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## Imprinting, incubation and intensification: factors contributing to fan club formation and continuance

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### Introduction

In recent times, researchers have expended considerable time and energy in understanding marketplace-based collectivities, alternatively conceptualized as consumption tribes (e.g., Bennett, 1999; Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2002; Kozinets, 1999; Patterson, 1998) or brand communities (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). For a few reasons, these collectivities are of special interest. First, these groups typically comprise dense social networks of loyalists to particular brands, products or leisure activities. When properly nurtured, these concentrations of brand loyalists constitute a potent collective resource for

marketing organizations, comprising customer retention, long-term profitability and positive word of mouth (Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn, 1995). Second, in the past, traditional marketing theory failed to adequately explain these phenomena, reflecting instead neo-classical notions of consumption as confined to instrumental and/or self-expressive motives. A more enlightened perspective recognizes that consumption can have strong social value, due to its ability to forge lasting social relationships that people value (Cova and Cova, 2002). In such instances the bonding that develops between participating individuals amplifies bonding with the focal consumption object and related activities. Significantly, such ideas had been already voiced by the institutional economists at the beginning of the twentieth century, notably Veblen, but since that time have been overshadowed by beliefs associated with advanced right wing capitalism. Finally, the emergence of these groups suggests that the rampant individualism supposedly believed to characterize late twentieth century affluent societies is arguably a myth. Rather the macro-subcultures of yesteryear, such as social class, age, gender and ethnicity have been replaced by micro-groupings (Featherstone, 1991; Van Raaij, 1993) defined by similarity of values, interests and life experiences (Cova and Cova, 2002).

In this chapter, we detail emergent theory with respect to how and why celebrity worship acts as a galvanizing factor in a specific type of marketplace-based collectivity known as a fan club. Significantly, fan clubs display the now well-recognized characteristics of marketplace-based collectivities. Notably members of these collectivities are as follows:

- 1 sustained admirers and advocates of a specific brand (in our case a branded person: i.e., a celebrity), product or activity that is mediated by mass media and/or commercial entities;
- 2 share a consciousness of kind and a sense of belonging to the group;
- 3 have common traditions, stories and lived experiences;
- 4 exhibit a sense of moral obligation to the community as a whole and each individual member (Cova and Cova, 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001).

However, we suggest that compared to other marketplace collectivities, fan clubs possess certain idiosyncratic aspects.

## Method

Our ideas derive from an extended ethnographic investigation of The Sir Cliff Richard fan club situated in Sydney, Australia. Cliff Richard is an aged celebrity (65 years old); his career spans 45 years. He is the largest selling recording artist in the UK, outselling the Beatles and Elvis. The fan club was formed in 1983 and still retains many of its original members. They meet every six weeks and maintain a busy calendar of extracurricular events and outings. During their meeting they chat about the latest Cliff news and/or their daily lives, plus exchange memorabilia they have purchased from commercial outlets or more

often than not, self-produced. Significantly, one member of the fan club in particular began making Cliff paraphernalia, etc., after Cliff's record company ceased this activity. She produces Cliff imprinted battery-operated clocks, book-marks, Christmas cards and Tee-shirts, and enjoys considerable status within the broader Cliff focused social network as a result. The club has 20 members who are generally aged 50 years plus. They are typically married with children, mostly female, drawn from middle management positions and service industries and live in the outer suburbs of a large metropolitan city. They developed an obsession with Cliff Richard during their teenage years, which obviously continues to this day. Their obsession is characterized listening to Cliff's music regularly, decorating their homes with prominent photographs of Cliff, checking his website daily for news and participating in the associated chat rooms.

Over an eight month period, we attended meetings in club members' homes and functions, such as the celebration of Cliff's birthday. Across this period, we acquainted ourselves closely with the members. We met many of their families and learned about their wider lives and individual histories. We initially interviewed them as a group. Then we conducted individual and couple interviews after meetings or outside the club meeting times in their homes. We interviewed many members more than once and through our regular attendance at functions informally conversed on a regular basis. We videotaped interviews, club meetings and the accompanying environments. We collected a body of photographic history about fan club, the individual members, and about Cliff Richard himself. We listened to the music and watched video clips of Cliff's concerts. We examined extensive newspaper scrapbooks, going back to the 1950s, that are maintained by club members. We reviewed a large variety of Cliff Richard memorabilia and read several books about Cliff's life (e.g., St John, 1991; Turner, 2005). From this material, the researchers made a video-ethnography piece called 'Living Dolls' which was screened at the 2005 Association for Consumer Research Film Festival in Portland, Oregon.

