I was, like, a baby to people thinking I'm this, like, sex freak that really just pops molly and does lines all day [do drugs: ecstasy and cocaine]. It's like, 'Has anyone ever heard of rock 'n' roll?' There's a sex scene in pretty much every single movie, and they go, 'Well, that's a character.' Well, *that's* a character. I don't really dress as a teddy bear and, like, twerk on Robin Thicke, you know? (Caramanica, 2013, para.5)

From this perspective, celebrities can control their image. Moreover, by being proactive about their image, they can make strategic decisions about their image and the directions they decide to take their brand. Dyer (1986) mentioned that celebrities' personas do not consist solely of their professional images; rather, they consist of every bit of information that is made publicly available about them. Furthermore, Meyers (2009) stated that a celebrity is not merely confined to the brand that they present at face value; rather, the celebrity is viewed for every individual action, shopping venue, or spoken word that surrounds him or her. As such, celebrities often make strategic decisions about what events they will participate in and what publicity they will seek (Meyers, 2009). Thus, there are a number of positive publicity events that celebrities participate in, such as philanthropic efforts or charity promotions. These events appear to be designed to shift focus away from the celebrity and instead to a social issue; however, these activities also function as a means to let fans, consumers, and publics know that the celebrity

is both socially involved and socially aware. Conversely, celebrities are tempted to (and at times do) create shocking publicity events to gain attention at the expense of their own morality. Zhou and Whitla (2013) stated that these choices can cause severe societal damage of the celebrity's image, but will increase the celebrities' viewership exponentially. These shocking events generate an extreme number of viewers in a very short time period that span a multitude of audience archetypes (Zhou & Whitla, 2013). King (2006) referred to these events as sources of 'infotainment'—meaning that they are events in which the subject works to create a storyline that is used for the sole purpose of entertainment. These events create characters and villains, along with storylines of drama to generate a more marketable and profitable news story.

In short, the options for publicity events can vary in form and outlet, but are all rooted in the motivation to bring the branded celebrity press coverage. This press coverage can either serve to support the current celebrity brand or to uproot the brand and alter it in either a positive or negative way.

Method

The authors, in December of 2013, used the prescriptions set forth by case study method to analyse the career of Miley Cyrus. According to Patton (2002), "the case study should take the reader into the case situation and experience—a person's life, a group's life, or a program's life" (p. 450). This particular method is good in this kind of applied research because this qualitative approach has the capacity to "open up a world to a reader through rich, detailed, and concrete descriptions of people and places" (Patton, 2002, p. 438) in such a way that the reader can understand the phenomenon studied and draw his own interpretations and conclusions about meanings and significance of events. The authors began by conducting a Google search of the 'Career of Miley Cyrus'. More than 30 million results emerged. The authors reviewed the first 10 pages of results (100 entries) and found consistency in the representation of Miley Cyrus' career and fan reactions to her career

choices. Thus, the sites therein serve as the texts used to analyse the career of Miley Cyrus as case. After analysing the media sources, it appears that Miley Cyrus' career to date can be segmented neatly into three phases. The authors now will discuss the three phases of the strategic rebranding of Miley Cyrus, including the publicity events that occurred in each phase. For the purposes of this study, a 'publicity event' will refer to an event or series of planned events that are created and/or performed by the subject with a rhetorical purpose. Events that were intended to be private but were captured by paparazzi or released to the press by a third party will not be discussed.

Case analysis

Child star years- 2006-2009

Prior to her rebranding, Miley Cyrus was the star of the Disney Channel series 'Hannah Montana', which premiered on March 24, 2006 and concluded on January 16, 2011. This television show served as a way to teach young adults how to deal with family, friends, relationships, and a variety of other woes that are applicable to the show's middle school and high school-aged viewing audience. This series, like many of those on the Disney Channel at that time, was wholesome and family oriented. There was no sexual content, insinuation of drug use, or other suggestive content within these episodes.

