**Fabricating Celebrity Brands via Scandalous Narrative:   
Crafting, Capering and Commodifying the Comedian, Russell Brand**

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**Abstract**

*Most marketing researchers with an interest in the mythic machinations of celebrity culture assume that being implicated in a scandal is detrimental to long term brand-building efforts. However, our premise is that this assumption is often misguided. We argue that celebrities who court scandal sometimes find that the media coverage it precipitates – especially when the spun narrative is compelling – can significantly increase their brand value. To support our assertion, we begin by reviewing the literature on celebrity scandal. Following this, we illustrate how the creation of a scandalous narrative can fuel a celebrity career. To do so we investigate the colourful career of the comedian-cum-celebrity, Russell Brand. We conclude that, when combined, the 3Cs of his scandalous narrative –* crafting*,* capering*, and* commodifying – *present, in combination, a viable means of gaining entry into the upper echelons of celebritydom.*

**Statement of Contribution:**

*This paper takes the counterintuitive stance that cultivating and celebrating scandal can be a winning formula in the eternal competition for brand visibility among celebrities.*

**Key Words:** Celebrity;Scandal; Brand; Narrative

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Scott Mills is a PhD candidate at the University of Liverpool Management School, UK. His research examines the consumption practices of comedy and comedians, focusing on the construction of self-identity, social mobility, and revolution. While at school, people used to laugh at Scott when he said he wanted to become a stand-up comedian. However, Scott has since become a stand-up comedian. They’re not laughing now.

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Lee Quinn lectures in marketing and consumer research for the highest bidder; currently the University of Liverpool Management School, UK. Recently, a grave error of judgement saw him contract an acute viral infection of unspecified origin. His wife and children stand by him.

**Introduction**

Delving under the skin of celebrity culture is the *raison d’etre* of what has been dubbed a “deranged corporate news culture” whose abiding prerogative seems to be the delivery of outrageous stories packaged to appeal to the most prurient interests of a cynical public (Huff and Phillips, 2011, p. 242). Tabloid and broadsheet journalism, gossip magazines, book publishers, celebrity blogs, and a slew of reality television programmes, all scrabble daily for such stories to publish or broadcast. The paparazzi, with their flashing cameras and dubious ethics, are the unsavoury characters entrusted to do much of the tawdry prying. Stories featuring nudity, emotional turmoil, extramarital affairs, break-ups, gossip, sex, and even the voyeuristic chronicling of a star’s death, are all grist to the mill of this industry. Note too that gossip-hungry consumers with an interest in this material are not just members of the unsophisticated proletariat. On the contrary, even professors of cultural studies and philosophy number among them. As Dean (2006, p. 9) acknowledges: “I know that tabloids are scandalous rags, delivering my attention to advertisers and the entertainment industry, feeding the celebrity-consumer machine, but I read them anyway. I may even read them critically, ironically, as if I were different from the typical tabloid reader, but I am still buying and reading them.”

Naturally, from the perspective of the celebrity, being the recipient of unwanted media attention is one of the main downsides of celebritydom. Yet some celebrities have used the media’s eagerness for the drama of scandal and revelation to orchestrate public interest in their careers. Madonna and her latter day disciple, Lady Gaga, strike us as two prominent exemplars of this scandal-mongering promotional strategy. While ostensibly just ordinary assemblages of flesh and blood with above average singing voices, they have fashioned a scantily-clad brand of infamy – that incidentally serves as a template for hundreds of would-be pop starlets – to such an extent that the mediated spectacle they offer is entirely fictitious (Kerrigan *et al.* 2011). Moreover, their predictable valorisation as notable celebrities, of course, would never have been impossible without the media apparatus – of which the internet is today a large part – that constantly reproduces and transmits the images, sounds and text that constitute the essence of their shifting commodities. Scandal’s role then, in the star-making system, despite often being dismissed as a frivolous topic, is not to be underestimated.

Nonetheless, gaze through the lens of scholarly marketing research and one cannot help but conclude that any involvement in scandal is inherently a bad thing, something best avoided[[1]](#footnote-1). In fact, most marketing researchers with an interest in the mythic machinations of celebrity culture assume as a matter of course that being implicated in a scandal is deeply detrimental to the long term brand-building efforts, not only of the celebrity in question but also of any brand they endorse (Carrillat, D’Astous, & Lazure, 2013; Fong & Wyer, 2012; Roehm & Tybout, 2006). In one such study, for instance, the author using ‘Social Identity Theory’ sought to ascertain whether, after a spate of immoral behaviour, celebrities could possibly continue to generate profits as entertainers or endorsers (Johnson 2005). In other words, maybe quitting their celebrity lifestyle would be a better option.