## Findings

Our research suggests that three phases associate with the formation and continuance of fan clubs, notably: (1) imprinting, (2) incubation and (3) intensification.

### 1 Imprinting

Life-long fandom is typically characterized by a moment in a fan's pre-adult life when they are indelibly marked by exposure to a celebrity; thereafter they are metaphorically compelled to follow in their footsteps. Researchers attribute this behaviour to a variety of causes. First, it is well known that celebrities can act as comforting role models of desired values and modes of conduct (Greene and Adams-Price, 1990) when adolescents commence establishing an identity outside the family. For a small proportion of people, the obsession does not cease

with adulthood. In this instance, the obsession seems to be a critical ingredient to the stability of their adult identity. Indeed, the obsession can be so strong that such individuals are driven to marry other fans of the celebrity, or seek out people, who in some way resemble the celebrity, most commonly in physical appearance. Second, exposure to celebrities associates with the formation of non-family mediated preferences including fashion styles, personal appearance (Schindler and Holbrook, 1993) and objects of sexual desire (Holbrook and Schindler, 1994). For example men often voice a preference for the looks of a singer or movie star they encountered during puberty, even though this may have little to do with their day to day choices in romantic partners. Music preferences have similar origins, following an inverted U-shape that peaks in people's early twenties (Holbrook and Schindler, 1989). Hence it is not surprising that baby boomers are encountered listening to the music of the 1960s, such as The Rolling Stones, Credence Clearwater, and Dusty Springfield. Significantly such preferences often last a lifetime; not least of which because they potentially fuel nostalgia for times when life appeared simpler, and hopes were higher (Schindler and Holbrook, 2003).

Virtually all the club members first encountered Cliff Richard in their teenage years. This contact was highly memorable. The vivid descriptions upon recalling these events indicate these were defining moments in their lives: 'I can remember the first time he came on the radio. From that point on I couldn't get enough of him.' Delving back into this period – the 1960s – we found that Cliff Richard was a phenomenon comparable to The Beatles. Widespread fan hysteria surrounded Cliff. This phenomenon is vividly depicted in a BBC documentary in which Cliff Richard is featured being protected by police from huge surging crowds in London at a publicity event. At this time, he had a series of musical recording that topped the charts and he starred in a number of hit movies (e.g., *Summer Holiday*, *The Young Ones*). Many of our informants regard seeing the *The Young Ones* as their defining moment. These impressions were a consequence of liking more than the music, rather a product of the transition from teenage life to adulthood. One female informant put it thus: 'Cliff was my first introduction to music and all the things that go with it . . . the party gatherings, the boys and all the adolescent stuff.' Another female informant explained that she remembered falling in love with her husband while listening to one of Cliff's hit songs at a restaurant. Some male informants relished the belief they bore a similar physical appearance to Cliff, especially when younger.

Ideal self-consistency motives (Baumeister, 1998) contribute to explanations of pre-adult celebrity imprinting and continued fandom in adulthood. Fans tend to be attracted to celebrities endowed with characteristics that they desire for themselves (Caughey, 1994). For example Cliff Richard publicly portrays traditional notions of clean, wholesome living, and embraces schmaltzy romantic notions and traditional Christian values. An ideal self-consistency account would reveal that Cliff Richard's fans prize similar values and modes of life. Not surprisingly female fan club members evinced a preference for other clean living singing stars, such as Hugh Jackman and Barry Manilow. Other self-concept/personality explanations focus on an individual's tendency to

fantasize as a means of escape. They propose that some people are more likely to seek escape through fantasy if they lack control in core aspects of their lives or in some other way are disempowered (Maltby, McCutcheon, Ashe, and Houran, 2001). In a similar vein, Kozinets (2001, p. 71) found that obsessive *Star Trek* adherents are driven by the attraction of 'utopian refuge for the alienated and disenfranchised'. Desire for utopian refuge may contribute to celebrity fandom in cases where the celebrity portrays a better, brighter, fairer world.