As the daughter of country music singer, songwriter, and actor, Billy Ray Cyrus, Miley Cyrus was born into a life of fame. In her earlier years as a carefully managed Disney star, any public appearances that were captured by the paparazzi were seemingly harmless. She was generally recognised as one of America's sweethearts and a positive role model for her tween-aged audience until June 2008 when a 15-year-old Cyrus was featured on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine wrapped in a bed sheet with her back fully exposed. Though the photo was taken by acclaimed photographer, Annie Leibovitz, the *New York Times* believed that the photo threatened the whole Hannah Montana franchise (Barnes, 2008). After receiving backlash from her fans and the media, Cyrus apologised for the photo almost immediately

after it was made public. She released a statement that said, “I took part in a photo shoot that was supposed to be ‘artistic’ and now, seeing the photographs and reading the story, I feel so embarrassed. I never intended for any of this to happen and I apologize to my fans who I care so deeply about” (para. 13). Clearly her fans were not ready for a rebrand at that time, and Cyrus recognised that.

This sort of response and apology demonstrates the complexities of brand support (fandom). Likely, the most outspoken critics of Cyrus’ exposed back photo were the parents of children (likely young girls) who were avid watchers of Hannah Montana. These parents saw a maturing Cyrus being sexualised and ‘ogled’ (Kincaid, 2010), and recognised that if their young daughters idolised Cyrus they might think: 1) it is okay to pose bare-backed for a photo; 2) it is okay to post said photo for the world to see; 3) it is okay for them to attract the eye of adult suitors. Since parents of children comprise a more than 600 billion dollar per year market for Disney (Girioux, 2011), they were able to use their spending power to exert pressure on Disney directly and Cyrus indirectly. Thus, an apology was issued. Though what lies below the surface is the fact that Cyrus was a teen approaching adulthood, many of her fans were likely teens approaching adulthood, and those fans who identified with Cyrus likely were unable to voice support for Cyrus due to parental influence and restrictions.

The beginning of the brand transformation: 2009-2012

In 2009, at the age of 16, Cyrus released *The time of our lives*, an album that included the hit song *Party in the U.S.A.* During her promotional tour, she called it: “a transitioning album... really to introduce people to what I want my next record to sound like and with time I will be able to do that a little more. So it is really about us working our way up to being able to do the music you really love.”(Miley Cyrus says, 2009). Both the album and the hit single reached the #2 spot on their respective Billboard charts. The album’s Wonder World Tour was also a critical and commercial success. It was her first tour not to include performances as Hannah Montana.

In August 2009 at the Teen Choice Awards, she performed her song *Party in the U.S.A.* while dancing on a stripper pole (Toomey, 2013). She followed up that album by releasing a single called *Can’t be tamed*, and a video for the song that featured a scantily clad Cyrus in a cage. When audiences pushed back after the edgy video was released, she was quoted as saying “I think it definitely shows a change of what people remember me as, but it’s not trying to not be me...The lighting is different, the outfit may be different, but what you see in me is the same since I was 11 years old on Hannah Montana” (Toomey, 2013, para. 9). By staying true to her Hannah Montana brand, and stressing that she was still the same girl her fans loved, Cyrus was still trying to appease any fans who were not ready for a different brand. In 2010 after a video surfaced of an 18-year-old Miley taking a hit from a bong, she apologised to her fans again saying, “I’m not perfect...I made a mistake...I’m disappointed in myself for disappointing my fans” (Toomey, 2013, para. 10).

What’s interesting in this particular issues management phase (see Heath & Palenchar, 2009) is that Cyrus was at a point where interests were colliding about whom she was, about whom she wanted to become, and what competing audiences/stakeholders wanted her to be. Disney and Hannah Montana remained her primary identity. (Parental) fans opposed any brand transition to adult content due to their own self-interests. They wanted the wholesome Hannah Montana image for their children. Disney wanted to preserve the wholesome Hannah Montana image because it was a popular part of the Disney enterprise. However, Cyrus (as organisation) recognised that she was technically an adult (18 years of age), and if she wanted to ensure the long-term success of her career, a different image had to be crafted. Thus, what one sees is that fandom and organisational interest can at times be in conflict and at other times be outright oppositional.

