Exhibitions and the role of fashion in the sustenance of the Kylie Brand mythology: Unpacking the spatial logic of celebrity culture

Paul Hewer and Kathy Hamilton

Marketing Theory 2012 12: 411 originally published online 1 November 2012
DOI: 10.1177/1470593112457737

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://mtq.sagepub.com/content/12/4/411
Exhibitions and the role of fashion in the sustenance of the Kylie Brand mythology: Unpacking the spatial logic of celebrity culture

Paul Hewer
University of Strathclyde, UK

Kathy Hamilton
University of Strathclyde, UK

Abstract
Central to the logic of the aesthetic economy (Entwistle, 2002) is celebrity culture, the two go hand in hand and the boundaries between them are increasingly blurred in the spirit and name of commerce, capitalism and marketing. Celebrity demands a stage, or better, an exhibition space, a frame for further performance and sustainment of appeal, a space to induce inspiration among followers and fans alike. Celebrity by this reckoning is less about advertising and the transfer of meaning through such overly narrow and confined media processes (McCracken, 1989); rather celebrity affect, as we seek to demonstrate in this paper, works through specific stagings, one such being the celebrity fashion exhibition, where the appeal of celebrity is broadened and staged anew to cultivate new forms of attraction, intimacy and public participation.

Keywords
Aesthetics, celebrity culture, cultural economy, fandom, fashion

We’re a nation of Kylie addicts. Not content with her recent Homecoming tour – rushed straight on to TV and DVD – we need a daily fix of the drama of both her doomed romances and fragile health. So it is hardly surprisingly that now we get Kylie – The Exhibition, a really good chance to gawp slowly, and close-up, at all things Kylie, except the flesh and blood woman herself. (McNulty, 2007)
The theoretical work of Drummond (2006) and Szmigin (2006) has alerted marketing theorists to the central importance of exhibitions within the aesthetic economy (Schroeder, 2006). Drummond’s work explores the movement of art (in his case, that of Caravaggio) from museum to marketplace commodification; while Szmigin (2006: 110) demonstrates how ‘exhibitions present objects, texts and other visual representations to create a complex but bounded system of representation’. This calls to mind Arvidsson’s (2007) account of the waning effects of advertising as a vehicle for marketing power and communication; instead the event, experience or exhibition takes centre stage as sites for the production of what he terms an affective intensity between consumers.

Central to the logic of this emergent aesthetic economy (Entwistle, 2002) is celebrity culture; the two go hand in hand and the boundaries between them are increasingly blurred in the spirit and name of commerce, capitalism and marketing. Celebrity demands a stage, or better an exhibition space for the staging of celebrity, a frame for the further performance and sustainment of appeal, a space to inspire participation among followers and fans alike. Celebrity by this reckoning is less about advertising and the transfer of meaning through such overly narrow and confined media processes as endorsement (McCracken, 1989); rather celebrity affect, as we seek to demonstrate, in this paper works through specific stagings where the appeal of celebrity is broadened and staged anew to cultivate new forms of participation.

As a case for elucidation, take Kylie: The Exhibition, which originated in The Arts Centre in Melbourne, Australia, after Kylie Minogue donated a range of costumes and memorabilia spanning her career. After attracting more than 300,000 visitors in Melbourne, the exhibition subsequently toured the UK with spells in London, Glasgow and Manchester. Centring on fashion, the exhibition showcased some of Kylie’s most iconic costumes that have featured in previous stagings of her celebrity appeal, through her tours, music videos and other performances over the years. Celebrities, especially female celebrities, are often viewed as fashion icons who inspire fashion trends, and magazines, tabloid newspapers and chat rooms are filled with images and discussion of best (and worst) dressed celebrities. For some, these celebrity images represent looks to be emulated. Kate Middleton, the world’s most recent style icon, serves as an example and some critics are going so far as to describe her as ‘the saviour of British fashion’ (Spencer, 2011). Instantaneous sell-outs, inundated websites and waiting lists are just some of the effects brands can expect when Kate decides to step out in one of their offerings.

In the US, Yermack (2010) reports a similar situation in relation to Michelle Obama, who has created $2.7 billion for fashion companies associated with the clothes she wore during 189 public appearances from November 2008 to December 2009. However, a turn to other female celebrities hints at a less functional use of fashion, that is, fashion as spectacle. One need only think of the flamboyant, outrageous and fantastical outfits worn by Lady Gaga to understand that it is not practical for the average woman to emulate all outfits paraded on the celebrity stage. Indeed, ‘this presentation of fashion positions the audience as more of a spectator and less a potential consumer, a gawker rather than a shopper, and ultimately, the fashions as attractions more than commodities’ (Edmond, 2010).