Note, that we do not disagree with the obvious insight that celebrity scandal can be bad for the celebrity’s own brand, or any they endorse (Erdogan, 1999). Yet, even when this seems not to be in doubt, as, for instance, in the case of Tiger Woods, unexpected benefits can still be accrued by the celebrity in question. For all the outcry that this event would be the ruination of his career, Tiger’s extramarital scandal, we would argue, actually made ordinary people better able to relate to him. His previously freakishly perfect persona with robot-like consistence melted away, and to them he became more human, capable of erring, of giving in to temptation (Davie, King & Leonard, 2010). As Mullman and Thomaselli, (2009, p. 18), citing Dean Crutchfield, chief engagement officer at branding agency Method, make clear: “If anything [Mr. Woods] is the one Gillette should put in front of the pack and say, ‘Now we have a real personality. In fact, ‘The best a man can get’ just got real … That’s something they can they can capitalize on and celebrate’”.

We wish to extend this notion by drawing attention to the potential beneficial effects of celebrities courting scandal (Thomson, 2006). Moreover, we suggest such beneficial effects could indeed transfer to brands which the celebrity endorses. After all, the objective of celebrity endorsement is to transfer desired qualities associated with the celebrity to the endorsed brand (Erdogan, 1999). In this respect, we point to the myriad fashion brands that rely on scandalous narratives to attain brand visibility and popularity. FCUK with their risqué name. American Apparel’s sexualisation of young models. Or, on the same theme, Calvin Klein’s Lolita campaign which again featured young models. Such brands seem to thrive on scandal, so much so that having an ad campaign banned is quite a legitimate aim for rebellious brands that cultivate a rock ‘n’ roll sensibility. In the context of celebrity brands, when Kate Moss’s illegal drug use hit the media in 2005, her seemingly appalled endorsers Burberry and Chanel severed ties with her, only to sign her on to more lucrative deals later when media attention waned. As Grant (2006, p. 236) states “there is nothing like a bit of scandal to boost your star rating”. Behr and Beeler-Norrholm (2006) hint that the brands Moss endorsed actually desired the theatrics around the scandal; the ensuing fallout, the media’s discussion of the potential embarrassment to the endorsed brand, and its fretting over the termination of endorsement deals, all the while mentioning the brands in question over and over.Having said this, it seems pertinent to advance how scandal in marketing theory is understood. We argue that celebrities who carefully court scandal can find that the media coverage it precipitates, regardless of how condemnatory it may be, can result in their popularity skyrocketing. The natural consequence of which, we assert, is that their brand value often undergoes an ineluctable and corresponding rise.

To support our assertion, we begin by reviewing the literature on celebrity scandal. In the process, we present the historical background to celebrity scandals. From this, we derive three common categories of celebrity and scandal interaction. Our paper then, in the same spirit as Kerrigan *et al.*’s (2011) take on the spinning brand commodification tactics of Andy Warhol, investigates the unique trajectory of comedian-cum-celebrity, Russell Brand’s career. Typical marketing scholarship would normally compel us to construct a normative model that supposedly distilled the essence of scandal’s role in developing celebrity, while, at the same time, offering a generalizable framework, applicable to all celebrity aspirants who seek not to embrace the celebration of wholesomeness and clean-living as a sure-fire route to stardom. For this paper, though, we refuse to kowtow to any such convention. Instead, our humble goal is simply to present the intrinsically interesting arc of Russell Brand’s incredible ascent via the constituent components of his brand narrative: *Crafting*, *Capering* and *Commodifying.* In doing so, our aim is to illustrate, not only how courting scandal has fuelled the fire of his celebrity career, but how it could also fuel the fire of other celebrity wannabees. We conclude by lamenting the absence of scandal in our own field, arguing that its introduction could considerably boost the popularity of our academic luminaries and, by dint of the reflective glow, the field itself.