The brand transformation is complete: 2012-present

The apologies to her fans stopped in 2012. In January 2012, she threw a penis-themed party for her then-boyfriend, and photos from the

party with her making lewd gestures circulated quickly around the Internet (Toomey, 2013, para. 11). When the photos made headlines, the Cyrus camp was quiet. Then in September 2012, she posted a series of Instagram photos capturing the chopping of her long hair into an edgy platinum-dyed pixie cut. In May 2013, she was featured in *V* magazine in a cover story entitled 'The emancipation of Miley'. The article featured racy photos of Cyrus and claimed that "...after shedding her Disney veneer—genuinely, without the trappings of image strategy—Miley has revealed herself to be a far more compelling pop figure in the throes of a powerful transformation. The world is watching as her look, identity, and womanhood evolve" (Jacobs, 2013, para. 1).

In June 2013, she released a music video for the first single off her *Bangerz* album, *We can't stop*. In the video she 'twerked' (thrusting her hips while in a squatting position), she smacked the behinds of her female dancers, and writhed around a bed in her underwear. *We can't stop* reached #2 on the Billboard charts. For her August 25th VMA performance, a performance she later called "a strategic hot mess" (Nicks, 2013, para. 2), Cyrus "twerked" and "grinded" against pop star Robin Thicke and oversized teddy bears, and she also mimed sexual acts with a foam finger. Miley Cyrus began the set with a furry, grey leotard that was decorated with a winking teddy bear, but then removed the grey leotard to reveal a bikini made of nude-coloured patent leather that made her appear nude.

Cyrus did actually appear naked (wearing just a pair of boots) in her *Wrecking ball* video, the single that she strategically released the same night as her VMA performance. On September 18, 2013, *Wrecking ball* became her first single to reach #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 list (Trust, 2013). On October 2, MTV premiered its documentary of Miley Cyrus' life called 'Miley: The movement' which captured her brand evolution leading up to the release of *Bangerz*. On October 4, 2013, she released the full *Bangerz* album. The lyrical content of her *Bangerz* album touched on the mature themes of alcohol use, drug use, and explicit sexual deviances. Responding to her critics, Cyrus said, "Even people who want to hate on me,

they can't even shut down the fact that I'm literally what everyone is talking about" (Stephens, 2013, para. 4). It was in 2013 she also began to reveal her feelings about being Hannah Montana for so long: "I watch everyone's music videos... Before, it was hard for me to watch that kind of stuff. I was so jealous of what everyone else got to do, because I didn't get to truly be myself yet. But now I realize how much they're not being themselves either. You don't have to be signed to Disney Channel to be put in a box, or to be rated PG." (Caramanica, 2013, para. 11).

Case summation

After an unsuccessful or incomplete attempt to change her brand from child star to sexy adult pop star in 2009, the publicity campaign surrounding the release of her *Bangerz* album in 2013 functioned as the full brand transition and announcement of her adult image. In the weeks following her much talked about VMA performance, she was a Google trending topic, *Wrecking ball* became her first single to hit #1 on the Billboard Top 100; *Wrecking ball* hit 36.5 million video streams and 477,000 paid downloads in its first week of release; her *Bangerz* album sold 270,000 copies its first week; she was featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone Magazine*; and she hosted Saturday Night Live (Piazza, 2013). In December 2013, she almost beat out the Pope for *Time Magazine's* Person of the Year 2013 (Bacon, 2013). In January 2014, *Forbes* named Cyrus to their annual 30 Under 30 list of people to watch in the music industry (Greenburg, 2014), and she also hit the top of the social media charts, demonstrating brand strength months after her album release (Miley Cyrus back, 2014). She may have lost some of her fans through her controversial *Bangerz* rollout campaign, but her record sales, concert ticket sales (Lawrence, 2014), and social media follower numbers (Starcount, 2014) are all indications that she easily replaced any fans she may have lost.

In the future, Cyrus has some obstacles to overcome. Because her events have an air of 'expected chaos', Cyrus likely will have to outdo herself in each publicity stunt she creates from this point forward. She will not only have

to increase the quantity of these events, but also their shock value if she hopes to remain in the headlines. This strategy, too, has potential pitfalls as too many publicity stunts can result in oversaturation of the media. Just look at Paris Hilton to see where publicity stunts without talent will take you (Piazza, 2013). The problem with taking a shock approach to publicity is that, while good in the short run, one will eventually use up one's shocking material and run out of ideas. As Piazza pointed out, "Infamy can only last so long before it needs to be supported by actual and consistent talent. Madonna has played this game perfectly. She shocks and she awes and sometimes she disgusts audiences, but she has found a way to continually reinvent herself and a brand on a regular basis for the past 30 years" (para. 19).