What makes Kylie: The Exhibition of interest is the consideration of fashion and celebrity as spectacular devices which as Turner (2004: 4) suggested ‘privilege the momentary, the visual and the sensational over the enduring, the written, and the rational’. We focus on the following two research questions in relation to the character of celebrity culture and marketing: How is the business of celebrity performed through exhibitions, that is, how is the mythology of Kylie circulated, refreshed and sustained through such marketing efforts? What does the bringing together of the celebrity world with museum culture say about contemporary consumer culture?
While Drummond (2006) explored the commodification of art, we contribute by highlighting the importance of movement in the opposite direction, that of marketplace to museum, from pop culture to the arts as a crucial moment in the continuing circulation of market value.

**Exploring the Kylie mythology and the eighth moment of tragic transcendence**

She is a gay icon, she is a showgirl, she is a sex symbol, she is loved by children, she is a business woman, she is a singer, a songwriter, an actress, she is a charity mascot. She is the girl next door. (Baker et al., 2007: 15)

Kylie was born in May 1968 in Melbourne and, since beginning her musical career in 1988, has enjoyed the success of 52 singles, 11 studio albums and countless awards and accolades including the prestigious BRIT, Grammy and MTV Europe music awards. As articulated in the quotation above from Kylie’s creative stylist, she appeals on multiple levels. Part of this stems from Kylie’s many transformations in image and musical style. Barron (2008: 50) traces the various (brand) personas that define Kylie’s career, termed the seven ages of Kylie Minogue (see Table 1):

Following the Cyber Kylie phase, in 2005 Kylie was diagnosed with breast cancer, an announcement that shocked both fans and non-fans alike, generated huge media interest and provoked an outpouring of public support. Here we witness the way celebrity has a melodramatic possibility, or as Turner (2004: 115) expresses it: ‘Celebrities become the locations for the discussion and evaluation of the dramatic happenings of everyday life divorces, deaths, disappointments in career and so on’. It seems that Kylie’s vulnerability only served to increase her popularity through greater identification from ‘ordinary’ people – heralding as we see it an Eighth Age of ‘Tragic Kylie’. Richards (1999: 59) makes a similar point on Princess Diana in terms of how her Hollywoodization was paralleled with the vulnerability associated with her battles with bulimia, and her unhappy and broken marriage. For Lumby (2006: 541) then,

At the heart of the global fascination with Diana is the fact that she herself symbolized the difficulty of living in a world increasingly made up of appearances. As an individual whose body, emotions and intimate relationships were under continual scrutiny, she literally lived on a faultline between the public and the private.

In Kylie’s case, such tragic events served only to fuel greater fascination with the backstage life of their pop idol, compounded by the fact that for fans the abrupt disruption during her worldwide tour essentially meant that their favourite brand was removed from the market. After a year off (during which she penned a children’s book), Kylie returned to the spotlight with a clean bill of health; her comeback was complete with a tour when we witnessed yet another Kylie persona: Showgirl Kylie adorned with her most flamboyant costumes to date, and proclaiming the assuring message of womanhood, *I will Survive*.¹

Not only will she survive, but she will prosper. And it is this continuing fascination that may explain why Brand Kylie, seen as a fashion icon (even post-40) remains such hot marketing property for a mid-youth generation. For example recent endorsements include the Spanish retailer Tous (www.tous.es) which employs the strapline: ‘Choose your tous celebrity style’; her beachwear range for the company H&M; her *Love Kylie* underwear; and her *Showgirl* and *Sweet*
Darling perfume products which embody and market those looks for a quick sale and easy consumer celebrity fix.

'Spinning Around': Unpacking the appeals of celebrity

From appearing on the front covers of newspapers and magazines, to launching their own perfume brands, to the stories that are woven around their lives in cyberspace, celebrities are undoubtedly a central element of consumer culture. When asked what defines their fandom, many point to their consumption practices (Sandvoss, 2005). Fans engage in a number of consumption rituals (Hogg and Bannister, 2000), and as Crawford (2004: 34) suggests...
not all fan activity invariably involves acts of consumption, being a fan most often (and increasingly) is associated with consuming; be that attending a ‘live’ sport event, watching it on television, buying a team’s replica jersey, observing the displays and performances of other fans, or any other multitude of fan related consumer practices.

