Resolving Contradictions in Human Brand Celebrity and Iconicity

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/S0885-211120150000017015

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RESOLVING CONTRADICTIONS IN HUMAN BRAND CELEBRITY AND ICONICITY

Toni Eagar and Andrew Lindridge

ABSTRACT

Purpose — The academic discourse around celebrity and iconicity has resulted in the same human brand as labeled as an inauthentic and illegitimate celebrity and as a culturally important symbol of legitimate achievement. We address the research question of how are contradictions between celebrity and iconicity resolved in creating and managing a human brand.

Methodology/approach — Using structuration theory, we analyzed David Bowie’s 50 year career, from 1964 to 2013, totaling 562 documents. Applying Langley’s (1990) stages of data collection of grounding, organizing, and replicating, we develop a process of model of celebrity and iconicity.

Findings — We identify three stages of human brand symbolic associations: forming, fixing, and transitioning associations. These represent alternate trajectories that Bowie and Ziggy Stardust followed to become icons. In resolving his trajectories across these stages, Bowie adapts and...
adopts commercial materials, business practices, and new technologies to converge his symbolic associations into a coherent iconic human brand.

Research limitations/implications — Limitations of this paper lie in focusing on one human brand in a particular industry. Future research is suggested in three areas: (1) the relationship between the proposed model and other human brand activities; (2) to explore how the process is manipulated by other market agents; and (3) whether a human brand’s association shifts can precede culture.

Originality/value — This perspective challenges existing conceptualizations of celebrity and iconicity by framing them as inter-related processes, where celebrity associations are fixed in time, while iconic associations transition across time periods to reflect changing cultural values and concerns.

Keywords: Human brands; celebrity; iconicity; brand icons; structuration theory; David Bowie

INTRODUCTION

“Fame can take interesting men and thrust mediocrity upon them.”
“Always had a repulsive need to be something more than human.”
David Bowie (Cited in Esquire, 2013; Young & Curcio, 2006)

Human brands represent the “well-known persona[s] who [are] the subject of marketing communications” (Thomson, 2006, p. 104). Accepting this definition, the quote from David Bowie shown above highlights two important and contradictory aspects of the human brand. First, human brands are often associated with famous celebrities (Muñiz, Norris, & Fine, 2014; Parmentier, 2010, 2011; Schroeder, 2005). Second, within celebrity studies the human brand is considered both the mediocre (artificial and synthetic celebrity) (Boorstin, 1964; Debord, 2002), and the icon — more than human, embodying a “compelling symbol of a set of ideas or values that a society deems important” (Holt, 2004, p. 1). So is a human brand mediocre or culturally important or both? This leaves the human brand in a quandary over their signification and their role in macro societal structures. This leads to the central question of this paper, how are the contradictions between celebrity and iconicity resolved in creating and managing a human
brand? We address this question by analyzing David Bowie who, we argue, achieved celebrity and iconicity simultaneously. Using structuration theory, we consider David Bowie's career, with a particular focus on his most successful character, Ziggy Stardust (Ziggy). A character born in June 1972, who only lived for one year, who became permanently associated with the moment Bowie became musically popular. Bowie was selected as his 50 year career provides a rich source of data on the human brand’s potential duality of signification. Bowie’s celebrity is indicated by the intense media interest in his private life, and his iconicity is demonstrated with the 2013 release of Bowie’s first album in 10 years with no publicity or marketing effort that achieved market success and critical acclaim. Through Bowie we consider how celebrity and iconicity manifests, is perpetuated and resolved (Holt, 2004; Parmentier, 2010). From this analysis, we address the question of celebrity and iconicity in human branding and make three contributions to consumer research. First, we theorize on the distinctions between celebrity and iconicity and their influence on human branding. Second, we use structuration theory to understand the relationship between structure and agents in influencing celebrity and icon trajectories. Third, we explain that celebrity and iconicity are not separate functions of the human brand, but rather different sets of material and organizational capabilities to achieve a coherent iconic human brand.