**Theorising Celebrity Scandal**

For the purposes of this paper we accept, as most theorists do, that the construction of a celebrity is an ongoing act of fictional creation. They are, in effect, living billboards, reflexively presenting their self in a form that they know will be digestible to their target demographic (Boorstin, 1992). We thus consider scandal as a “public drama” that allows a celebrity to orchestrate and manipulate the media coverage they receive (Jacobs, 2005; Gamson, 1994; Press, & Williams, 2005). They are protagonists who live in a land of make-believe, a media-constructed landscape of story and myth. In support of our perspective of celebrities as mediated spectacles, Thompson’s (2000) wide-ranging review of political, sex and power scandals suggests that one means of understanding scandal is to subscribe to what he labels the ‘No Consequences Theory’. He describes this type of scandal as an ephemeral event, mostly fabricated by the media, which “has little or no bearing on the material factors and processes that shape social or political life” (Thompson, 2000, p. 234). It should be said that, in adopting this stance, we do not believe that all scandal literally has *no* consequences. At its worst, especially when the scandal in question impacts on the fabric of everyday life it can end a celebrity’s career. For example, Michael Barrymore, the once popular entertainer, has virtually disappeared from public life since a man attending a drug-fuelled party at his house was found dead in his swimming pool. “Allwight!” – as his catchphrase went – it most certainly was not. Being embroiled in scandals involving illegality is thus not recommended for any career-minded celebrity. Our focus in this paper then is only on the grey area of scandals that can be described as transgressive. It is the seemingly immoral stories involving titillation, sex, shock, gossip, voyeurism, and so on that are most likely to boost a celebrity brand’s popularity among consumers. Fans of scandalous celebrities could be enthused by such bad behaviour, especially when the dominant moral sensibilities of the wider public are offended.

Naturally, given their heightened, mass-media-fuelled levels of visibility, it comes as no surprise to recognise that celebrities encounter a greater chance of becoming embroiled in scandal than ordinary citizens (Driessens, 2013). By focusing our attention here on a number of prominent manifestations of the celebrity-scandal relationship we are able to frame three core categories of scandalous activity, which provide us with a historical overview of celebrity scandal. These categories are offered as: scandalous affairs and the pre-existing celebrity; sex-tape scandals and the celebrity revival; and, celebritizing notoriety. In the following section we highlight a number of illustrative examples in order to outline the underpinning rationale for our conceptualisation of celebrity scandal. Our analysis frames the need to understand how the celebrity-scandal relationship can be seen as a strategic construct in order to advance marketing’s perspective on scandal. In this sense we begin to counterbalance the scholarly debate that delineates scandal as a damaging construct (Carrillat, D’Astous, & Lazure, 2013; Fong & Wyer, 2012; Roehm & Tybout, 2006).

***Scandalous affairs and the pre-existing celebrity***

The first type of interaction is arguably the most frequently encountered. In this situation, the presence of a pre-existing celebrity becomes associated with a relatively common, illicit event (such as adultery or shop-lifting) that, consequently, becomes media-worthy as scandalous. Consider, for example, the actress Elizabeth Taylor; someone who has been labelled as one of the most iconic big screen performers in recent history. Over a career spanning several decades, she is argued to have combined the sex appeal and glamour of Marilyn Monroe with the serious acting capabilities of Susan Hayward (Doty, 2012). However, whilst married to her fourth husband, it was her affair with another married actor, Richard Burton, which marked the beginning of modern-day celebrity culture as many now recognise it (Cashmore, 2006).

Prior to the extra-marital Burton affair, Taylor was a sensationalised international film star. A contract player with the MGM film studio since her childhood, she made the transition from child star to adult actress seamlessly (Corliss, 2011). During the late 1950s, whilst in her twenties, she had become a mainstay performer, regularly appearing in dramatic roles, and receiving critical acclaim, regardless of a tumultuous private life. Indeed, in 1958, whilst mourning the death of third husband, Mike Todd, she began an affair with husband-to-be number four, Eddie Fisher; a married American singer who had been the best man at Taylor’s wedding to Todd (Doty, 2012). Nevertheless, although these events were widely reported by the media at the time they survive only to live in the shadow of the scandal surrounding the Taylor-Burton affair that followed (Cashmore, 2006).

When news of the Taylor-Burton affair became public knowledge in 1962 they immediately found themselves entangled at the centre of a media-frenzy. Tabloid tales of prying paparazzi and courtroom dramas of morally bankrupt telephone tappers may have become commonplace today but Taylor and Burton became the first celebrities to experience media intrusion into their everyday and private lives on such an invasive scale. US government officials publically derided their relationship and the pair even received an anonymous open letter that many believe originated from the Vatican (Doty, 2012). Taylor’s iconic image soured as her previously endeared public status evaporated. A seemingly untouchable Hollywood starlet morphed into the role of a promiscuous, adulterous floozy. Interestingly, simultaneous changes to the Hollywood celebrity system also appeared to be taking place at around this time as celebrities were increasingly seen as individualised, holding power sovereign to the film studios that created them and bringing to an end the preceding thirty-year-old oligopolistic system that saw these individuals exclusively and contractually bound to a particular studio (Marshall, 1997). As Potts (2009) notes, this structural shift led to the public image of celebrities no longer being controlled and protected by film studio’s PR teams, transferring responsibility largely onto the celebrities themselves. Furthermore, from a marketing perspective, this particular example offers an insightful turning point, marking a juncture whereby the public were seen to have become more interested in one particular celebrity’s private life than her abilities as an actress.