The popular music celebrity, more than any other form of celebrity, demonstrates the rapidity of the dissipation of the power and influence of the public personality (Marshall, 2005). Wall (2003) traces the development of research on the consumption of popular music over three main periods. He suggests that for the first 60 years of the 20th century, popular music consumption was characterized by fanaticism and viewed as a form of socially maladjusted behaviour, a deviant social ritual and an unhealthy psychological state. After 1970, analysis focused more on how certain subcultures used music consumption to resist the norms of society. However, more recently there have been significant attempts made to grasp the meaning and practices of music from within pop culture. This involves a focus on fandom, which is regarded as ‘the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text’ (Sandvoss, 2005: 8).

Frith (1987: 37) suggests that pop songs or pop stars generate more emotional meaning than other media events or performers, as through the experience of pop music, we are drawn ‘into affective and emotional alliances with the performers and with the performers’ other fans’. For example live musical performances construct the relationship between the performer and the audience at a personal level as the concert becomes a ‘ritualized authentication of pleasure and meaning of the records through a “lived” experience’ (Marshall, 2005: 202). Further, attendance at a concert becomes an expression of commitment and celebration of the performer rather than an appreciation of the performer’s skill at performing live (Marshall, 2005). This form of emotional engagement is often considered in relation to the formation of para-social relationships where fans develop an illusion of intimacy with their preferred celebrities (Schickel, 2000). Kylie herself articulates this affective intensity as follows:

For me it’s much more than doing a show and having an audience. It’s pretty much safe to say that 99% of the audience know me or have had some experience that involves me that I don’t even know about . . . it’s a collision of energy between the audience and myself . . . every night it’s different. (Minogue, 2007)

Such live events are crucial then in the production of celebrity attachment; and by this reckoning the fashion exhibition becomes a crucial site for the furthering of such appeals, as fans are granted the opportunity to get up close and intimate with the clothes which adorned their pop idol. Celebrity culture is closely connected to the aestheticization of everyday life, with fans becoming taste cultures that seek to cultivate and emulate their chosen celebrity (Rojek, 2001: 102). Fashion is thus central to this process for as Entwistle (2002: 321) suggests ‘in aesthetic economies, aesthetics are not something “added on” as a decorative feature or afterthought once a product has been defined, they are the product/s and, as such, are at the centre of the economic calculations of the practice’. Kellner (1995) provides us with an example through his analysis of Madonna, where Madonna’s focus on style and fashion in the production of identity reinforces the norms of consumer culture and emphasizes the importance and centrality of fashion within it. As such, popular music performers are particularly relevant as a focus of investigation as they are often associated with transformations in both musical style and style of dress in efforts to assert their authenticity (Marshall, 2005).

For some, an obsession with celebrity is linked to the dumbing down of society, with those fascinated with celebrities and their abundant lifestyles associated with cultural tastes often
denigrated by the dominant value system (Fiske, 1992); equally, celebrity fans are often differentia-
ted from more reputable aficionados and admirers of high culture (Jenson, 1992). As such, it is
uncommon for exhibitions devoted to celebrating such lifestyles to be granted space in the
hallowed grounds of a museum or art gallery. The one exception being *Diana: A Celebration*
(Palmer, 2008: 57) which had it all; royalty, tragedy, paparazzi intrusion and the clothes which
‘represented her, and in fact stood in for her absence’. Diana, referred to as the fashion princess
(Hanmer and Graham, 1988), became a global fashion icon and the evolution of her style over the
years was a source of constant media attention from the buzz surrounding her wedding dress to the
famous feature in *Vanity Fair* magazine in 1997 with a collection of images (including the front
cover) taken by celebrity fashion photographer, Mario Testino.

In explaining this interest in celebrity fashion, the work of Turner (2004: 4) is useful, as it
associates the appeal of celebrity with a wider cultural shift ‘that privileges the momentary, the
visual and the sensational over the enduring, the written, and the rational’. Referring to the work of
Boorstin (1961), he suggests that a celebrity culture is fascinated with image and simulation at the
expense of substance and reality. In this way, celebrity becomes a *spectacular commodity* (Turner,
2004); but also highly effective in the furthering and sustaining of business ambitions – something
of which museum curators are all too aware in their desire to pull in the punters and open their arms
to corporate sponsorship and commercial appeal (Steele, 2008).