CELEBRITY AND ICONICITY

Celebrities and icons have a troubled and contentious relationship in the literature, where celebrity represents the mediocre and iconicity represents the laudable (Alexander, 2010). Rojek (2001) states that a person becomes a celebrity when media interest transfers from the reporting of the public self to investigating the private self, which lacks legitimate achievement and authenticity (Boorstin, 1964; Debord, 2002). Consequently, the media and public’s interest in the private lives of celebrities ensures that their fame precedes their achievements (Turner, 2004). Alternatively, icons embody crucial cultural functions, whilst performing cultural identity myths that allow imagination, effectively repairing a damaged cultural fabric (Holt, 2004). In essence, the icon is a legitimate cultural symbol of personal achievement and societal values, while celebrity is the lionization of illegitimate private mediocrity. Whether a person is considered a celebrity or an icon is often based on representations of the public and private self and
attributions of greatness across time, and whether the celebrity’s cultural
meaning and value is malleable to manage shifting cultural concerns
(Brown, McDonagh, & Shultz, 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 a geotemporal process, where the celebrity is created
through multiple associations, whether they are private or public achieve-
ments 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. A celebrity may retain public recognition
across time periods; however, if the associations that the audience ascribes
to them remain fixed in that time period, it cannot be said that the celebrity
has become an icon. Instead we would argue that the celebrity becomes a
symbol of nostalgia rather than an icon morphing their personal meanings
through time (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Brown et al., 2013).

Human brands 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, indicates that the human brand is no longer
a known figure in a particular time setting (Boorstin, 1964). Instead the
known figure has become an icon whose meaning is mythologized through
imprecision, amorphousness, and ambiguity (Brown et al., 2013). In this
paper, we use structuration theory to understand these different trajectories
for becoming a celebrity and an icon.

**STRUCTURATION THEORY AND HUMAN BRANDS**

Structuration theory explains how social systems are created and repro-
duced 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 behavior of individual, group, or organizational agents. Agents exist and inter-
act within a structure drawing upon rules and resources indicative of
generalized procedures and methodologies that agents possess as knowl-
dge. Hence, the human brand structure can be considered through the
interactions and knowledge between media, market, audience, and human
brand agents. 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 our understanding of the influence of achievement, public interest, and cultural symbolism over time (Holt, 2004; Rojek, 2001).

An agent’s ability to influence the structure they exist within is reflective of their ability to mobilize power. Giddens (1984) argues this is not a resource in itself, but is indicative of ownership of material and organizational capabilities allowing agents to exercise power within the structure. Giddens argues 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 organizational capabilities at a point in time allowing them to determine their own self-image (Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hewer, & Daza-LeTouze, 2011; Schroeder, 2005), while icons may have different resources and capabilities that allows them translate their image through time (Holt, 2004). This raises the questions of what are the materials and capabilities required for a person to become a celebrity and an icon? Structuration theory enables us to address these questions by considering the power of agents within the market structure to influence the human brand’s structural position as celebrity or icon.

METHOD

Using a historical data approach, David Bowie’s career 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 a market resurgence after a 10 year absence. Well known for his experimentation with different musical styles and flamboyant and dramatic alter-egos, such as Ziggy. He represents a rich context as his 50 year career includes an ongoing and contentious relationship between his celebrity and iconicity. Bowie’s career was analyzed using process data that explains how a sequence of multiple events over a period of time influences an entity (Van de Ven & Huber, 1990). We are able to understand a phenomenon, like Bowie, by going beyond surface description following Langley’s (1999) process data methodology. We undertook three stages of 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 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 1964 to 2013. Interpretations based upon Bowie’s relationship with other agents, including: the media, music industry, and fan based materials. For a full overview of the time periods constructed from this analysis, see Lindridge and Eagar (2015). 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), see Table 1. No screening process was used to review the data, instead

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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<th>Television Programs</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Total Ziggy Mentions</th>
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Table 1. Analysis of Bowie Narratives.
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 — structured the data gathered into a systematic form. This stage, using a narrative strategy,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Press</th>
<th>Television Programs</th>
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z = number of mentions regarding Ziggy Stardust.
represented the initial development of theory. 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 findings. 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 current paper only reports on the time periods that relate to Bowie’s celebrity and iconicity, rather than his full career, while time periods not mentioned have a significant impact on his human brand, the focus here is on highlighting those events that were most indicative of the processes in question.

