

# Becoming Iconic: David Bowie from Man to Icon

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## ABSTRACT

*From Nelson Mandela to Ronald Reagan, from Steve Jobs to Sam Walton, from Oprah Winfrey to Martha Stewart, from Michael Jordan to Muhammad Ali, from Andy Warhol to Bruce Springsteen, from John Wayne to Woody Allen, cultural icons dominate our world. (Holt, 2004, p.1)*

The opening of Holt's work on brands as icons highlights two important assumptions. First, that people can be icons. Second, icons are somehow different to celebrities, even though many of the people identified by Holt as icons have been studied as part of celebrity cultural studies (Crowley, 1999; Grano, 2009; Illouz, 2003) and the emerging area of human branding (Davis and Halligan, 2002; Kerrigan et al., 2011; Schroeder, 2005; Thomson, 2006). This overlapping between people who are both celebrities and icons suggests that there is a lack of theoretical distinction between these concepts. Beyond elitist judgments of celebrity as empty reproduction and icons as legitimate symbols (Alexander, 2010) there is a need to understand when a person becomes a celebrity and an icon. Such conceptual distinctions are required when developing the concept of human brands beyond its current focus on celebrities. In particular, there is a need to consider if human brand icons operate at a larger macro level than current branding and endorsement literature has considered. Using structuration theory we consider how consumers form relationships and attachments not just with the celebrity (Gabriel, 1997; Parmentier, 2010; Thomson, 2006) but also how icons become representative symbols of complex sets of societal ideas and values (Holt, 2004).

## LEGITIMIZING CELEBRITIES AS ICONS

Celebrities and icons have a troubled and contentious relationship. Rojek (2001) claims that a person becomes a celebrity when media interest in their activities transfers from the reporting of their public-self to investigating their private-self. This separation of the public- and private-self is one of the distinguishing features of celebrity discourse. Icons, in contrast, represent a person or thing that is regarded as a "compelling symbol of a set of ideas or values that a society deems important" (Holt, 2004, p.1). Celebrities and icons represent important cultural mythmaking and values, with celebrities deemed to represent the synthetic (Boorstin, 1964), the apparent (Debord, 2002), and the aspirational (Marshall, 1997). Consequently, the media and public's interest in the private lives of celebrities ensures that their fame precedes their achievements (Turner, 2004). Celebrities and icons, however, are people and objects that embody crucial cultural functions, whilst performing cultural identity myths that allow imagination, effectively repairing a damaged cultural fabric (Holt, 2004). Whether a person is considered a celebrity or an icon is often based on perceptions of greatness across time (Campbell, 1949), and whether the celebrity's cultural meaning and value is malleable to manage shifting cultural concerns (Brown et al., 2013).

Rojek's (2001) view that the celebrity represents a move from a public concern to a focus on the private self is disputed in this paper. Instead, we view celebrity as geotemporal process, where the celebrity is created through multiple associations, whether they be private or public achievements or roles (McCracken, 1989). These associations represent cultural concerns of a time period and as society shifts a celebrity's meanings may not transform. Power and fame may not

transfer then to new time periods or cultural contexts and concerns. Steve Guttenberg, a well known and popular actor in the 1980s with films such as 'Cocoon' and the 'Police Academy' series provides a good example. Despite his success in the 1980s his cultural meanings and social authority remain tied to this time period. In essence he embodies nostalgia for the 1980s rather than representing modern cultural meanings (Holbrook, 1993).

Celebrities become icons when their fame is enduring through the transformation of their cultural meaning and values that mirror changes in society (Holt, 2004). This ability to transmute their meanings, across time periods and cultural contexts, means that the person is no longer a known figure in a particular time setting (Boorstin, 1964), but rather they become an icon whose meaning is mythologised through imprecision, amorphousness and ambiguity (Brown et al., 2013). In this paper we use structuration theory to focus on how a person becomes a celebrity and an icon.