Supporting the ideal-self-consistency motive our informants displayed a very conservative value set and behaviours. Their personal values and preferred lifestyles closely aped Cliff Richard's lifestyle. Most of the informants were practising Christians. Cliff's appeal is strongly rooted in his openly professed Christianity. 'We definitely admire him, a Christian man, not afraid to admit this. I revered him from afar, but when I met him he became just like my next-door neighbour. I respect him for his Christian beliefs; he cares for people in third world countries and just has a heart of compassion.' Part of their admiration is that in the 1980s Cliff publicly came out about his Christianity despite the fact that this was widely regarded as commercially risky for a rock musician. A male informant admired Cliff because 'he speaks up for the things that he believes in and I admire his courage, his honesty, straightforwardness, genuineness and the fact that he does not follow along with the mainstream, like a lamb'. Terms like 'clean' and 'wholesome' are commonly used to describe Cliff Richard. His music, video clips and entire public presentation are imbued with the traditional romantic fantasy images of the 'boy next door', 'clean shaven' appearance and 'white picket fence' family values. The fans' conservative values seem to imbue their fashion choices. They tended to wear clothing that was non-revealing or figure hugging, bland in colour and not noticeably fashionable.

The imprinting process is arguably fuelled by some fans' implicit acceptance of the concept of a para-social relationship (Cohen, 1997); that is, a person A believes they knows a lot about person B, but person B knows nothing about person A. In sum, a false sense of intimacy prevails. In such relationships, people experience a high degree of affinity and involvement with a person, often famous, with whom they have little if any direct contact. Boon and Lomore (2001) elaborate that strong feelings of attraction to the celebrity involve persistent positive thoughts related to the celebrity. This behaviour fuels growing identification and the perception that a special bond exists between the fan and the celebrity. In recent times, the use of Internet sites by celebrities, notably via blogs and embedded home-video clips has fuelled these types of relationships.

Despite never personally meeting Cliff, many of our informants appeared to exhibit close identification of a para-social nature. For example, one female informant said: 'You feel you know him ... When we went to the airport to see Cliff arrive I took my young son. He ran up under everyone's legs right up to Cliff and asked him for a kiss and a cuddle. He just sees him as an extension of our family, because Cliff is always present in our home.' She further elaborated that when her home was threatened by bushfire, she had rushed outside with photos of Cliff, rather than other belongings. This case underscores the

significance of Cliff in our fans' lives. Two informants when asked the question 'What if you didn't have Cliff in your life?' looked absolutely shocked and replied: 'I'd be devastated. Our lives would be poorer. We have so many memories. He's part of our life and he's part of us.'

The idea of a para-social connection is further underscored by the prominent display by fans of photos of Cliff in their living rooms, often taking greater prominence than photos of family and friends. They also reported sacrificing family outings and holidays, preferring instead to spend money and time going to Cliff concerts with other fan club members. In contrast, a few informants reported being less attached to Cliff, stating that they if didn't have Cliff, they'd adopt another hobby, 'like astronomy or building model aero-planes'. Another informant explained: 'When I was single mum, Cliff dominated my life, but now I'm married he's like a member of my extended family - always there, but not the main game. I have other things on my mind.'

Para-social relationships with Cliff are likely further supported by fan's ability to continue collecting of Cliff's music and memorabilia. Over his long career Cliff Richard has released several hundred recordings. Some of the club members have collected virtually everyone of them. Substantial collections of memorabilia were found in everyone of the homes that we visited. This ranged from Cliff Richard cups, plates, calendars, dolls, clocks, posters, pens, books and videos, through to pebbles that had been taken from his driveway and leaves plucked from the holly bush in his garden. Many fans retained all the tickets and programmes from the concerts they had attended, numbering in their hundreds. In addition, 'A lot of the members have a Cliff room . . . a whole room devoted to Cliff. Some wallpaper their bedrooms with his photos.' O'Guinn (2000) described similar phenomena in American fans clubs, likening these rooms to devotional shrines.

## 2 Incubation

Incubation comprises the time period that fans are more or less alone, prior to becoming members of the fan club. This period is characterized by a sense of alienation and stigma as a consequence of being an adult fan (regarded by most people as aberrant), coupled with being a fan of a Christian pop singer, such as Cliff Richard, in a highly secular society, such as Australia. The following quote from the long-time president captures the conflicting emotions experienced by consumers who worship Cliff Richard:

So you like Cliff Richard? Is he a bible basher? Is he gay? Has he got a girlfriend? Why isn't he married? These are questions you face once you reveal that you are a Cliff Richard fan. You feel like a Christian thrown to the lions. I often wondered, I must be odd, because I'm the only one who likes Cliff. You ask record shops, they answer Cliff who? So can you imagine how I felt when I joined the Australian group.