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.

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**FINDINGS**

The data analysis of Bowie identified three key stages in Bowie’s career representing his and Ziggy’s relationship to celebrity and iconicity. See Fig. 1 to illustrate the process through which human brand celebrity and iconic associations are formed, fixed, and shifted to create the human brand icon. The following will detail the stages of human brand associations with celebrity and iconicity and the contradictions that emerge.
Understanding the success of Ziggy to Bowie’s human brand lies within the socio-economic context of 1972; a time characterized by Britain’s continued economic decline, industrial strife, and an impending feeling of apocalyptic doom (Lynskey, 2013). Musically a period typified by heavy rock bands such as Deep Purple, with roaring guitar riffs, screaming vocals, drum solos, and denim jeans. In contrast, the newly emerging Glam Rock movement personified by Marc Bolan’s band T-Rex offered teenage girls a sexually conformist, mainstream and safe object to project their fantasies onto.

Bowie’s/Ziggy’s breakthrough moment occurred when he appeared on Top of the Pops (TOTP) in July 1972. Bowie dressed in a multi-colored skin tight zip-up suit with spikey long saffron dyed hair and red leather lace-up patent leather boots defied the wider socio-cultural norms of not only glam rock but British society. This appearance embodied the performance persona of Ziggy (Auslander, 2004, 2006), a sexually ambiguous alien who becomes a pop star but is killed by his fans as a reaction against his growing cult. During the TOTP performance, Bowie twice placed his arm around his guitarist Mick Ronson, widely acknowledged as publicly confirming his homosexuality. Later Ziggy performances replicated and extended these sexual demonstrations. On stage Bowie’s costumes were often reduced to wearing a cod piece or exotic clothing. Accompanying this was demonstrations of Ziggy’s sexual ambiguity, with Bowie often emulating the sexual act of fellatio on Ronson’s guitar. As Hebidge (1995, p. 60)
noted, Ziggy’s allure lay in “a new sexually ambiguous image for those youngsters willing and brave enough to challenge the notoriously pedestrian stereotypes conventionally available to working-class men and women.” A perspective shared by Frith (1989) who argued that Ziggy’s appearance offered teenagers, mimicking Ziggy, the opportunity to become their own celebrity, effectively escaping the direness of their own lives.

Within this time period, Bowie and Ziggy form their initial celebrity and iconic associations. For Bowie, the sexually ambiguous associations of his performance persona, translated into public interest in his private self. Particularly, his public statements of homosexuality while his private self was married with a child.

David’s present image is to come on like a swishy Queen, a gorgeously effeminate boy. He’s as camp as a row of tents, with his limp hand and trolling vocabulary. “I’m gay,” he says, “and always have been, even when I was David Jones.” But there’s a sly jollity about how he says it, a secret smile at the corners of his mouth. (Watts, 1972)

Corresponding to Bowie’s associations of private self sexual ambiguousness, Ziggy represents public reinforcement of this image. For example in the album “The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars” the songs “Five Years” and “Moonage Day Dream” make clear references to homosexuality: “A cop knelt down and kissed the feet of the priest, and a queer through up at the side of that” and “The church of man love is such a holy place to be …” respectively. Auslander (2004) noted how Bowie’s performance persona and characters, such as Ziggy, relied upon the audience to interpret the performance. Bowie’s declaration of homosexuality was central to Ziggy’s performances which aimed to titillate and challenge both the audience and wider society’s norms.

