Ethics of Celebrities and Their Increasing Influence in 21st Century Society

Chong Ju Choi
Ron Berger

ABSTRACT. The influence of celebrities in the 21st century extends far beyond the traditional domain of the entertainment sector of society. During the recent Palestinian presidential elections, the Hollywood actor Richard Gere broadcast a televised message to voters in the region and stated, "Hi, I'm Richard Gere, and I'm speaking for the entire world". Celebrities in the 21st century have expanded from simple product endorsements to global political and international diplomacy. The celebrities industry is undergoing, "mission creep", or the expansion of an enterprise beyond its original goals (Hyde, 2009). The global internet is one of the major drivers of this phenomenon. The contribution of this paper is to analyse this global phenomenon and the potential implications for business ethics research.

KEY WORDS: ethics, celebrities, mission creep, fame, addiction, internet

Introduction

The global influence of celebrities in the 21st century extends far beyond the entertainment sector. During the recent Palestinian presidential elections, the Hollywood actor Richard Gere broadcast a televised message to voters in the region and stated,

> Hi, I'm Richard Gere, and I'm speaking for the entire world. (Richard Gere, actor)

Celebrities in the 21st century have expanded from simple product endorsements to sitting on United Nations committees, regional and global conflict commentators and international diplomacy. The Russian parliament is debating whether to send a global celebrity to its International Space Station. The celebrities industry is undergoing, "mission creep", or the expansion of an enterprise beyond its original goals (Hyde, 2009).

There has always been a connection between Hollywood and politics, certainly in the USA. However, global celebrities in the 21st century are involved in proselytising about particular religions, such as Scientology, negotiating with the Taliban in Afghanistan and participating in the Iraqi refugee crisis. The Hollywood actor, Jude Law's attempt to negotiate with the Taliban in Afghanistan was not successful; but the mere fact that Jude Law tried, and that it was discussed widely over the global internet, shows the expansion of celebrities' domain in today's society. The global entertainment industry, especially based in Hollywood, has vastly exceeded their original mandate in society.

The global internet is one of the major drivers of this phenomenon. The nature of constant, instantaneous and frenzied topic discussions over the global internet in the 21st century seems to have found a perfect match with the accelerating and expanding role of global celebrities. The contribution of this paper is to analyse this global phenomenon and the potential implications for business ethics research.

The global internet and celebrity "mission creep"

We believe that the global internet is one of the major drivers of this "mission creep", or an organization of industry's expansion beyond its original goals, by today's celebrities (Choi and Berger, 2009; Hyde, 2009). Part of the reason is that, in the 21st century, fame and celebrity are no longer restricted to a person's achievements, or work in the entertainment and sports fields. One of the people receiving the largest

number of hits on the global internet is Paris Hilton, a person famous for being famous (Carter, 2006). But is the increasing power of global celebrities being matched by equally great responsibility?

Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene* notes:

> ......certain tendencies and traits get replicated in a culture on a massive scale...replicated traits called memes, once they take root and spread, replicate whether or not there is some actual benefit to society, like a virus.

The global internet has accelerated this phenomenon of bandwagon effects, network communities and celebrity obsession, or the obsession with anyone who is "famous" over the internet. In terms of the business ethics literature, several areas have analysed related topics. Researchers such as Choi and Berger (2009), Maury and Kleiner (2002) and Spurgin (2003) have analysed the marketing and advertising ethics issues of the internet and e-commerce and how the internet can accelerate consumer crazes, and in turn social contagion towards a particular product, athlete or artist. Global internet and mobile technologies allow the dissemination of countless images and stories in nanoseconds, blurring the distinction between internet-driven ideas with actual scientific and historical records. However, in today's global society, we do not see individuals as still being influenced by science or history; however, individuals are becoming influenced by global celebrities.

We believe that the global internet has dramatically magnified the global quest for fame and celebrity (Choi and Berger, 2009; Chossat and Gergaud, 2003; Cohan, 2001; Foster et al., 2003), which in turn has increased the global influence of "celebrities", who in turn are people who are famous for being famous. The impact of the global internet is especially felt by the younger generation in today's global society. This younger generation is experiencing a combination of consumer crazes and bandwagon effects (Cohan, 2001) along with the belief that global fame based on the global internet adds economic and business value to individuals and society.