We may only be able to speculate that Taylor’s illicit behaviours had become too regular an occurrence for the sensibilities of the general public but we can be certain that the general public do not judge scandal in isolation of the celebrity’s brand narrative. This is just one example of how the presence of pre-existing celebrity, captured during the throes of a relatively common illicit event, becomes embroiled in scandal. Other, perhaps more inflammatory, celebrity scandals of this kind include: Winona Ryder’s shoplifting episode, Mel Gibson’s drink-driving and anti-Semitic outbursts, and Hugh Grant’s Sunset Boulevard misdemeanours with Hollywood prostitute, Divine Brown. Barely a week passes without another celebrity scandal story breaking, confirming that scandal and the pre-existing celebrity will remain one of the most frequently encountered types of celebrity-scandal interaction.

***Sex-tape scandals and the celebrity revival***

The second type of interaction occurs where a person of relatively minor, or ailing, celebrity status becomes involved in an illicit event which, in turn, enlivens their profile due to the increased levels of media exposure and public interest that follow (Kurzman *et al*., 2007). Take, for examples, the separate celebrity cases of Pamela Anderson, Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian who list among many others to have recorded their bedroom-based sexual exploits prior to the content somehow making its way into the public domain. Whatever we might think, ‘sex tape’ scandals continue to endure as a key facilitator in the revival of celebrity brands and although the real facts of each matter are as murky as the X-rated footage in which these sweaty conspirators nakedly appear, a serious question always remains as to whether such leaks are intentional. Only the celebrities themselves can answer the question as to how much they suffer as a consequence of their intimate moments becoming widely available for public consumption. The reality is that many of them recapture and even surpass the celebrity status garnered during their earlier careers.

An heiress to the Hilton Hotel chain, Paris Hilton, for example, was sometimes portrayed in the tabloids as an air-headed socialite hobnobbing with a young Hollywood crowd (Ferris & Stein, 2010). And yet, it may be no coincidence that Hilton’s sex-movie was released on the internet days before the first airing of a new reality television show, ‘The Simple Life’, in which she was to debut. The media circus surrounding the newly crowned ‘amateur’ porn sensation no doubt massaged the show’s popularity, drawing an astonishing thirteen million viewers to the opening episode (Cashmore, 2006). Despite the apparent shame, Hilton conveniently managed to leverage her rise to fully-fledged ‘bad girl’ to full effect (Chang-Kredl, 2008, p. 221), appearing in further television reality shows, taming her talents to star in alternative movie genres, publishing her memoirs (twice), releasing a solo music album, selling the obligatory fragrance, as well as DJ-ing in clubs (Polak, 2008). Such is the extent of Hilton and others’ reignited fame that this template readily lends itself to be copied by a slew of young female socialites hoping to thrust themselves into the realms of celebrity super-stardom (Milner, 2010).

***Celebritizing Notoriety***

The third type of scandal that can result in the conferring of celebrity status – and by no means one which we endorse – usually occurs when a member of the general public is involved in an event of dubious propriety. Notoriety, though probably the rarest type of celebrity-scandal formation, can rapidly transform its participants into celebrities. One such example led to a small time crook, Mr Ronald Biggs, becoming world famous as the chief architect of the Great Train Robbery of 1963. Audaciously, in cahoots with a gang of accomplices, he managed to steal £2.6m from a Royal Mail train before being arrested a month later and sentenced to fifteen months. However, a year later he escaped the confines of his Wandsworth cell to become a fugitive, a man on the run. For many years, he lived an extravagant life in Brazil, only returning to Britain to face justice in 2001, after the onset of ill-health (Penfold-Mounce, 2009). Such an endeavour, and the subsequent media’s romancing of his crimes, served to transform Biggs into an international celebrity, enabling him to profit from his fame and provide an income for his family. One means of doing so was to charge people money to hear stories, no doubt considerably embellished and exaggerated, about his seemingly daring-do adventures and remarkable ability to evade justice (Liljas, 2013). He even generated a cult-like following with supporters around the world, including celebrities such as Mick Jagger and the band members of the Sex Pistols (Prinz 2014). Upon his death in 2013, the palpable media discourse of ‘a loveable rogue’, rather than an organised and unrepentant career criminal, followed him to his grave.