The above suggests that in forming these associations within this time period, Bowie followed the trajectory of becoming a celebrity as the audience looked to his private self in order to interpret his public performance narrative (Rojek, 2001). In contrast, Ziggy’s association formation displays the building blocks of mythic symbolism on which to base future iconicity (Brown et al., 2013). For example, Ziggy’s performance narrative draws heavily on mythic imagery with the narrative structural elements of God-like figure from the sky that comes to earth to be corrupted and die (Levy, 1981). His cultural symbols of the corruptive power of celebrity, pessimism for the future, and the libertinism of sexual ambiguity in the present were sacralized into the cultural symbolic system immediately after his TOTP appearance. Boy George, the British singer, writing in 1995 (pp. 35–36)
captured how Ziggy was sacralized through dress and appearance and the communitas of being a Ziggy clone:

When Ziggy Stardust ... came to Lewisham in 1973 I rushed to buy a ticket. ... I tried to give myself a Ziggy stardust haircut. It was a disaster .... I spent the whole day hanging around Lewisham, watching the crowd well up. Hundreds of Ziggy ... clones. Bowie was like an alien. It was the most exciting thing I’d ever seen.

Stage 2: Fixing Associations in a Time Period

In the previous stage, Bowie is shown to become a celebrity with the media’s focus on his private self, while Ziggy is seen to be in the initial stages of sacralization that we will show formed the basis for his later iconicity. However, in stage 2 we find that Bowie’s celebrity and his essential humanness mean that there are a number of associations that become fixed in the Ziggy era and do no translate across time periods to become iconic. The first of these fixed associations is the perpetuation of the belief that Bowie is Ziggy, this was initially perpetuated by Bowie himself, with statements such as, “‘Call me Ziggy! Call me Ziggy Stardust! are Bowie’s last words” (Edwards, 1972). However, the media and fans also enacted this symbolic association. For example, on the BBC’s Nationwide television program (1972) Bowie/Ziggy is presented on tour as “… a high priest of pop” before being readily dismissed as a “a self-constructed freak” who “claims he enjoys the pleasure of other men” and “… who spends two hours before his show caressing his body with paint.” Ziggy’s perceived control over crying teenage girls and his subversive behaviors leads to Ziggy being positioned as a deviant, indicative of an immoral society — “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.”

Bowie indicates that his association with Ziggy is increasingly restrictive, “I feel like Dr Frankenstein. What have I created?” (Hollingworth, 1973). This may have been what led to Bowie’s surprise announcement at his final UK show in 1973 that Ziggy was dead and that there would be no more Ziggy shows. However, Bowie is never fully able to escape his 1972 creation. The clearest evidence of this is in 2013, where the model Kate Moss accepted a British music award on behalf of Bowie, while wearing a Ziggy costume and an image of Ziggy was displayed over the stage. Over his career, Bowie’s association with Ziggy is perpetuated by his various record companies, with re-issues, releases of “lost” recordings and anniversary
editions. The media, particularly the British music press, perpetuated Bowie-Ziggy associations, through commentary and interviews. For Bowie, 40 years later, his image is indelible tied to his Ziggy performance persona.

There were two key aspects where Ziggy has the advantage of symbolic amorphousness while Bowie essential humanness becomes fixed in time, particularly his age and sexuality. Bowie’s age becomes an increasing issue for him as his human body ages he is in constant comparison with his eternal creation of Ziggy, particularly in the 1990s, where a 50-year-old Bowie’s effort to embrace cutting edge electronic music was unsuccessful. His agency to produce new music, cutting edge styles, and his countercultural credibility are all restricted as Bowie, and his audience, gets older. Consider this newspaper review of an “Earthling” (1997) concert performance which captures both the media and fans’ unwillingness to sanctify Bowie’s new musical genre:

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 & 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. (Sullivan, 1997)

The above instance indicates that while Bowie had the agency to deny the market their desired performances, as he did with killing Ziggy in 1973, this denial no longer signified “cutting edge and subversive musician” to the media and his audience. Instead it suggested market irrelevance and pretentiousness. Ultimately the inescapable human foible of age limits the human brand’s ability to shift their symbolic meanings across time periods in order to create iconicity, as other market agents’ value youth in their musical performances.