Media stories about celebrities are often presented as a model of consumption practice and
aspiration for the reader (Turner, 2004). In this way, the celebrity becomes akin to an Identity
Brand (Barron, 2007); for, as Rojek (2001: 188–9) suggests, ‘Celebrity culture is one of the most
important mechanisms for mobilizing abstract desire. It embodies desire in an animate object,
which allows for deeper levels of attachment and identification than with inanimate commodities’.
Thomson (2006) suggests such attachments are particularly prominent when they encourage
feelings of autonomy and relatedness. Identity Brands, in other words, work best when they make
consumers feel empowered and enlivened, when they are able to generate and evoke more intense
eotional attachments. In doing so, the market transforms celebrity into a commodity, entangling
consumers in what Rojek (2001: 14–15) terms the ‘market for sentiments’. He explains that
‘economic growth depends on the consumption of commodities, and cultural integration depends
on the renewal of the bonds of social attraction’ (Rojek, 2001: 14–15). For celebrity culture, this
suggests that consumers may be deeply attracted to and preoccupied with the trials and tribulations
of celebrities, but also that they employ celebrities as resources to assist them in the task of
refashioning and re-imagining their own forms of life and conduct.

However, Turner (2004) is keen to point out that celebrity consumption not only relates to identity
work but can also be more playful in nature. We see the relevance of fashion here as Turner (2004:
102) uses the example of celebrity fashion spreads in magazines which are as likely to ‘produce a
playful and imaginative form of cultural consumption . . . [as to] unproblematically support the
interests of capital’. Such distractions are also pleasurable since they are linked to notions of fantasy
and desire, for as Rojek (2001: 31) contends: ‘the fact that celebrities seem to inhabit a different
world than the rest of us seems to give them licence to do things we can only dream about . . .
through public presentation, they affirm that the gods have come down to earth’ (2001: 31–2).

Celebrities here function not simply as role models or as sites of emulation, but as harbingers of
transformation and escape with which to re-enchant our everyday lives, closing the gap from pro-
saic, mundane affairs and bringing it closer to the utopias of celebrity-land. The museum experi-
ence thus becomes a crucial site as it frames celebrity as a possibility and makes material a closer
communion with this otherworld and its associated glamorous lifestyles and practices.
Methodology

Our findings are based on multiple data sources including participant observation, online fan comments and secondary data. Both authors engaged in participant observation of *Kylie: The Exhibition* during its four-month spell at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow from September 2007 to January 2008. Participant observation allows the researcher to enter ‘the world of everyday life . . . provid[ing] practical and theoretical truths about human existence’ (Jorgensen, 1989: 15). This involved multiple visits to the exhibition, scheduled to enable observation on different days and at varying times. On occasions, the authors visited the exhibition together and on other occasions, they went separately, either alone or accompanied by friends or family members. Each observational visit lasted approximately 90 minutes and incorporated the exhibition itself as well as the adjacent merchandise area. During site visits both authors maintained detailed field notes of their observations on the exhibits, other attendees and their reactions, and their own personal reflections. No formal interviews were conducted although informal conversations were engaged in with those who had attended the exhibition.

The website of the V&A Museum in London provided another useful data source because during the exhibition’s residence, a section of the website was introduced entitled ‘your say’ which welcomed contributions to the ‘Kylie pages’. In particular, users were invited to respond to the following question: ‘Throughout Kylie’s career her audience and the impact she has had on them have evolved in response to her constantly changing Image. How has Kylie influenced your style?’ In line with a confessional society where consumers are increasingly willing to share their private experiences, opinions and tastes online (Beer, 2008), this generated 137 responses, totalling 32 single space pages of text. Most of the respondents to this question used it as an opportunity to post their views of the exhibition.

Secondary data sources included press data (e.g. newspaper articles and reviews of the exhibition) and Kylie biographies, to ensure authors had maximum familiarity with her career. The accompanying volume to *Kylie: The Exhibition* (Baker et al., 2007) provided useful visual imagery to correspond with field notes, important given that photography was not permitted inside the exhibition.

We followed an iterative approach to data analysis, drawing on thematic coding or categorization (Spiggle, 1994) to bring together similar ideas and concepts. The researchers met regularly throughout to share experiences and discuss emerging understandings. These emergent themes were also compared with pre-existing theory. The authors have also been conducting a netnographic analysis of two online forums devoted to talk around Kylie (Hamilton and Hewer, 2010), collecting textual and visual material in the form of conversations, images and blogs. Although not reported on here, understandings and insights obtained were used to aid interpretation.

Kylie: The Exhibition

Approaching the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, in the heartland of the west end of Glasgow, we are greeted with a large sign across the front of the imposing neo-gothic building promoting *Kylie: The Exhibition*. Entry to the exhibition is free and there is a space for queuing outside the exhibition room, demonstrating its popularity. Indeed, each time we visit there is a buzz about the place with the exhibition thronging with people of all ages and sexes, families often with tweens and younger children who have obviously dressed up for the occasion, groups of friends and people on their own. Upon entering, it’s difficult to know which way to turn first, there is
so much to see; but the most prominent thing to notice is the Museum Dress, the signature piece in the exhibition that is used in accompanying promotional material, and strategically used as an entry point for the exhibition. The dress, which was co-designed by Kylie herself to flag up her design credentials, is a nostalgic collage of different images from single, album and magazine covers, a shrine to Kylie’s long career.