Fame and celebrity

Lindsay Lohan, a young Hollywood celebrity, recently decided to visit Iraq and to somehow help the American military in Iraq.

> My security guard is going to take me to the gun range. He says if I'm going to Iraq, I should really know how to shoot (Lindsay Lohan, quoted in Hyde (2009)).

How is it that celebrities in the 21st century are formulating foreign aid policy, backing political bills or affecting public health debates? Traditionally, the economic value or market price of the entertainment industry and its various components was seen as intangible and difficult to measure. Movie stars and films, artists and the quality of art is often seen as difficult to measure in terms of value and price without the role of expert opinions (Frey and Pommerehne, 1989; Hirsch, 1972). But global internet-driven 21st century seems to be driven by a general growth of the idea that celebrity can be measured in a tangible way.

In terms of a broad definition of cultural industries, art is seen as the high-brow or high end of culture, and entertainment and spots, the mass-consumption or low end of culture (Seaman, 2003). Various researchers in recent years in diverse disciplines ranging from sociology and geography to cultural studies have increasingly pointed out the increasing impact of the global internet (Hodgson, 2003) and the convergence of culture and the global market place in what is being called "late capitalism" or the 21st century (Negus, 2002). The obsession and perhaps addiction to fame, celebrities and what famous people are doing is accelerating. Between 2000 and 2005, the circulation of major opinion magazines such as *Time, Newsweek, Atlantic* and *New Yorker*, increased by 2%; the circulation of celebrity news magazines such as *People, Us, InStyle* and *Entertainment Weekly* increased by 18.7% (Halpern, 2008). The Gallup Organization's annual survey of the people Americans most admire traditionally did not include any celebrities, and normally the most admired people tended to be public service people

such as Winston Churchill or Martin Luther King Jr. The Gallup Organization's survey in 2008 of the 20 most admired people included several celebrities such as Mel Gibson, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Michael Jordan (Halpern, 2008).

One explanation could be that the global internet and technology in general in the 21st century allows much greater dissemination of countless images and global stories about the everyday lives of celebrities. Certainly, the convergence of culture and global markets in general helps to clarify the similarities between the industries of sports, art, movies and fame. In turn, the key driver of this convergence of the demand for fame, and in turn the lives, thoughts and comments of celebrities, is the rapid development of the worldwide web (Choi and Berger, 2009; Griesinger, 1990; Maury and Kleiner, 2002; Spurgin, 2003).

At the same time, evolutionary psychologists discuss the possibility that the global internet has made it easier for people to act on their traditional impulses towards admiration and being admired, and simply magnified these impulses. Henrich and Gil-White (2001) in their psychological studies have shown that only humans have the ability to observe and then mimic complex behaviours (Hirshleifer, 1995; Sneddon 2001; Soar 2002; Spurgin, 2003). This creates "prestige hierarchies", where those with the most valuable skills to be imitated are placed at the top of this hierarchy. In turn, others aspire to reach this hierarchy, or at least to be in close proximity to such individuals at the top of the hierarchy. Proximity to famous people is seen as a sign of status and prestige, and has value in politics, as well as in entertainment centres such as Hollywood (Halpern, 2008). Global internet and mobile technologies however may be changing this definition of proximity, as well as the definition of fame and celebrity.

Individuals at the top of the hierarchy in the 21st century are seen to be famous celebrities. The global internet is an outstanding communication channels for Hollywood celebrities. There are many recent quotes showing the global political involvement of models, actors and other celebrities. The Hollywood actress, Sharon Stone, was recently commenting on conflicts in the Middle East.

We can choose to have this alternative kind of growth that is a collective nuance of understanding. We are just that breath away from a peaceful co-existence. (Sharon Stone, actress)

Social herding and the quest for fame

The demand for the expansion of celebrities' influence and domain in society can be attributed to the increasing demand for fame in a global internet society. According to a survey done by the *Washington Post* and Harvard University in 2005, 31% of American teenagers think they will become famous one day (Carter, 2006; Choi and Berger, 2009; Gaski, 2001; Halpern, 2008). Statistically, it is not possible for everyone to be globally famous, even in a global internet society, but it helps to show why celebrities or those who are indeed "famous" for whatever particular reason are so highly valued in the 21st century, especially by the younger generation that has been educated with the internet. Achieving fame is seen as a comprehensive definition of ambitions and success. In surveys of teenagers' shows in terms of a wish list, American teenagers in the 21st century overwhelming chose "fame" over all other attributes, including intelligence or wealth (Choi and Berger, 2009; Halpern, 2008).