Notwithstanding the fact that many celebrities begin their lives as ordinary citizens, living outside of media attention in relative obscurity, we now turn our attention towards an in-depth analysis of celebrity brand-building through scandal. We wish to evaluate our underpinning argument that scandal is not the *bête noir* of branding that many may assume it to be. What we need in order to do so, therefore, is a fitting exemplar; a celebrity of outrageous proportions and a platform from which to probe our assertions. In this sense, we can think of no better bastion of scandal than the self-styled, dalliant dandy himself. Please allow us to take you into the brazenly iniquitous world of Mr Russell Brand, a celebrity schooled for scandal. We do so by building a potted textual Brand biography, drawing from both volumes of his autobiographies, where his fecund writings allow us to speculate about the nature of his brand, and by consulting copious newspaper and academic papers that embrace him as a subject. This is also supplemented by our theoretically-informed interpretative take, which posits that his celebrity brand can best be understood in terms of what we call the 3Cs of celebrity branding: *Crafting*; *Capering;* and *Commodifying*. Needless to say, none of this was consciously enacted by Russell in the manner suggested by Folman’s (2009) “*The Scandal Plan: How to Win the Presidency by Cheating on Your Wife.”* There is, therefore, no grand calculus at work here, merely our framing and interpretation of it.

**Crafting Brand**

The notion of *crafting* Brand specifically refers to the crystallisation of personality and mind-set that occurred during the nascent years of his youth. His uniqueness as an individual, fomented by the peculiarity of his cultural influences, circle of friends, and his admittedly not unusual upbringing, helped cultivate a climate in which this loquacious and outrageous character could flourish. Born in 1975, Russell Brand spent his formative years as an only child, living with his mother in a council house in Essex. Detailing his poor background, and having little contact with his father whilst growing up, Russell’s autobiographical account reveals a narrative of humble origins (Brand, 2007). In that pre-internet era he likely spent a considerable amount of time in his bedroom, listening to music, reading, and generally *crafting* a sense of his own private world. Self-exploration, experimentation, especially with drugs, and imaginary excursions were high on his agenda. The crafting process began then with a seemingly familiar rags-to-riches tale, evident in the stories of so many individuals who go on to become the patriarch of a multi-million pound celebrity brand status. Boasting an impressive portfolio that includes stand-up comedy, movie appearances, television presenting roles, publishing deals, radio shows and the occasional journalistic flourish, Brand’s life certainly appears to be one of extremes (Brand, 2010). Expelled from both school and drama school, a drug addiction consumed much of his adolescence as well as his twenties. Notably, during this period, he was also asked to leave a second drama institution, Drama Centre London, as a consequence of his drug-addled exploits; not that this should come as any great surprise given his brash claims to have drunkenly swindled his way through the auditioning process while high on heroin (Brand, 2007).

Nevertheless, agents began to recognise an inherent raw talent for entertaining, enabling him to attract minor television roles, such as his short-lived late-night MTV show ‘*RE: Brand’*, as well as paid gigs on the UK comedy club circuit (Brand, 2007). However, having repeatedly been fired from his various opportunities and ditched by a number of agents, due to his drug addiction, Russell eventually signed with his long-term agent, John Noel. Noel served as a steadying force and is attributed as the guiding hand enabling Russell to overcome his addiction via a suitable clinic’s rehabilitation programme in 2006. Almost immediately following his recovery, Brand secured a role in presenting *‘Big Brother’s Big Mouth’*, a new *‘Big Brother’* spin-off show on digital television where viewers could debate the goings on they had observed inside the *‘Big Brother’* house. Brand’s dandyish charm coupled with lightening sharp wit appeared apt for moderating such interaction and ratings for the show soared as his cult following ensued.

There is no chance of side-stepping the ever-present reference to sex in Brand’s literary repertoire and within his early stand-up routines this lascivious bent was punishingly inescapable. It is worth noting that drugs and alcohol were, apparently, not his only addiction as he also admitted himself into a rehabilitation programme as a self-confessed sex addict. Whether this was wholly necessary is debatable but there is no doubt that it remains pertinent to his scandalous portrait. Shortly after his “unsuccessful” sexual rehabilitation Brand attained his first highly prominent exposure in the media as he was photographed leaving a London nightspot with celebrity A-list starlet, Kate Moss; subsequently being photographed again upon leaving her house the following morning (Brand, 2010). Following this tabloid appraisal, his success on *‘Big Brother’s Big Mouth’* was widely acclaimed and a primetime Friday night interview with one of the BBC’s highest paid celebrities, Jonathan Ross, placed Russell’s Brand firmly into the public’s consciousness. However, lest we believe that this was all so simple; it clearly was not. Crafting Brand was a carefully staged project, a textual project no less, with scandal emblazoned across his stage performed route to the top of a culture in which he is now firmly embedded.