The true test for this brand will be how Miley Cyrus and her publicity team deal with this seemingly inevitable emergent issue. Her public relations team has a number of viable options. Given the praise she has received from public relations and marketing professionals (calling her a "marketing genius" (Kalb, 2013), a "strategic genius" (Standish, 2013), and a "PR genius" (Cataldi, 2013), it appears that she possesses the public relations savvy to refresh her brand if needed.

Conclusion

Celebrity, fandom, and public relations

This study has attempted to contribute to celebrity, fandom, and public relations research by focusing on the strategies that a celebrity uses to 'rebrand' herself. The authors focused on the celebrity because an organisational (celebrity) rebrand has direct and indirect implications for fans and especially those fans who choose to continue to support said rebranded celebrity. Thus, this paper explores fandom, ironically, from the perspective of the organisation (celebrity).

From the preceding analysis, what becomes clear is that celebrity and fandom are far more complicated and nuanced than the authors originally envisioned. When dealing with a childhood celebrity, parents of fans (these parental audiences might not be deemed fans in a definitional sense because they do not socially

identify with the celebrity; they are just financing and making it possible for their children to socially identify with a celebrity) wield great power and influence over a celebrity's image because their dollars support the celebrity. When Cyrus made decisions that violated the expectations of these parents, the parents used their influence (the dollar) on Disney executives to leverage pressure on Cyrus to conform. In short, childhood celebrity complicates the notion of fandom and celebrity due to the all-important variable of parental influence. If celebrities choose to rebrand themselves into adult stars, lessons from this case study suggest that they must find ways to better navigate the parental audience challenge and influence.

Debranding and image transitioning

This case also contributes to scholarly understanding of branding, debranding, and celebrity issues management. The authors argue that Miley Cyrus was engaged in a complex public relations effort, even if she and her team did not recognise the nuances and intricacies involved. The authors, as scholars, recognise that brands and images are interrelated but are not synonymous. Brands are an organisation's identity in the marketplace (what distinguishes their product and services from that of competitors), and image is what people, consumers, and fans think about the organisation in reality (Nandan, 2005). So the first thing Miley Cyrus had to do was to slowly dissociate herself from Disney and the Disney created Hannah Montana brands. Disney is a family friendly, child-centred media and entertainment conglomerate, and Hannah Montana was created by Disney to further contribute to the Disney brand. If Miley Cyrus was going to be successful as an adult star it was paramount for her to rebrand, or more accurately debrand, herself. Brand signifies ownership (the term derived from the process marking livestock); thus, before one can rebrand, it is crucial to debrand—that is renounce ownership. Miley Cyrus shed the old brands, Disney and Hannah Montana, by creating metaphorical and psychological distance between her and the existing brands. She did this in, part, by consistently altering her image—that is how people perceived her. So

the publicity stunts and spectacles are consistent, strategic reminders that Miley Cyrus is no longer owned by Disney or Hannah Montana. This is her new image; consistent images can lead to a strong brand. Thus, the authors argue that the rebranding is not complete. Although Miley Cyrus has a signature haircut and a signature pose with her tongue hanging out of her mouth (the tongue-wag is to Miley Cyrus what the golden arches are to McDonald's), she has created a brand identity (what a business or organisation wants people to believe they are), but may not have established an enduring brand—at least not one that is as strong as Hannah Montana and Disney.

Based on the analysis of the case, the authors provide a three-fold list of brand management steps for childhood celebrities desiring to rebrand themselves:

- 1) If rebranding is desired, child star celebrities must develop a viable debranding and image transitioning strategy. Dustin Diamond, a former child star, was famous for his role as Screech on the highly popular show *Saved by the Bell*. After the show ran its course, Diamond tried to transition into some adult acting roles, but was typecast as the nerdy Screech. This typecasting may have been the result of an unsuccessful rebranding strategy. As a last effort, he resorted to publicity tactics—a pornography sex tape—to make himself relevant. This effort failed, as well. This is the most crucial step in the process. If this effort fails, inevitably, the rebranding effort fails. Regardless, it is clear that the Miley Cyrus camp had a post-Hannah Montana branding effort in mind. The timing of implementation might not have been perfect; however, the plan was well considered and executed with some degree of success.