We sense from this quote that not being able to interact with other fans can be extremely lonely. One informant described the exhilaration of her first fan club meeting, 'Knowing that you were able to share with like minds. It was so great to have people to talk to about Cliff. I felt so welcome and it was nice to talk about someone that you so admire.' Some informants described years of being a fan where they had no regular contact with other fans. 'I used to wonder if I was only one.' Most went to considerable trouble to find the fan club and expressed discernable relief when they succeeded. Their motivation appears to be more than just the need to interact, but extends into a desire for self-validation. 'I was nervous. I thought they'd know so much more about Cliff than me. But they were so accepting. I felt right at home.' The club gives them the sense that they are not aberrant; that they are not weird. 'It's great. I can just go to a meeting, not worry about what my family thinks. Often I can be more open in the fan club than at home. Anyway my family has got used to it. They don't object anymore.' Feeling an accepted member of a group particularly applied to the male fans, where sexual orientation issues in following a male celebrity can apply.

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All of club members felt stigmatized by the term 'fan' and called their group the Cliff Richard Meeting House. The concept of celebrity worship was particularly obnoxious to them. 'We know not to cross the line. We like to see Cliff, to go to his concerts but that's it. We know of others, who believe one day he's going to marry them. He had to take action against her; she was so obsessed'. Despite acknowledging that others disapprove of their celebrity worship, some fan club members found it hard to understand why others think their love of Cliff as odd. 'I went into an English pub on my last trip. I said we were here to see Cliff in concert. They looked at me as if I was from outer space. I thought how dare they! Cliff's English, why shouldn't we like him?'

Incubation is also propelled by the celebrity's sustained career and arguably excessive need for admiration by others. After all, Cliff Richard is not a one-hit wonder. Long after their teen years, he has continued to produce successful records and very apparently from his interviews enjoys the limelight. Diehard fans have not an opportunity to grow out of him, due to a lack of activity in the charts or public life. Arguably Cliff's sustained narcissistic need for admiration of his own self-projection (Vaknin, 2001) fuels his continued drive to remain in the pop music charts. Further insight into his behaviour comes from a former producer of Cliff, who stated: 'How can someone so in love with himself ever fall in love with someone else?' (Turner, 2005, p. 362). When a celebrity's need for adoration fuels celebrity worship, the celebrity-fan relationship takes on a symbiotic character; fans and celebrity develop a dependency on each other. Each party becomes 'willing prisoners' of their expectations of each other.

This situation is particularly interesting in the case of Cliff Richard whose success was seeded in the 1950s and early 1960s when he swept up a generation of teenage fans. Since then he appears to have carefully catered for and adapted to this loyal fan base: 'I live for my fans.' In this case celebrity and fans play their respective roles in a scripted manner that both rigorously adhere to. There are no surprises or exceptions. Cliff Richard exhibits a stunning

constancy in music, style and broader values. In this case continued delivery of what the fans desire helps to maintain the relationship. Cliff is notorious for pursuing the perfect performance through intensive practice and a careful eye for detail. For example, informants related the story of him missing a dance move in one performance and spending four hours the next day practising the one move over and over again. While many celebrities reduce their workload once they achieve success and progress into middle age, Cliff continues to strive for recognition.

Despite liking Cliff, informants readily agreed that Cliff is vain and very self-assured. One stated: 'Oh he loves himself. He has no doubt about his own talents,' or 'He always tells us that [because we like him] we have good taste in men.' Another informant pointed to his obsession with his appearance: 'He always watches what he eats. He is always on a diet. He eats breakfast, never lunch and very little for dinner.' Photographs over the years suggest the occurrence of Cliff's frequent and major cosmetic surgery. Newspaper clips proclaim him as 'The Peter Pan of pop.' At 65 years of age, he has not a single grey hair, maintaining a deep brown hair colour. Cliff, himself, infers his excessive dependency on his fans adoration and narcissistic streak when he states in a 1960s film clip: 'My fans are everything to me. I will do anything to make them happy.' At one stage during his career Cliff adopted a hip funky more contemporary style in his appearance and the music he performed. When his fans indicated their dislike for this change of events, Cliff returned to his original image and music format immediately.