Upon passing the Museum Dress the exhibition is divided into six celebrity themes: Music and Video, On Tour, On Stage, Image, Icon, and Backstage. In the Music and Video, On Tour and On Stage sections which form the backdrop to the exhibition we see approximately 45 costumes, famously worn by Kylie in her music videos, tours, special performances and award shows. Many of the costumes on display are iconic and you don’t have to be a devoted fan to remember them, from the simple white dress from the 1987 I Should Be So Lucky video to white hooded jump suit from the Can’t Get You out of My Head video, released in 2001. Each of the outfits is displayed on a black mannequin, serving to accentuate Kylie’s petite form, and all around we overhear exclamations about Kylie’s size zero figure. The dresses are strategically placed to be beyond the reach of most people although you imagine fans wanting to reach out and touch the fragile cloth due to its proximity.

Beside each of the costumes, we are given snippets of background information, including when it was worn and more importantly, the names of the celebrity designers who Kylie has worked with; the exhibition becomes then a veritable who’s who of celebrity designers: from Chanel to Galliano to Gaultier as we witness the synergies between the performer and celebrity designer brands. In the accompanying volume (Baker et al., 2007: 15), her ‘stylist’ and a savvy cultural intermediary recognizes the role such celebrity designers and their brands play in contributing to the appeal of Kylie and what she stands for:

Designers are selected for what they represent themselves, and what their clothes can add to the Kylie mythos. Julien Macdonald’s creations for ‘On a Night Like This’ tour shimmer under the weight of his trademark crystals and sexy glitz. Dolce & Gabbana’s costumes are similarly glitzy, but possess a cinematic glamour. Both emphasise different aspects of Kylie. Chanel lends an almost formal Parisian chic; Helmut Lang and Nicolas Ghesquiere from Balenciaga add an avant-garde body consciousness.

The image section (two long walls of photographs) features shots of Kylie in various poses. Here her photogenic possibilities are established and played up as we learn that Kylie is one of most photographed women in the world. We also have the opportunity to flick through albums of magazine covers featuring Kylie. The scope of these titles reinforces Kylie’s broad appeal and includes women’s fashion magazines (e.g. Elle), men’s magazines (e.g. Loaded), gay lifestyle magazines (e.g. Attitude), British magazines (e.g. The Face) and Australian magazines (e.g. Vogue Australia). In the icon section, two items stand out, perhaps because they are the only outfits not to be modelled but instead appear in protective glass cases, serving to heighten their value and importance to Brand Kylie. The first are the dungarees she wore during her time in Neighbours while playing the character of Charlene Robinson; and the second are the gold hotpants worn in the Spinning Around video, famously we are told bought for 50 pence at a London flea market. Finally, in the backstage section we see, among other things, sketches for some of the famous costumes, and have the chance to sit and watch a documentary featuring behind the scenes footage.

Walking around the exhibition, it’s easy to find yourself singing along to the sound of Kylie’s music, with a huge screen continuously playing 17 music videos, from 1987’s I Should Be so Lucky to 1994’s Confide in Me. In front of the screen is a large open area, one of the most popular spaces
in the exhibition decked out with a silver disco ball to cast light upon the exhibition space. To exit, all visitors have to pass through the adjacent gallery shop which offers a range of Kylie merchandising including the exhibition book, her children’s book and T-shirts.

*Kylie: The Exhibition* demonstrates the strategic character of celebrity conduct and its associated image management as witnessed through the range of costumes and looks on display; looks which express the different market positioning of Kylie as early ‘girl-next-door’ appeal (dungarees) to her ‘sexy’ image, through her ‘Indie’ and ‘disco’ (gold lame hot pants) days and to her more recent ‘showgirl’ reincarnation.

In exploring this appeal, it is useful to cite the work of David Gauntlett (2004: 170) on Madonna: ‘Madonna famously carved out a space for female performers to be unapologetically sexual agent/actors, asserting their own needs and desires, and refusing to be treated as mere sex objects by men’. Part and parcel of this refusal lies perhaps in the chameleon-like nature of Kylie and her ability to transform and reinvent herself to belie market fixing. In many senses the continuing transformation of Kylie is achieved not only through her music, but also more seamlessly through the clothes that are carefully selected to adorn her. In many senses this can be understood as a response to market forces and the attempt to prolong one’s longevity as a celebrity brand, but more importantly as an object of media speculation and inquiry. For as Bauman (1996: 18) suggests: ‘If the modern “problem of identity” was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern “problem of identity” is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open’. Keeping one’s options open is then a useful way to define this postmodern sensibility and aesthetic, a logic wherein fluid identity (Gauntlett, 2004) becomes the order of the day in the business of sustaining celebrity appeal. For Kylie, as every celebrity knows, identity work has become as Harraway suggested ‘contradictory, partial and [more importantly] strategic’ (Harraway, 1990: 197).