A model talking about nuclear power plant is going to capture a different audience than a nuclear scientist will. (Christie Brinkley, model)

In this sense, the younger generation want to communicate to an "audience" more similar to what models, and actors and their audience.

Another factor that can lead to the development of the global addiction to fame and the growing influence of celebrities in the 21st century is the way information is communicated within the market. One key way in which information is diffused globally today is through word-of-mouth communication, through social and community networks on the worldwide web (Hodgson, 2003; Negus, 2002; Schelling, 1978; Seaman, 2003; Smith, 2001). Herding occurs when a consumer's choice depends on the decisions of others, helping to accelerate the process of critical mass buildup, social lock-in effects and

increasing returns (Abrahamson, 2006). Such herd-ing, admiration, adulation can exist for global celeb-rities. In these cases brand, or market, images are built on the choices made by others in a social network created over the global internet. In the 21st century, such choices are increasingly made by celebrity-endorsement effects, and the association with people who are "internet famous".

Internet–driven celebrities: famous for being famous

The social historian Daniel Boorstin warned already in the 1960s that public life had become overrun with "pseudo events", semiscripted narratives to district people from reality (Hyde, 2009). The global internet seems to be the perfect communication medium for accelerating this phenomena in the 21st century. One effect of the rapidly increasing number of "reality TV" shows, such as Big Brother or Survivor, is that it seems much easier to be famous. Reality TV makes people famous for being them-selves. "Human beings have had delusions of gran-deur since the beginning of time, but now these thoughts no longer seem so delusional. You turn on the TV and there seems to be so much fame to go around". At the same time, entertainment is increasingly seen as being central to the global internet-based society, and entertainment captivates a global audience. Warren and Halpern-Manners (2007) quote their study of 653 New York middle-school students near Rochester, which are seen to represent demographically the USA as a whole, in terms of future ideal job occupations. The results of the survey was that 43.4% chose "the personal assistant to a very famous singer or movie star". Even proximity to a celebrity or someone who is globally famous seemed to be an ideal occupational choice for these middle-school students in the USA (Choi and Berger, 2009). In this sense, there is some appreciation of the difficulties of becoming famous, but mere association to celebrity is seen as vastly superior to more mundane ambitions such as aca-demic studies and learning a skill or craft.

Celebrities in the 21st century have great power to communicate and disseminate such mundane events, such as how an entertainer is spending his or her weekend, where he or she is dining and what he or

she is drinking. This type of traditional "whispering" about the lives of celebrities, in turn is done contin-uously and globally in the 21st century, through the global internet. One of the first television pro-grammes that depicted the value and advantages of being famous, was the television show, Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. Celebrities can provide a "common discourse" that perhaps traditionally was found through books, social groups and civic society (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2000; Choi and Berger, 2009). In today's global internet world, there seems to be a perfect match between global common discourse and global celebrities. Paris Hilton, perhaps one of the first people to be famous for being famous, due to the internet, helps create such global common discourse. She was recently quoted on her planned space mission:

> With the whole light years thing, what if I come back 10,000 years later and everyone I know is dead? I'll be like, great, now I have to start all over. (Paris Hilton)

The 21st century's internet society seems to thrive on a harmonious three-way relationship among celebrities, audiences and fame addiction. The global internet in turns moulds this three-way relationship and accelerates its dissemination and communica-tion. This in turn allows celebrities in the 21st century to "mission creep", or expand and acceler-ate their influence into various new areas of society. This interaction of forces is shown in Figure 1.