### 3 Intensification

Once becoming members of the fan club, members report greater freedom in their worship of Cliff arguably as they have willing fan club companions. Every time Cliff tours Australia and New Zealand, the fan club members attend concerts together across the six main cities in the region; 'We go to every concert in Australia and spend every cent that we have, and sometimes even resort to MasterCard. We even try to stay in the same hotel as him.' Although most the fan club members are circumspect about the degree to which they followed Cliff around, it seems it's a case of safety in numbers. The numerous times they reported encountering Cliff on fan club outings group further suggests that they are prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to be physically close to him or to meet him. For example, they described videotaping him sun-baking by a hotel pool; having multiple 'chance' meetings on aircraft flights and lurking outside his country home in England: 'We made a hell of a noise trampling on pebbles of his driveway; the gardener turned the garden hose on full blast. I think he wanted us to leave.' They described numerous instances of waiting long hours for Cliff at airports and/or at the entrance to hotels where he is staying; or pass by where he just happens to be playing tennis. During our fieldwork period, one pair of ladies travelled to England to attend eight consecutive Cliff Richard concerts at the Royal Albert Hall, London.

The fan club activity, on the surface at least, appears as a source of temporary escape or diversion from the stresses of everyday life, and hence may be a healthy activity. The group related a story in which they had all waited late at night after a concert at the entrance to Cliff's hotel. Upon finally arriving, he turned to them and asked: 'Haven't you got homes to go to?'. Initially they were a little offended by this response. However, one of them rationalized: 'We thought he must be terribly tired. Look you accept this from Cliff because fantasy is better than reality. If your husband came home leaving his dirty socks around and treated you like that, you wouldn't tolerate it. But with Cliff, well he's not there every day. It's just a diversion for us.'

Jenkins (1992) argued that we should emphasize the active positive benefits when fans created social networks. O'Guinn (2000) found that fan clubs act like a surrogate family for many members and that the personal relationships that developed often became amongst the most important in their lives. One of the most powerful mechanisms that maintain these fans' interests in Cliff are the strong, enduring friendships that have developed within the group. When interviewing two women their immediate response to the question: 'What if Cliff did not exist?' was 'Well we would not have met.' As one informant emphasized many of these friendships go back over 20 years: 'We have made so many really good friends, and over the years we have shared births, deaths, marriages, children growing up, and so many experiences. We have just sprouted these wonderful friendships worldwide.' Another informant asserts: 'It's (the club) like a part your family.' Instances of mutual support stemming from this community were manifold. For example, one informant described how 'For 5 years I was a single mother and it was really hard, but there was so much love from all these people. It was a huge support for me.'

An intensifier of fandom not mentioned in the literature, but which became obvious in our interactions with the fan club, was the physical attractiveness and sexual appeal of the celebrity. When the question of sexual attractiveness was put to female fans all positively affirmed this as their perception - 'He's yummy', 'he's the complete package, fit, good looking, very attractive in every way'. One informant stated: 'We'd pay just to sit and watch him eat his dinner on stage.' As noted earlier Cliff has put a lot of effort in maintaining physical attractiveness through exercise, diet and a variety of cosmetic enhancements. This contributes to the state of constancy. Male fans tend to shy away from the attractiveness topic. While they agree that Cliff is an attractive person, male fans verbalize more rational reasons for following Cliff. These reasons are around the quality of the musical performances, Cliff's talent, and the admirable values, ethics and personal characteristics of the celebrity.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings suggest that marketplace collectivities, such as fan clubs, are possibly a consequence of consumers seeking sanctuary within their confines. They comprise environments in which consumers can experience social

acceptance and a sense of belonging amongst 'like minds'. This can be a welcome relief after long periods of discomfort caused by the stigmatization and loneliness associated with adult celebrity worship. The bonds that consumers develop in fan clubs can strengthen their relationship with the brand (in this case a celebrity) and also act as important sources of emotional support with respect to other relationships in their lives (e.g., family, friends). Hence fan clubs enriches relationships within, and external to the market. Furthermore the numerous social groups and social networks in which our fans appear to successfully participate over long periods of time suggests such that these individuals are socially adept and more likely healthy psychologically. In this sense, Cova and Cova's (2002) idea of tribes (rather than segments or sub-cultures) appears appropriately applied to fan clubs; comprising one of the many tribes in which contemporary consumers participate.

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