## STRUCTURATION THEORY AND HUMAN BRANDS

Structuration theory explains how social systems are created and reproduced through the engagement of structure and agents (Giddens, 1984). Structuration theory argues that neither structure nor agents have primacy, instead existing in varying levels of continuous engagement. Structure represents a society's social arrangements that emerge and determine an individual's, group or organization's behavior (hence forth called 'agents'). Agents exist and interact within a structure drawing upon rules and resources indicative of generalized procedures and methodologies that agents possess as knowledge. Hence, the structure of human brands (including how it manifests, is perpetuated and created) can be considered through the interactions and knowledge between the agents of the media, the market, the audience and the human brand. Without these agents the structure cannot exist, neither, we argue, would the concept of human brand. Consequently agents' behaviors are not only determined by the structure that they exist within but are also constantly recreated and adapted through differing time periods. Hence, agents ability to recreate differing meanings, over time, regarding a human brand's celebrity and iconicity further Rojek (2001), Turner (2004), and Holt's (2004) momentary perspective.

An agent's ability to influence the structure they exist within is reflective of their ability to mobilise power. Giddens argues this is not a resource in itself, but is indicative of ownership of material and organisational capabilities allowing agents to exercise power within the structure. Giddens offers some insights into this question by arguing that the rules and resources that form the structure are not static, but instead can be created, changed or combined in different ways by different agents over time. A celebrity at the height of their fame would then be associated with higher material and organisational capabilities allowing them to determine their own self image (Kerrigan et al., 2011; Schroeder, 2005).

Giddens' argument that differing agents, over time, can change the structure reflects the inter-relationship between structure and agency that forms social practices. Social practices represent the current actions of the various agents and are a direct consequence of agents' previous actions. The structure that agents interact within can exist externally to them (such as celebrity news) as well internally (such as the memories of the celebrity). This raises the questions of when people change their place in the structure to become a celeb-

ity and what structural changes occur when they become an icon? Structuration theory enables us to address these questions by considering what agents, within the market structure, influence the human brand's agency.

## METHOD

David Bowie's career, using a historical data focus, was analyzed to explore the themes around human brand celebrity and iconicity, agency and market structure. Bowie is a popular music artist who began recording in 1964 and is currently enjoying market resurgence after a ten year absence. Well known for his experimentation with different musical styles and flamboyant and dramatic alter-egos, such as Ziggy Stardust, he represents the embodiment of the music market. Bowie's career was analyzed using process data. An approach that explains how a sequence of multiple events over a period of time influences an entity (Van de Ven and Huber, 1990). Process data allows us to understand a phenomenon, like Bowie (Langley, 1999). Langley's (1999) criticism of data collection rarely going beyond surface description was addressed through following his suggested process data methodology. That is undertaking three stage sequential data collection: grounding, organizing and replicating.

Grounding strategies identify the data sources that can be used to develop the concepts for the subsequent strategies, informing the process data development of constructing agency and institutional narratives. An approach Langley (1999) equates with structuration theory. This paper, taking a deductive approach, used alternate templates to construct several differing interpretations of Bowie's career from 1972 to 2013. Interpretations based upon Bowie's relationship with other agents, including: the media, music industry and fan based materials. This highlighted potential tensions and subsequent gaps in these differing interpretations.

Data collection, using grounding theories, was achieved through a variety of media sources: social media (Bowie fan websites, YouTube, Facebook), media (over 400 articles analyzed from newspapers, magazines - reviews, television programs.), music industry (press releases) and materials produced involving David Bowie (interviews, his own website). This collection process ranged in materials dated from 1964 to 2014. No screening process was used to review the data, instead focusing on what was being communicated, by whom and when. Materials were read, notes made, and re-read to identify nuances and metaphors. Data was systematically coded according to the emergent themes, such as 'Ziggy', 'Paranoia' or 'Career decline'.

The second stage of the analysis – organizing strategies – organized the data gathered into a systematic form. This stage, using a narrative strategy, represented the initial development of theory. This data was then used to identify temporal brackets - each period reflecting a specific sense of continuity, which is not evident in other time periods. This approach allowed us to compare and contrast differing temporal brackets to review the inter-relationships between Bowie and other agents during and between time periods (Langley, 1999). The use of temporal brackets lends itself to Structuration Theory with its emphasis on institutions and agents influencing each other's behaviors over time. Temporal brackets aim to gather realistic tales (Van Maanen, 1995) showing linkages within the structure between Bowie and various agents. We followed Langley's (1999) suggestion to avoid excessive data reduction, instead focusing on the contextual data embedded in various narratives, highlighting differing perspectives. This was achieved through numerous reconstructions of temporal bracketing. Both the authors independently studied the data collected from stage 1, comparing and contrasting their find-

ings. Once the temporal bracketing was agreed upon, this output was then presented to five Bowie fans for their comments and review. This process achieved a wider sense of external validation to the proposed temporal bracketing. Feedback at this stage led to minor revisions regarding the differing agents' narratives.