**Capering Brand**

The notion of capering describes the counterintuitive inclination to create wealth by taking risks. While most market-making strategies emphasize the need for careful consideration in respect of selecting the most risk-free and conservative means of making money (Abrahams 2008), Russell Brand does no such thing, preferring instead to mischievously gambol from controversy to controversy. Such a strategy is closely aligned with the first tenet of Laermer and Simmons’ (2007) *Punk Marketing Manifesto*, which states, rather dramatically, that those who avoid risk will die. In this spirit, Russell’s decision to remind an eminent audience at GQ magazine’s *‘2013 Men of the Year Awards’* that the event’s main sponsor, Hugo Boss, designed uniforms for the Nazis, is an example of such feather-ruffling risk-taking. Ejected from the event later that evening, this cringe-worthy, but outrageous, escapade is a standard Brand tactic. Indeed, his career is littered with incidents where he speaks the unspeakable and does the undoable. Each and every one of these apparent lapses of decency and social awareness reeks of scandal. His most prominent risk-taking capers include: arriving for work at his MTV office dressed as Osama Bin Laden on the day following the 9/11 terror attacks, or; leaving a voicemail to inform the elderly Andrew Sachs, who played Spanish waiter Manuel in the once popular British sitcom, Fawlty Towers, that he had recently copulated with his granddaughter (Kelly, 2010); or brashly announcing US president at the time, George Bush, as mentality deformed whilst hosting the 2009 American MTV Video Music Awards (Brand 2007, 2010). His stunts are shocking, as morally bankrupt as they can be, and yet his popularity remains. His appearances never dwindle and his public voice never loses an outlet to be aired in weaving consumers’ psychological connections and attachments to the brand of Brand (Thomson, 2006).

For example, Brand’s most recent controversy occurred on the BBC’s *Newsnight* programme during an unlikely interview with English journalist, broadcaster and author, Jeremy Paxman, along with an associated cover story and guest editor spot in the October 2013 issue of *New Statesman* (Brand, 2013). Urging a revolt against government and calling upon the public to *“change the way we think”* he insists that a revolution is in order if we are to achieve a fairer society where power and money are more evenly distributed. Naturally, we would cynically question whether Brand is really distancing himself from consumer and celebrity culture by denouncing the system, and proclaiming his anti-capitalist, anti-consumer, anti-fame, ‘we are all one’ agenda that is apparent when he discusses his worldviews. As far as we see it, asking consumers to register online for ‘a revolution’, as Brand labels it, seems rather incongruous, oxymoronic and, quite frankly, embarrassing if we are genuinely supposed to believe in him as a genuine article. Whether this is simply just a ploy to enhance his celebrity status and his reported $15m brand value (The Richest, 2014) in a crowded marketplace is open to speculation. However, the eminent scandal on this occasion does not appear to be his revolutionary call *per se*. It is more to do with the fact that he was given the media space in order to do so (Webb, 2013), perhaps little more than a self-serving marketing ploy, authentic in appearance and designed to manipulate ordinary consumers, drawing attention and enhancing his own celebrity status (Cashmore, 2006). Scandal defines this status and it creates him the space to embellish his act. What is more, he makes no secret of the strategy. And yet, how could we have missed this shameful alliteration of public naivety? It was obvious, right down to the chosen names of his most successful stand-up comedy tours, including: “*Scandalous*” and *“Shame.”*

**Commodifying Brand**

In the context of this paper, our understanding of Brand as a commodity focuses on how he, via the apparatus of the media, turns his ordinary life narratives into saleable commodities that attract the attention of audiences and advertisers (Illouz and Wilf, 2008). At one level, his relatively humdrum pursuit of hedonistic pleasure through sex, drugs and the mythical perpetuation of an anti-establishment ideology are common touchstones in these narratives. Tabloid accolades bolster these narratives - not least those along the lines of *The Sun’s* uncouth, three-time editorial bestowing: *‘Shagger of the Year’* (Brand, 2007) - serving to authenticate his iconic comedic commodity into the cultural landscape. In concert with similar narratives already in circulation, they also help to transform and extend cultural norms in respect of what is currently deemed morally acceptable within the commodity system (Gies 2011; Gorin and Dubied, 2012).