What strikes the authors is how these styles and looks are embodied within the costumes and outfits; but shorn of their performability they appear all-too-lifeless, as if in need of Kylie to bring them to life, and sprinkle a little celebrity magic upon the costumes. Or perhaps it is the opposite; her absence as replaced by a lifeless mannequin serves only to magnify and make explicit her feminine authority in bringing such objects to life.

Taking this further we might argue that fashion is an essential ingredient to the Kylie mythology, with talk of glamour and celebrity looks indications of how the exhibition showcases the affinity between identity and bodily practices as expressions of fashion. Conrad in this vein speaks of how: ‘Her clothes and accessories magnified her. Those four-inch heels were elevators, like the bushkins on which actors strutted in the Greek theatre . . . Without these props, and without the cascade of curls, she has nowhere to hide’ (Conrad, 2006). Baker et al. (2007: 15) speak with a commercial and market sensibility of the importance of what she wears: ‘Kylie’s outfits are not confined and therefore not defined by fashion. They have become symbols and icons themselves that exist today as a part of Kylie, a tiny expression of herself and her essence.’

‘Especially for You’: Aesthetic appeals

She lit up the stage and performed perfectly fusing, fashion, culture, brilliance, musical talent, and beauty all in one. Absolutely fabulous. Kylie is one of those stars who is forever changing and evolving with the times. She will never go out of fashion, and will always remain a huge part of popular culture. Be it music, fashion or performance she never fails to amaze (Fan’s comment on Kylie)
In this section we draw on analysis of online fan comments to explore the aesthetic appeal of Kylie fashion. Fans certainly appear to agree with the iconic status of Kylie’s clothing and are grateful for the opportunity of getting up close to her ‘glamorous clothes’ described in another response as ‘spectacular, creative and beautiful’, while another suggests: ‘It’s about time that an exhibition in her honour is given’. One fan commented: ‘Please keep wowing us we will never tire of seeing your amazing outfits’. While another talked of her long journey from Holland to London to see the exhibition ‘I have traveled 10 hours with the bus’ and ‘I (almost) cryed when I got the tickets’. Others were equally complimentary:

The exhibition was amazing, its such an privilage to see the actual clothes that hold so much history. I did’nt want to leave the museum, just to be in the presence of the beautiful clothing, takes your breath away. I have been to the exhibition twice so far and both times it have taken my breath away. Looking at Kylie’s outfits throughout the years of her career is amazing ... I loved seeing the detail of her clothes and even the wear and tear from the gruelling tours! Just shows you what hard work she put in.

This exhibition isn’t just for diehard fans like myself but will be loved by anyone that has a passion for pop culture.

Drawing on Rojek (2001: 31) it appears that celebrities not only ‘do things that we can only dream about’, but they also wear things in ways that we can only dream about. Some critics argue that the exhibition was not art but ‘all image, nothing deeper’, ‘a massive, joyously silly game of dress-up – wonderful for fans but utterly lacking in artistic and critical rigour’ and ‘Kylie is not ready to be made into a museum piece’ (Teeman, 2007).

Comments which surely only add to the urgency of going to a museum exhibition with a difference, with popular celebrity appeal. The background information provided beside each costume refutes criticism of limited effort or artistic rigour, especially those worn for her ‘Showgirl Homecoming’ Tour. Rather they are quick to speak of the labours involved in the production of such celebrity allure. For example we learn that one costume featuring a headdress based on the style of a Roman Centurion’s helmet took six months to complete and another featuring a heavily embroidered corset also demanded six months of ‘meticulous hand sewing’.

Equally fans who have visited the exhibition disagree with such journalist critics, drawing attention to the experience as both entertaining and educational, as suggested by a comment from a secondary schoolteacher:

After bringing my Year 10 Textiles students to the Kylie exhibition on Friday, 25th May, they were delighted in every way. Not only being able to visit London and the V&A Fashion collection, but a bonus of being able to view the Evian ‘Kylie’ exhibition was an amazing experience for us all. To examine ‘show’ costumes first hand and so many different styles, textures and techniques from this excellent collection, has certainly inspired them for their forthcoming final examination coursework. The exhibition layout was as vibrant and energetic as Kylie herself. What a wonderful tribute! Thank you Kylie.