The final stage of data theory development – replicating – aimed to gather the various data strands to construct a theory, which involved comparing the different processes that occurred over Bowie's career. This process moved the analysis onwards from stories linked to events to the identification of variables that represented the critical events (Langley, 1999), forming the basis for theory development.

## FINDINGS

The data analysis of Bowie identified four key transitions in Bowie's career representing his transformation from musician to celebrity to icon. This transformation was not a linear evolution with the elements of fame, achievement and cultural symbolism taking prominence during different time periods. The transition stages will be discussed, evidence is provided in Table 1.

### *Transition 1: from musician to celebrity*

1972 represented Bowie's long awaited career breakthrough appearance as Ziggy Stardust on BBC's Top of the Pops on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1972. Of interest, from this period, is how Bowie presented his public life as a recording musician, with the media and fan's attention focused on his achievement as a producer of innovative music. Following his career breakthrough, his private life dominates his public achievements as the ambiguity of Ziggy Stardust is resolved by attempting to understand Bowie, the person. Central to this interest is Bowie's conflicting persona portrayal of a bi-sexual extraterrestrial alien, confronting and challenging British cultural values of heterosexual restraint. In an interview with NME (a music magazine), Bowie presented Ziggy as the antithesis of British society in industrial decline, fighting to keep its identity, morality and values. Interest in Ziggy Stardust's sexuality was enhanced by the conflict with Bowie's private life, where he was married with a son. In this transition the public's interest moves from Bowie the musician to a fascination with his public sexual ambivalence. An interest reflected in Bowie's commercial success, in 1975, in the US, a success that was greeted with trepidation. However, Ziggy's lack of private self (Rojek, 2001) allowed him to be an amorphous cultural symbol that became iconic, without becoming a celebrity first.

### *Transition 2: when fame dominates achievement*

Turner (2004) equates celebrity with the media and public's interest in the individual's private self as detracting from their public achievements. A danger of celebrity then is fame can outstrip an individual's actual achievements. This is important because celebrities are agentic manipulators of their self and image (Schroeder, 2005). They control and are also controlled by fame. In Bowie's case, there were two stages to his fame process: seeking fame and suffocating from it.

In seeking fame, Bowie deliberately chose to sacrifice his critically acclaimed, and consequently commercially unsuccessful, Hunky Dory album (released late 1971) to promote his new Ziggy Stardust persona. A persona embodied through various market offerings, including t-shirts, clothing and most importantly a new album (released early 1972). By seeking fame through his alter-ego Bowie sacrificed the potential commercial success of Hunky Dory, but, more importantly, his own human brand. Ziggy Stardust was a product to be sold, taking precedence over Bowie as an individual and as a musician.