Moreover, in order for Brand’s brand to command a premium above other celebrity commodities, it was necessary to add another more exotic element to his persona. Therefore, existing concurrently among his ordinary overtures, lies a more peculiar discourse of ‘British-ness’; the self-described autodidact, a perennial emphasis of which alludes to his use of a Victorian-esque vocabulary. His dandyish mannerisms and appearance, demonstrated by his dramatically long, back-combed hair, tight-fitting trousers, and pointy shoes, all feed into the literary archetype of a character tangibly reminiscent of a Charles Dickens creation. The discourse reproduces itself through what Kerrigan *et al*. (2011, p. 1512) term the “*brand imaginarium”*, providing “the resources [for consumers] to imagine other immersive worlds.” Conversely, Brand also talks and writes (2007, 2010) of growing up in a council house in Greys, Essex as an only child in a single parent household, thus not detaching himself from his ordinary British upbringing. In this sense, our argument reinforces the remarks of Boorstin (1992, p. 75) to remind us that a “celebrity is usually nothing greater than a more publicised version of [ourselves].” It is a believable and arguably plausible literary construction serving to activate any subsequent attempts to authenticate his cultural status within the celebrity brand landscape. Indeed, a glowing exemplar to illustrate Boorstin’s (1992, p. 47) capturing of the “human pseudo-event of celebrity branding”, little more than a superficial and synthetic product gifted to persons by the controllers of the media. Yet, while so many celebrities are crafted as *extra* ordinary, Brand simply masquerades his grounding, and yet illusionary, uniqueness as something *rather* ordinary and by dint of doing so blossoms into what Debord (1994, p. 29) frames as a spectacular representation of the living human being; a specialist of apparent life, which as Kerrigan *et al*. (2011, p. 1515) might suggest enables him to enact his trademarked lifestyle and socio-political viewpoints in an apparently free manner. Like a magician’s trick, it is all so obvious when we understand how. We just don’t see it at the time.

**Discussion**

Rather than simply theorising in the abstract, let us explore the potential for celebrity brand revival as a consequence of scandal. Take, for example, the career trajectory of former *BBC* *One Show* presenter, Christine Bleakley. This Northern Irish, burgeoning media starlet burst onto UK television screens in 2007 as a relative unknown with an identity to create in front of millions during a primetime airing. Things were going well until 2010 when, perhaps believing in her own hype, she jumped into the lucrative promised land of commercially-sponsored television entertainment; a big figure salary, a celebrity fiancé in Chelsea footballer, Frank Lampard, and a big ticket opportunity for her to cement her developing status as the nation’s flamboyant darling before entering the glitzy realms of celebrity super-stardom (Lightfoot, 2011). Unfortunately, for whatever reasons, things did not quite go to plan for Christine as audience figures plummeted and an aura of greed over grace now looks a more fitting admonishment.

In these inauspicious circumstances let us consider one of the options available here, made possible by our 3Cs of celebrity branding. Crafting: a plan is required and a scandal is hatched. Capering: how about a three-in-a-bed romp with Arsenal footballers - footage of which should, ideally, be leaked onto the internet - or a booze-fuelled night on the tiles with Russell Brand himself? Commodification: take your pick of that morally-questionable scandal of choice, or even invent your own, the outcome is the same. Every camera-wielding paparazzo out there will be clamouring for a cleavage shot of newly-single Bleakley. Just look at poor old Christine, we cry! Robed in Versace, heeled in Jimmy Choos, diamond encrusted with a little moral support from De Beers, and quaffing Cristal on her way to the Ritz for a meal with Prince Harry… A scandalous star is re-born. Biographies to be re-written, MTV events to be drunkenly hosted, her own designer perfume to blend, let’s just call it *Simply Bleakley*, and a mooted appearance as Moneypenny in the next Bond movie all serve to fuel the fire in that Aston Martin Vanquish as she tears down the Atlanta highway with ageing Hollywood bad boy, Colin Farrell[[2]](#footnote-2) for company. Whatever happened to squeaky clean Christine, the media will constantly ask us as a $15 million price tag hangs around her neck like the bad smell that her perfume no doubt will become. Time will only tell as to whether such as scenario will materialise but history reminds us that it is a plausible theory to entertain.

But what does Brand’s celebrity success say about the moral standing of society? And, more to the point, what does this infer about the manufactured fabrications of our disciplinary endeavour? As academic marketers we often tend to shy away from scandal, not wishing to carry the mantle of cultural shape-shifters, capitalist promoters, brand savages. Or at least we appear to in public. And yet, the machinations of scandal are plastered all around us. In every newspaper or magazine, on every billboard or supermarket shelf, we simply cannot escape the falseness of reality: from the front pages of *The Sun* to the back pages of *The Metro;* from the shining lights of *Broadway* to the heaving depths of the underground; Stand-Up at the *Apollo*, sit down at the ballet. Scandal surrounds, and pervades. Scandal becomes us. Why? Because marketing practitioners and their celebrity brand creations know this. They create the scandal, they actively search for the scandal, thus satisfying consumers’ perverse thirst to morally rebel against the status quo (Heath & Potter, 2005). When Edward Bernays suggested that sex sells, he was only partially correct. As Brand and many other celebrity constructions remind us, sex sells, but it sells much better if it is morally scandalous.