Beyond his inevitable aging, Bowie also created meaning inconsistencies through his contradictory displays of private and public sexuality. As discussed previously, in 1972 Bowie announces that he is homosexual, while at the time being married with a young child. However, in entering the US market, Bowie’s association with sexual ambiguity becomes problematic in achieving mainstream success. Prominent in this repositioning for the US market was his denouncing of his previous homosexual associations. Bowie reflects on this repositioning of his sexuality by telling Rolling Stone magazine that his homosexuality declaration was “the biggest mistake I ever made ...[as] I was always a closet heterosexual” (cf. Gilmore, 2012). By declaring himself heterosexual and drug free Bowie’s human brand sought out a new legitimation from the music market. Further enhanced by his
second marriage to Somalian supermodel, Iman, in 1992, provided tangible evidence of his heterosexual, midlife lifestyle. However, such heterosexual performances alienated Bowie, whose private self was sexually confused, from Ziggy’s emerging iconicity as a cultural symbol of sexual ambiguity and the increasing awareness of alternate sexual lifestyles in society’s consciousness (Jones & Bego, 2009). Bowie’s credibility is reduced through this confused brand image of private and public sexuality, as such, the audience and the media perpetuate Bowie’s image of sexual ambiguity, in line with Ziggy, rather than updating their image of Bowie.

Stage 3: Shifting Associations across Time Periods

While Bowie’s associations with age and sexuality remain fixed, he does achieve iconicity through associations that transition through time. However, there is a difference between the associations that Bowie is trying to achieve and those that are formed by the media and the audience. In particular, Bowie had the agency to move through different musical genres in order to perpetuate his success by remaining creatively relevant. For example, in a move away from Glam Rock, Bowie embraced the African-American genre of soul music, becoming the first white artist to appear on Soul Train in 1974. This effectively introduced him to the American audience as a credible musician able to transcend racial boundaries. However, media appearances during this same time period still referred to his ambiguous sexuality and human brand image. Consider the following quote where the reporter’s agency clearly challenges the legitimacy of Bowie’s human brand:

There is an honesty about David these days even though it really can’t be described as refreshing. It is as carefully acted out as anything he’s ever done, and as such, the face of David Bowie presented to me that week was who David Bowie decided to be, February 1976. He’s clever, totally aware of his persona, and there’s a very determined gleam in his eyes these days. (Robinson, 1976)

Bowie’s ability to transition his associations through adopting new musical styles and adjusting his sexual orientation was not unchallenged by the market. The US media, in particular, question the authenticity of Bowie’s brand image. So while Bowie is adjusting his symbolism to reflect differing attitudes to sexuality between the United Kingdom and the United States, and changing musical styles to reflect a “cutting edge and counter-cultural” image, media agents are challenging these cultural symbols as inauthentic and as signifying the manufactured and synthetic celebrity (Boorstin, 1964).
To counter these representations of his human brand as the inauthentic celebrity, Bowie transitions his symbolic associations beyond his musical output. Such as his embrace of new commercial materials, such as music videos, evidenced by the single release “Ashes to Ashes” (1980), which preceded the 1981 launch of the music television channel – MTV. Beyond music, Bowie also uses innovative business practices, “Bowie Bonds” (1997), a scheme where investors could receive a percentage of future royalties by financing the purchase of Bowie’s back catalogue, and being one of the first artists to have interactive website and electronic music downloads (1998) as material and organizational capabilities to become an icon. In creating his iconicity, Bowie is able to mobilize his emerging iconic symbolism to move into new musical styles, commercial materials, business practices and technologies to transition to new relationships with the market and consumers.