Table 1 Summary of Findings

<b>Transition 1: from musician to celebrity</b>
Private life interest: <i>'I'm gay,' he says, 'and always have been, even when I was David Jones'</i> (Watts, 1972, January 22). Success trepidation: <i>'Dick Cavett show'</i> (1974, November 2): <i>"Rumors and questions have arisen about David, such as who is he, what is he, where did he come from, is he a creature from a foreign land, is he a creep, is he dangerous, is he smart, dumb, nice, are his parents real, crazy, sane, man, woman, robot, what is he?"</i>
<b>Transition 2: when fame dominates achievement</b>
Fame sought: Melody Maker (Watts, 1972, January 22) describes 'Hunky Dory' as <i>'...not only the best album Bowie has ever done, it's also the most inventive piece of song writing to have appeared on record for a considerable period of time'</i> . Ziggy, rather than Bowie, was a "product" to be sold (Taylor and Wall, 1976). As the British BBC television program 'Nationwide' (1973) captured his alien image as a man <i>"...who spends two hours before his show caressing his body with paint [as]...a high priest of pop"</i> . Yet Ziggy Stardust is also presented as a deviant, describing him as <i>"a self-constructed freak"</i> indicative of an immoral society – <i>"It is a sign of our times that a man with a painted face and carefully adjusted lipstick should inspire adulation from an audience of girls between 14-20."</i>
Fame suffocates: <i>'Oi, Bowie! No! That was one's first reaction to the rumour sweeping the Hanover Grand on Monday that David Bowie would follow his show with a drum &amp; bass set. Though he conducted some brave experiments with the genre on his current album, Earthling, there was something undignified about the idea of him trying to recreate adrenalised beats in front of a bemused crowd of people his own age.'</i> Guardian newspaper review (Sullivan, 1997).
<b>Transition 3: when icon emerges</b>
The Iconic Producer: <i>'Yeah, I'm not only doing it, I'm doing it on three platforms. I'm working with people on a film version and I'm working with people on a theater version that's completely different and I'll synthesize the two into a huge version of Internet hypertext - where we will find out about Ziggy's mum and things like that. &lt;snip&gt; It will be a bigger, grander, more blah, blah. But the three taken together is, I suppose, lazy post-modernism where the same story is told in different ways.'</i> (Phoenix, 1999)
The Iconic Private Self: An appearance on the ITV television show 'Russell Harty' (1973, January 22) Bowie / Ziggy contrasted his supposed innocence with discussion of his erotic fan mail: <i>'It's very sexy...I seem to draw out a lot of fantasies out of people and a lot of fan mail I get, a lot of it is awfully nice and say 'How's your baby' and 'How is your wife' and 'What's your mum's name?' and things like that...but some of them are worth framing...I [couldn't] really tell you about them, they really are quite heavy...'</i>
<b>Transition 4: when celebrity and icon converge</b>
Celebrity and Icon Interchangeability: <i>"Supermodel Kate Moss was into vintage Bowie tonight - as she wore one of his Ziggy Stardust outfits to collect a prize on his behalf at the Brit Awards. The catwalk star was on hand for the ceremony because David Bowie, 67, chose to stay at home in New York rather than attend the event to pick up his best British male award - his first Brit for 18 years."</i> (McConnell 2014)

In fame suffocating, Bowie appears unable to dictate his own celebrity narrative. Instead his public recognition and human brand outperforms his success as a musician. From the mid-1980s, following the hugely successful 1983 album 'Let's Dance' and global 'Serious Moonlight Tour', Bowie was considered mainstream. Something that older Bowie fans, from the data, report in shocked terms, as Bowie was always considered a niche musician. Becoming mainstream was evident in Bowie's next album— 'Tonight' - an album that received mixed critical reviews. A product that reflected Bowie's declining music sales up to the 1990s. During this time Bowie appears more known for his human brand as a bi-sexual alien, then he does for his musical releases. Bowie was later to admit that this period represented a time of musical confusion influenced by commercial needs. A need that produced a disconnect between his self and what his human brand represented to his audience. Attempts in the 1990s to regain relevance, involved releasing a drum and bass dance album, which was met with further fan and media critical disdain.

#### *Transition 3: when icon emerges*

In transition 3 the celebrity begins to evolve into an icon. Bowie's iconicity is an emergent process as his symbolic meanings evolve over various time periods from counter-culture musician and as a symbol of sexual ambiguity (1970s), to mainstream musician and aging rock star (80s and 90s), and finally into the merging of Bowie and Ziggy as a unified cultural icon (2000s). In achieving this unified symbolism, Bowie engages in two practices, becoming an iconic producer and using his ambiguous sexuality to establish an iconic private-self.

In becoming an iconic producer, during this period of musical and commercial confusion in the 1990s, Bowie re-engages with his Ziggy Stardust alter-ego, readily playing his music and talking about his relevance. In particular Bowie wanted to develop online, television and theatrical productions regarding various aspects of Ziggy Stardust's life, moving the symbolic meanings of Ziggy out of his 1970s roots and into a new cultural context. This inextricably linked Bowie's public-self, as a musician and creator, to the symbolic meanings of Ziggy by expanding, redefining and staking ownership (Rojek, 2001).

Second, by using ambiguous sexuality to establish an iconic private-self, Bowie presented his sexual ambiguity as a component of his public-self. His public declarations of being homosexual, heterosexual and bi-sexual had raised interest in his private-self, including questions about his relationship with his first wife, Angie, and his current wife, the supermodel Iman. Questions that led to Bowie's sexuality becoming iconic in its ambiguity. For example, in the British Russell Harty television show (1973) Bowie discussed a plethora of sexually oriented fan letters and fan fiction, see table 1. This iconic private-self become a cultural symbol of society's increasing tolerance towards sex and homosexuality.