This suggests that we may need to reassess the boundaries of art and popular culture; but also recognize that the museum frame is increasingly susceptible to the pressures of commercialization. As Wilson (2003: 9) suggested, fashion is ‘a form of visual art, a creation of images with the visible self as its medium’. Kylie herself acknowledges and appreciates the importance of the fashion world to her audience when she suggests:
There are so many elements that go into each individual costume, whether it be for stage, performance, everyday wear or video – camera angles, movement, environment, temperature, durability … however the most important factors are intuitive and emotional: how I feel in it and consequently how it affects my performance. The rest lies in the hands of my audience: will they love it, will they hate it? Will it be remembered or forgotten? (Baker et al., 2007: 12)

And perhaps that’s the acid test of celebrity and its market appeal – its ability to not be forgotten, its ability to grasp a little notoriety, its ability to belie the mundane for the heady scent of spectacular concoctions. Analysis reveals that for many of her fans Kylie’s costumes appear to live on in many a fan’s memories, bringing with it tales of the good old days of youth and bittersweet adolescence. In many postings, respondents begin with highlighting how long they have been a Kylie fan, and indeed for most of them this stems from her time in Neighbours during the late 1980s. In comparison to many celebrities, especially ordinary celebrities who often move from idol to objects of shame in relatively quick time periods (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2011), Kylie, even after a career spanning many decades, still evokes admiration and gratitude. As such, the costumes at the exhibition act as resources for reminiscing about their own changing selves: ‘Thank you Kylie, for growing with me, and for all the memories along the way’. Or as another echoed,

When Kylie 1st released I should be so lucky in the 80s I was in my 20s. There was always one of her songs, in shops, pubs, clubs where I went into, so as time went on in the years growing up, each song had a memory. Now I’m in my 40s, & have kids of my own, my daughters 7 & 10 now have the enjoyment of listening to Kylie. My oldest is a big fan of Kylie, so when the Kylie exhibition came around, what a great chance to take my kids to see what music I grew up with in my 20s.

Similar to more commercially-oriented spaces (Diamond et al., 2009), the museum appears to produce a world for the sharing of memories and acts of remembrance among intergenerational family members. The museum curators made significant efforts to encourage families; for example one of our participant observation trips coincided with a Kylie Quiz and Kylie Karaoke event which attracted participants of all ages. Visitors ranging from 5 to 55 years old took their turn in front of the microphone singing both Kylie’s music and other popular songs.

Others gave more specific examples of the way in which they had been influenced by Kylie:

Like many people, I have loved Kylie since her Neighbours days and have followed her career ever since. I’ve always loved her style too – in 1988 when I was 6, I wanted a red ra-ra dress to be like Kylie! When I saw her performing Especially For You on TOTP I wanted her frilly shirt and grape earrings – I really, really loved everything about her! I wanted hotpants – I have some now, but nothing like as short as those gold ones! And it went on. Over the years she has inspired me through her music, attitude and style. The exhibition was wonderful. Not just seeing the costumes, but the whole experience. I remembered things I had forgotten, such as the Live In Japan video, which I have a copy of somewhere! The photographs were also amazing, as I had never seen some of them. It was exciting to be so close to the things I have seen time and time again on TV and DVDs, to see the detail and colours of everything.

In this way visitors become part and parcel of the living history of the Kylie brand and incorporate it into their own lives (Hollenbeck et al., 2008: 348). Many fans are appreciative of Kylie’s ‘own mature and sophisticated sense of style’ and the fact that ‘she always looks well groomed and is a style icon.’ For others, Kylie represents a fashion muse, offering inspiration and guiding their everyday fashion decisions:
Kylie’s image has been a constant in my life for a long time. Each outfit seems to represent a different part of her life and mine! As a more diminutive woman myself, she provides inspiration that fashion can look stunning on people of all heights and she looks beautiful in everything. It is not just her beauty that is inspirational though. Her ambition, personality and more recently, her bravery, make her the kind of woman I aspire to be and would love to meet.

For some, the exhibition operates to remind fans of attending concerts, prompting them to post responses containing details of the different tours they have attended over the course of Kylie’s career, and their own lifetimes. These comments reveal that fans believe artistry is evident in different aspects of Kylie’s career, not just when displayed on mannequins in a museum.

Every aspect of this live performance (the impossible princess of breathtaking beauty, her voice sounding like that of an angel, dance routines, music arrangements, outfits, lighting design and so on …) makes you discover that works of Art are not only to be found in museums.