- 2) Relatedly, a celebrity should engage in some sort of pre-test to gauge audiences' or fans' potential reaction to the image transition. As indicated above, when Miley was pictured on the

front of *Vanity Fair* magazine wrapped in a bed sheet with her back fully exposed, there was much outcry. Maybe this was a 'priming' effort by her public relations staff? The authors argue that more likely it was a test by her public relations team to assess how audiences and fans would react to a tasteful, more adult depiction of Cyrus. Parents of fans and other audiences were not ready for such a transition. It is still unclear if teens (her social identity linked fans) disliked the image. In any event, Miley Cyrus apologised quickly, fell back on the Hannah Montana brand, the image that accompanied that brand, and waited again before another debranding and image transitioning attempt. This strategy is not a foreign one. When Coca-Cola wanted to rebrand to New Coke (the authors consider this a rebrand because Coke is the signature product of the Coca-Cola brand), the company gathered survey and focus group data. Coke made the wrong decision (launching New Coke without truly assessing the costs of moving forward without adequate 'fan' support) and quickly fell back on Coca-Cola Classic (and never made another attempt to rebrand Coca-Cola, though the company did introduce new products to its product line). The Cyrus camp was wise to wait until it appeared audiences were ready for her transition. They also had a new product (album and image) ready for public consumption. Of note, however, is that Miley Cyrus had reached a pivotal point in her career where if she had not made another attempt at the debranding effort and image transition, she likely would have lived in infamy as a child star.

- 3) Celebrities must announce their new image, with fanfare, to the world via multiple outlets. Miley strategically timed the release of her album, video, and *Bangerz* album to coincide with the 'launch party' and release of her new image. Moreover, she launched her new

image in one of the most visible outlets possible: the MTV Awards show. This multiplatform approach assured Miley maximum exposure and optimal coverage for her new image.

This discussion leads us to raise further questions and suggest possible directions for future research. For example, the above stated lesson 1 asserts that if rebranding is desired, child star celebrities must develop a viable transitioning strategy. Every child star, however, is not created equally, even if they possess equal talent. Stated another way: What role do the child star's demographic identity markers play in the successful child star transitional branding efforts? To what extent can males use the sex appeal strategy or sensational antics/shock publicity to transition from child to adult star? A parallel case might analyse the efforts of Justin Bieber in his fight to remain relevant. Other related questions might explore race/ethnicity, physical attractiveness, and/or sexuality and the roles they might play in child star transitional branding efforts and how fans or parents gauge such efforts.

In short, the Miley Cyrus rebranding transition creates an interesting and fruitful case study on how to approach a major brand change. While this is a matter of transitioning a child star into the adult realm, it appears, on the surface, applicable to company rebranding efforts as well. For example, what is interesting about Miley's transition is that it appears that in some cases even bad publicity can be good publicity. Marketing scholars noted, even bad reviews will lead to more sales of a product and that even after hearing only bad things about a product, consumers can have longer brand recognition (Berger, Sorenson, & Rasmussen, 2010). So in many ways, public relations scholars should begin to explore the contexts in which negative impressions are as impactful as making positive impressions. This is a fruitful avenue in practice, for the authors argue that it is far easier to make a bad impression than a good one. The ethics of such approaches, however, should be considered and expected public response to such decisions should be weighed and taken into

consideration. The authors hope this analysis helps to inform companies about the need to create meaningful conversations about their branding values and what strategies (positive publicity or negative) might work best for their product. Also fan and consumer perspectives must be taken into account. However, as highlighted in this case, what are an organisation's strategic options when fan desire is in direct conflict with organisational interests and preservation? This sort of discussion is especially important in an era when company spokespersons take to social media, in hopes that consumers, 'like' them or 'friend' them and their products and become brand loyal, fanatics for their products and services. The authors hope that these corporate communication executives have a plan in place if by chance fandom and brand support for the organisation become oppositional to and threaten organisational self-interests.

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