#### *Transition 4: when celebrity and icon converge*

The convergence of the celebrity and the icon is a result of the culmination of the celebrity's self and image amalgamating into a cohesive whole with their cultural symbolism. For instance, during the mid-1970s to early 1980s Bowie resisted the cultural dominance that his alter-ego Ziggy held, dramatically demonstrated by killing

Ziggy, in 1973, prior to his US tour. Bowie's fame and achievements influenced his ability to control his public and private self and image, manifesting through a reconnection, in the 2000s with the symbolism attached to Ziggy Stardust. A process beginning in the 1980s where discourse and production outputs began a backwards reflection towards Ziggy Stardust, culminating in an interchangeability between Bowie and Ziggy Stardust as the musician, celebrity and icon. In 2013, after a 10 year absence, Bowie released his first album with no promotion or fore-warning, to huge success with rapid sales and internet buzz. Whilst the album made no reference to Ziggy, much of the media commentary focussed on his iconic Ziggy alter-ego. A focus that Bowie perhaps saw as inevitable, as a need to maintain his musical relevance. This is embodied in Bowie's 2014 award for 'Best British Male Artist' at the British Music Industry Awards. An award that was collected by the model Kate Moss wearing one of Ziggy Stardust's original costumes, against a photographic background of Ziggy Stardust wearing the same costume. Ziggy Stardust had become Bowie and Bowie had become Ziggy Stardust. Bowie, the market and his fans appeared to have reached a resolution of how they view celebrity and icons.

### DISCUSSION

Bowie's career indicates that celebrity and iconicity are an inter-related process. A process that transitions from producer, to celebrity, to icon for Bowie and from creation to icon for Ziggy. Our findings indicate that the concepts of celebrity and icons whilst different are inter-related through the notions of fame and achievement (Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004), self and image (Schroeder, 2005), and symbolic representation (Holt, 2004). Human brand icons then are the consequence of the agentic actions of human brands to reconcile their public / private selves and images within an ever-changing and dynamic system of production, media and audience. A finding that challenges perspectives of the celebrity triumphing over an empty image (Baudrillard (1994 [1981]), the low class obsession with the private lives of public figures (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]; Rojek, 2001) or icons being the legitimate symbols of cultural exceptionalism (Holt, 2004).

The key similarities between celebrities and icons are their public visibility and symbolic embodiment of cultural values. Celebrities visibility lies in their fame, with symbolic meaning deriving from their imagined private-self that dominates the achievements of their public-self (Rojek, 2001). Visibility is also prevalent in the achievements icons derived from their symbolic meanings (Boorstin, 1964). Our analysis of Bowie, however, challenges this similarity. Instead, we argue, the distinctions between icons as legitimate achievement and celebrities as fame over substance are a false distinction. Evident in Bowie's efforts to merge his public and private selves with his Ziggy Stardust alter-ego. A merger not only of the musician who could be gay/bi-sexual/heterosexual in his private life but also as the public embodiment of counter-culture and sexual ambiguity. Consequently, Bowie shifts his discourse away from a simple celebrity agenda of titillating the audience with stories of the weird and sexually liberal, to forming a complete public and private iconic self that represents larger cultural concerns. Concerns regarding counter-culture versus the mainstream and the cultural acceptance of sexually ambiguity.

When does an individual become a celebrity? We posit that this occurs when the public and private selves of the human brand converge to form a coherent symbol of larger cultural concerns. This raises the questions of when people change their place in the structure to become a celebrity and what structural changes occur when the celebrity becomes an icon? Our findings suggest that this transition is a complex interplay between fame, achievement and symbolic

convergence that the human brand can both influence in establishing their self and image (Schroeder, 2005). Yet this is beholden to wider cultural, media and production structures (Alexander, 2010).

These findings extend our understanding of human brands and the symbolic meanings celebrities and icons represent. A representation based upon endorsement (McCracken, 1989) or developing their human brand (Parmentier, 2010). While, celebrity human brands own the symbolic meanings associated with their private selves, more than their public selves, human brand icons own a convergence of public and private meanings of wider cultural concerns.

Limitations of this paper lie in focussing on one celebrity / icon in a particular industry. Future research is suggested to two areas. First, to determine whether celebrity and iconic human brands have differential effects as endorsers and as influencers of private, public and cultural values, and two, to explore other celebrity / icons, such as political figures like Ronald Reagan, to understand how the celebrity / icon process is manipulated by agents in the market.

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