In contrast with Bowie’s agentic efforts in applying his knowledge and resources to transition his associations across time, Ziggy’s transitioning associations are a product of market agents, such as the audience, media and record companies, especially following Bowie’s symbolic killing of Ziggy in 1973. Ziggy’s breakthrough moment on TOPT and his performance narrative captured a time in British history of social and economic disruption. Bowie displays a reluctance to engage with Ziggy’s symbolic meanings from this time, stating:

A lot of people I’ve talked to that have been to the shows have got a very, very definite idea of what Ziggy is and what he represents. They know how he works for them. I would not want to shatter anybody’s private movie. (David Bowie, quoted in Hayman, 1973)

While Bowie distances himself from Ziggy, his meanings are perpetuated through time periods as a counter-cultural narrative by other agents in the market structure. Initially these associations seem to represent a nostalgia for a moment in time and of Bowie’s inability to escape his association with Ziggy. The following encapsulates Bowie’s attitude to Ziggy as a material resource that helped him achieve fame:

“Did they work or not?” Yes, they worked. They kept the trip going. Now, I’m all through with rock & roll. Finished. I’ve rocked my roll. It was great fun while it lasted but I won’t do it again. (David Bowie, quoted in Crowe, 1976)

However, repeated references to Ziggy in the media over this period continually associate Bowie with Ziggy. An association that Bowie seems to resent: “That f****r Ziggy wouldn’t leave me alone for years, that was when
it all started to sour.” However, as Bowie’s ability to transition his associations through musical adaptation is curbed, see stage 2, Bowie re-engages with Ziggy as a tool to advance his human brand, resulting in Bowie creating the meta-Ziggy story, providing his performance persona with the private self that his public persona lacked:

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. I want this kind of parallel world with Ziggy on the Internet that stays there as archive forever — like a living organism. But the theater version and the film versions will be completely and utterly different from each other. The stage show will be about the interior values of Ziggy and his contemporaries. It won’t have terribly many characters in it. The film would be the audiences’ perception of who or what Ziggy was. 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. (David Bowie, quoted in Phoenix, 1999)

Following Bowie’s withdrawal from the market after an on-stage heart attack, there was increasing focus given to Ziggy by other market agents. Fashion taste-makers transitioned Ziggy’s style to a modern audience. The symbolism of Ziggy relied upon the awe of spectacle to challenge and subvert societal meanings. Yet 40 years later the anti-establishment symbolism of Ziggy had now morphed into societal dominance, particularly within fashion. In 2003, the model Kate Moss was photographed for British Vogue magazine wearing a blue suit worn by Ziggy, whilst in 2012 the fashion magazine Miu Miu took Ziggy inspiration for a fashion article. Fashion designers now re-imagined Ziggy, with the 2006 Gucci collection and the 2012 Givenchy collection making direct reference to Ziggy’s clothes. The advent of social media, in particular YouTube also saw the transition of Ziggy as spectacle and performance to a modern time period. For example, 52,948 YouTube clips are directly tagged to “Bowie,” 127,000 separate uploaded videos are tagged to “Ziggy Stardust.” Ziggy’s 1972 breakthrough television appearance on TOTP’s, uploaded by “midevilfreako” in 2007 is credited with over 9.8 million viewings. Ziggy’s significance lies in embodying a sense of legitimacy, developed over time and positioned within nostalgia evident in a 2014 comment on YouTube commenting upon Ziggy’s TOTP appearance in 1972:

Who’d have thought David Bowie putting his arm around Mick would still be talked about today in connection to gay liberation? This man is a social pioneer and a living legend. (Abi Watson)
DISCUSSION