Her musical performances appear to exemplify the convergence between music, fashion and performance and make explicit this fluid sense of identity, or as one reviewer suggested of her recent shows: ‘seven costume changes, each producing the kind of transformation most women spend hours to achieve’ (Sullivan, 2008); all effortlessly produced we like to think for the sake of her fans and her continued market and brand longevity.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have explored the value to marketing theory of analysing the staging of celebrity as achieved through the cultural form of the exhibition. Our paper responds to recent calls to draw attention to space and visual consumption within marketing theory (de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2010; Schroeder, 2006). Previously, exhibitions have been treated and analysed as trade shows; however, our analysis, like that of Szmigin (2006), broadens understanding of exhibitions and their crucial links to consumer culture and consumption. Through the attachment to celebrity, exhibition space so produced and manufactured represents a crucial context for the performance and broadening of one’s celebrity appeal. Our analysis reveals a convergence of a number of forms of creative expression – music, fashion, art and performance – blending, reinforcing and feeding off each other to combined celebrity brand effect within the frame of the museum space. Unlike Drummond (2006) where the account is of a movement from museum to commercial terrain; here the movement is crucially reversed, so that it is a movement from commercial celebrity culture to that of the museum, with the museum becoming deployed as a showcase for contemporary celebrity lifestyles and the associated paraphernalia of celebrity. Etymologically the spatial coordinates of the museum were always ‘a seat or shrine of the muses’, with celebrity adding to those of erato (love), melpome (tragedy) and thalia (comedy).4

Within such transformative contexts the audience is hailed to participate in the on-going narrative around celebrity-hood, becoming witness to the fluid identities achieved through music, dress and photographic representation. For as Turner (2004: 9) argued contemporary celebrity can be defined as

a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand.
And as a commercial commodity, its value and significance resides in its ability to renew and restage its persuasive appeals. Part and parcel of this staging are the audience, those who attend and choose to spend their time in such consumption spaces where celebrity and nostalgia echo through the walls and mannequins on display. Arvidsson (2007: 16) suggests in the Ethical Economy that what matters is ‘one’s ability to function as a node, able to diffuse and circulate information as well as mobilize attention and participation’. The spatial logic of celebrity signifies the importance of such celebrity spaces, and their stages and temporal spacings not only for sustaining and renewing economic value, but for an understanding of the forms of participation and intimacy which it inspires among fans and consumers alike who seek proximity and closeness to their coveted glamour brands. Herein information is less salient than glamour and celebrity lifestyles and how these become made material in cloth and dress. In this sense the exhibition offers up to consumers an appealing vista on the allure and glamour to be achieved through such imaginative celebrity devices.

Notes

1. As famously proclaimed by Gloria Gaynor in her 1978 anthem to female identity, written by Freddie Perren and Dino Fekaris.
2. Kelvingrove is one of Scotland’s most popular attractions, and outside of London is the most visited museum in the UK, recently topping the more expensive Edinburgh Castle; and it’s free. For further information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kelvingrove_Art_Gallery_and_Museum. We note here that its founding was due to an International Exhibition of 1888 to celebrate achievements in the arts, applied science and industry – convergence culture has deep roots then.
3 Please note that we have included quotes as they appeared rather than amending the spellings as this captures a flavour of the individual and spirit with which they are offered to others.
4. See (http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=muse, accessed 5 August 2011) Museum: ‘Originally “a seat or shrine of the Muses”, from Mousa “Muse”: “The names of the nine Muses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, and their specialties are traditionally: Calliope (epic poetry), Clio (history), Erato (love poetry, lyric art), Euterpe (music, especially flute), Melpomene (tragedy), Polymnia (hymns), Terpsichore (dance), Thalia (comedy), Urania (astronomy).’

References


Paul Hewer is Senior Lecturer at the Department of Marketing, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. His research interests focus on consumer culture, celebrity brands and consumption. His work is published in a range of outlets including Advances in Consumer Research, Consumption, Markets and Culture, Journal of Marketing Management and Scandinavian Journal of Management. He is co-editor of the Journal of Marketing Management. Address: Department of Marketing, University of Strathclyde, 173 Cathedral Street, Glasgow, G4 0RQ. [email: paul.hewer@strath.ac.uk]

Kathy Hamilton is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Her research interests focus on understanding consumer culture. Key projects have related to consumer disadvantage, family consumption and gender issues and the consumption of celebrity. She has published recently in Journal of Marketing Management, Sociology, and Journal of Consumer Behaviour. Address: University of Strathclyde, 173 Cathedral Street, Glasgow, G4 0RQ.