Celebrities, prestige and the internet

Evolutionary anthropologist researchers have advo-cated a "prestige theory" (Urrutiaguer, 2002). Prestige hierarchies then have those with the most valuable skills at the top. In hunter-gatherer times, the talented hunter was revered because he bought home food and because his skill could be "learned" (Choi and Berger, 2009; Halpern, 2008). Identifying a mentor or talented hunter and learning his skills helped one's survival in this earlier environment and society. In turn, the often exaggerated behaviours of such mentors are easily overlooked. The supermodel Naomi Campbell was famous for abusing her maid, but could not surrender her passport because she had
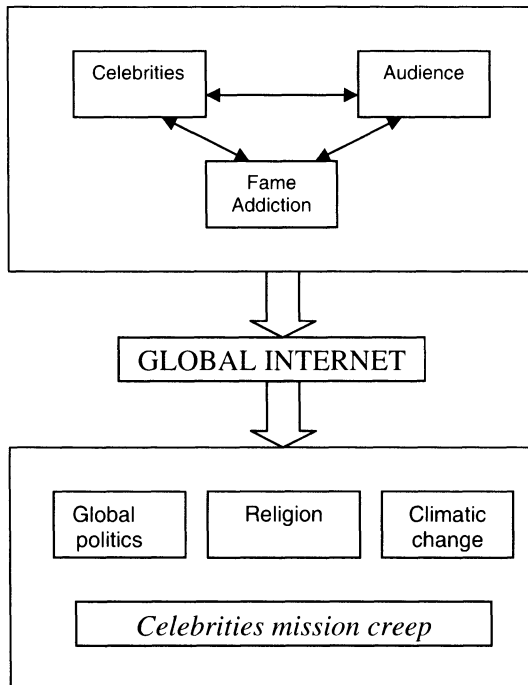
Figure 1. Celebrities' mission creep in the 21st century.

an appointment "to visit President Nelson Mandela" of South Africa (Hyde, 2009).

The traditional value of celebrities and the entertainment industry in general were seen to be intangible. The global internet society however, seems to believe that such intangible value and attributes can now be measured and seen as tangible. Human beings in modern times thus replicate such behaviour, by identifying prestigious people or "celebrities" and befriending and associating with them indirectly through the internet in society (Stead and Gilbert, 2001). Such formerly intangible values of association are now seen as tangible in a global internet society (Putnam, 2006; Rosen and Sanderson, 2001).

In turn, the global popularity of internet-based social networking sites such as MySpace or individual blogspots all show the need to discuss events, but also things that are famous (Choi and Berger, 2009). Traditionally, celebrities were seen as people that needed to be seen from afar and while keeping one's distance. In this sense, celebrities were similar to art pieces, better to be seen from a distance (Halpern, 2008; Hirsch, 1972; Maury and Kleiner, 2002). This traditional distance has been reduced

due to global technologies in communications. Celebrities, and famous people in turn, help to bring people, including adults, together in conversation and social interaction. The global role of the internet in the 21st century society will further accelerate such social and psychological trends throughout today's global knowledge-based society. Global internet communications have increased the availability of "fame" and access to the lives of celebrities, which in turn will further accelerate the global influence of celebrities in the 21st century society.

Conclusions

The global influence of celebrities in the 21st century extends far beyond the entertainment sector. During the recent Palestinian Presidential elections, the Hollywood actor, Richard Gere broadcast a televised message to voters in the region and stated, "Hi, I'm Richard Gere, and I'm speaking for the entire world". The celebrities industry is under going "mission creep", or the expansion of an enterprise beyond its original goals (Hyde, 2009). The purpose of this paper was to analyse the business ethics research implications of such global celebrity expansion and influence in the 21st century.

As the global internet helps to reduce communication costs rapidly, firms and customers tend to communicate much more quickly, and in smaller pieces than in the past. This magnifies the business ethics questions regarding the global internet and the increased power of celebrities, driven by the global internet. But do these celebrities realise the global impact of their actions, and their impact on global common discourse? How can celebrities be held responsible for this mission creep (Hyde, 2009) and the expansion of their domain in the 21st century society?

At least two areas warrant further research. The first is an empirical analysis of some of our ideas, looking especially at Hollywood's movie celebrities and the implications for positive business ethics. The second area is a further development of the conceptual ideas, especially in terms of positive business ethics and global education that can help to make celebrities more accountable for their greater power, role and influence in the 21st century internet-driven society.

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Chong Ju Choi
Department of Shipping Trade & Finance,
Cass City University Business School,
106 Bunhill Row, London, U.K.
E-mail: russell_choi@hotmail.com

Ron Berger
Marketing,
Interdiciplinary College,
Herziliya, Israel
E-mail: berger_r@zahav.net.il