Bowie’s career indicates that celebrity and iconicity are inter-related as associations form, are fixed in and transition across time periods. In the first stage associations form with the performance persona of Ziggy has emergent iconicity with mythic narrative elements and is increasingly connected with cultural concerns for the corruptive power of celebrity, a pessimism for the future and libertinism in the present. Alternatively, at this stage Bowie’s associations are strongly tied to those of Ziggy, with only the emergence of the public’s concern for his private self as a sexually ambiguous homosexual man in a heterosexual marriage. The second stage of fixing associations in a time period indicates a human brand’s celebrity. Bowie’s associations becoming fixed in two areas, his sexuality and age. Bowie’s sexuality is fixed as his public declarations and displays of heterosexuality are rejected by other market agents in favor of the sexual ambiguity of Ziggy. In addition, Bowie’s physical age and that of his audience restrict his ability to transition his musical outputs to reflect changing cultural preferences. The final stage, indicates the shift of associations across time periods to signify iconicity. Bowie’s iconicity is challenged by other agents over time, as his celebrity is used to question his authenticity as a cultural symbol. However, Bowie adapts and adopts material and organizational capabilities to become an icon, who is still successfully producing music. In contrast, Ziggy’s transition to iconicity was largely accomplished by market agents other than Bowie, as he is molded and morphed to reflect current cultural ideas of sexuality, from titillation to acceptance, celebrity and societal antipathy (Brown et al., 2013).

These stages of forming, fixing, and shifting associations indicate that Bowie and Ziggy follow differing trajectories to achieve iconicity. Where Bowie’s trajectory is forming associations with his Ziggy performance persona, fixing his celebrity associations with his ambiguous sexuality and age, to transitioning to iconicity through adopting and adapting his material and organizational capabilities. While Ziggy’s trajectory is forming associations that indicate emergent iconicity with important cultural symbolism around pessimism for the future and libertinism in the present. These emergent associations are then adapted and adopted by various market agents over time to transition Ziggy’s associations to cultural iconicity. The trajectories of Bowie’s and Ziggy’s symbolic associations follow different paths that converge when both become icons, especially when Bowie adopts Ziggy as a material resource to transition his symbolic meanings beyond
his fixed associations, this is seen in his creation of a meta-narrative of Ziggy’s private self which contrasts with his earlier statements describing Ziggy as a “f****r” that was “dead.”

Despite the different trajectories that Bowie and Ziggy follow to becoming icons, it should be highlighted that these are both performance personas of the David Bowie human brand (Auslander, 2004, 2006) who was required to manage these trajectories competing celebrity and iconic associations. Human brand icons then are the consequence of the agentic actions of human brands to reconcile their public/private selves and their forming, fixing, and shifting associations 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). David Bowie as a human brand icon adopts and adopts the material and organizational capabilities of changing commercial materials, such as music styles and music videos, business practices, new technologies and performance personas, such as Ziggy, in order to create, perpetuate, and transition his symbolic associations. He does this in the face of other agents, such as the media, record companies and the audience, seeking to fix his associations through categorizing his sexuality and devaluing his age as an illegitimate signifier of credibility in the music market.

These findings extend our understanding of human brands and the symbolic meanings celebrities and icons represent. While, celebrities, within a time period, own the symbolic meanings associated with their private- and public selves, icons have a convergence and transforming of meanings across time reflecting wider cultural concerns. However, there are limits to the materials and resources a human brand has to create their celebrity and iconic associations. Other market agents can restrict and enhance the associations that are formed, fixed, and shifted (Lindridge & Eagar, 2015; Muñiz et al., 2014; Schroeder, 2005). In this sense human brands as celebrities or icons need to be understood from a structural perspective to determine their agency in determining their trajectory and material resources versus the countervailing forces of other market agents.

Limitations of this paper lie in focusing on one human brand in a particular industry. Future research is suggested in three areas. First, to determine what impact the differing trajectories a human brand may be following on other human brand activities, such as endorsement and role
diversification (McCracken, 1989), and two, to explore other celebrity/ icons, such as political figures like Ronald Reagan, to understand how the celebrity/icon process is manipulated by other agents in the market. Finally, the assumption in iconicity is that cultural shifts precede human brand transitions (Holt, 2004), more research is needed to identify if and when a human brand may transition associations that then influence a cultural shift.

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