Our investigations suggest that any architect of a celebrity brand, bold enough to do so, should employ scandal with great care and caution. Whilst celebrity brands can benefit from the increased visibility, they can also suffer. What is notable about Russell Brand’s successful use of scandal is that he has crafted, capered, and commodifyed his scandalous activity to prominent and compelling discourses inherent in his brand narrative. Moreover, all of his scandals are housed within what Jacobs (2005) describes as a narrow moral theme. Sex is prominent. Likewise, his dandyish stage persona where, under the guise of the jester, he can say almost whatever he likes; and he frequently does. Whether that is casually announcing that Hugo Boss made uniforms for the Nazis at an event the company sponsored, or telling a grandfather he had sex with his granddaughter. Importantly though, Brand has not pushed his fans’ capacity for scandal too far; Brand has not murdered anybody. As the themes of the scandals are mirrored from themes already a part of his brand, his fans are unsurprised and stoic to the immorality perceived by others and are left to revel in the anarchy of the mediated spectacle. Thus, in implementing scandal to achieve a positive effect, we suggest marketers must craft, caper, and commodify any planned scandal.

**Conclusion**

While such a strategy carries obvious commercial risks, this paper has sought to reaffirm our assertion that morally transgressive scandals can prove beneficial, even foundational, to the careers of some celebrities. To date, the marketing literature fails to acknowledge that celebrities skilled in the art of turning their own “private scandals into public commodities” can be successful (Latham 2009, p. 4). Russell Brand is but one of many, a comedically-crafted commodity, capering across every trashy column inch of our cultural existences. Specifically, we suggest through the case study of his career that this works best when the scandal links to existing themes in the celebrity narrative, and adheres to the dominant moral sensibilities of their fans whilst offending those of others. At the same time, it is also our contention that consumers who buy into, believe and follow the arc of these narratives, or at least suspend their disbelief to do so, do not necessarily hold celebrities accountable for upholding everyday moral codes of conduct. As Mothersill (2003, p. 75) argues more generally in respect of art and morality, the make-believe worlds, and the characters who live in them, that people enjoy exploring while reading novels or watching movies remain bewitching and beguiling even when “fictional characters … espouse ideas of vice and virtue that [they] find morally repellent.” A well-told story about a misbehaving celebrity can thus be as interesting and fascinating as the wild and wonderful narrative of a heinous but compelling movie character like the ‘Wolf of Wall Street’. Just because someone feels empathy for a drug-taking, sex-crazed, filthy-rich car-crash of a celebrity, does not mean that they espouse the same slack moral code. Moreover, when celebrities make mistakes, they confirm that they are not so different from the rest of us. If nothing more at least the media can publish a better story than one reporting that someone’s life is great all of the time. For where is the art in tedium?

As a strategically managed marketing approach, we conclude that there is no reason why celebrity scandal will not further continue to evolve as a popular way of subversively igniting the public’s interest in celebrity brands. The underpinning standpoint of our argument is premised on an understanding of the immorally playful narratives, often at the heart of celebrity-enhancing scandal, a reminder of how the ever-increasing popularity of celebrity scandal informs our understanding of consumer culture, a clear demonstration that many consumers yearn for deviance. Perhaps provocatively, our literary style within this paper continues to embrace this socially constructive line of argument; a laconic ironic statement of our intent to question the normative view that scandal should be avoided.

With this fact in mind, perhaps we should even consider adding a splash of scandal to the machinations of scholarly publication. Pepper our prose with expletives, write irreverently, and rage, rage, rage against the dying of delight. In this vein, we allow Wilson (2000, p. 84) to capture our final reflections on the morally bankrupt, but still infinitely bankable, world of celebrity marketing. Since, after all, it really is scandalous to think that Courtney Love can “thrash horribly like a half dead fish through her personal tragedy, and rampant displays of public fucked-upness, and still end up on the front cover of everything.”

Maybe we can do the same?

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1. A rare exception is Schroeder’s (2000, p. 47) delightful book chapter which, among other concerns, discusses the strategic use of scandal as practised by avant-garde artists. In a similar vein to the thinking that underpins this paper he asserts that “scandal may not always be negative.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As one might have guessed, Colin Farrell has also starred in a ‘leaked’ sex movie during his scandalous career. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)