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Posting from beyond the grave: An autopsy of consumer attitudes toward promotional communication in a posthumous context

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ABSTRACT

It is now common for consumers to mourn and commemorate deceased celebrities on social networking sites (SNS). In addition to grieving messages, however, celebrities' posthumous SNS increasingly include promotional content; late celebrities, from Marilyn Monroe to David Bowie, regularly tweet or post promotional messages from the afterlife. The aim of this paper is to explore consumer attitudes toward marketing communication in a posthumous environment. Prior research has consistently documented consumers' rejection of marketing activities in other sacred environments. By investigating the interaction effect of celebrity attachment (fans vs. non-fans) and death salience on celebrities' posthumous SNS, this research is the first to identify a positive response to marketing communication in a sacred environment. Three experimental studies demonstrate that although both fans and non-fans react negatively to promotional messages when death is salient, over time, celebrity attachment diminishes death salience and fosters a positive response of fans toward promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS. Celebrity attachment may favor artificial immortality and, as such, distance the late celebrity from death-related thoughts.

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Just because a celebrity is dead doesn't mean he can't tweet. (Forbes, 2012)

1. Introduction

Celebrities (i.e., individuals who enjoy public recognition; McCracken, 1989) use social networking sites (SNS) to increase their influence and deliver promotional content (Johns & English, 2016). Currently, celebrity SNS remain active well after the death of the individual (Drake & Miah, 2010). Celebrities' official posthumous SNS, accounts that are allowed by Facebook or Twitter to display the blue “verified” checkmark, may reach millions of consumers, as illustrated by the official posthumous Facebook pages of Michael Jackson (76 million fans), Paul Walker (45 million fans), Albert Einstein (19 million fans) and Marilyn Monroe (14 million fans). Interestingly, many celebrities' posthumous SNS are not devoid of promotional content: Marilyn Monroe sells cosmetics on Twitter, and Einstein promotes bobblehead figurines and “I ♥ π” t-shirts on Facebook. As shown by these examples, messages

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promoting celebrity-related products and memorabilia are generally posted under the name of the deceased celebrities, thereby creating the illusion that they were posted from beyond the grave.

However, these promotional messages coexist with consumers' grieving rituals on celebrities' posthumous SNS, such as posted messages that commemorate the deceased (Radford & Bloch, 2012). Posthumous SNS thus function as digital gravescapes (Church, 2013) wherein consumers are exposed to death-related information. A significant portion of research in consumer psychology has documented that exposure to death-related information may increase *death salience*, or the level of activation of death-related thoughts in consumers' minds (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010). Evidence from various settings has shown that in addition to explicit death-related stimuli (e.g., news of terror attacks; Liu & Smeesters, 2010), implicit death-related stimuli can arouse death salience (e.g., exposure to an insurance brand; Franssen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Das, 2008). By extension, we posit that the death of a celebrity should increase death salience. Then how do consumers respond to promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS?

A strong rejection of commercial content by consumers could be expected since this content should be perceived as a violation of the boundary between the sacredness of death and (profane) marketing practices (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989). Drawing on prior research on grieving processes, however, we posit that as time passes, celebrity attachment positively impacts the acceptability of messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS by reducing death salience. Consumers who display a high degree of celebrity attachment (i.e., the fans) are likely to maintain their beloved celebrities as everlasting figures (Alexander, 2010), thereby dissociating them from death-related thoughts.

Drawing on the literature on grieving processes and the continuing bonds theory, the present research contributes to our understanding of this communication practice by showing that celebrity attachment attenuates death salience over time, thus preventing the clash between death (sacred) and marketing communications (profane). Through three experimental studies, we demonstrate that celebrity attachment triggers a positive attitude toward promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS.

2. Theoretical background

The death of a celebrity increases the level of death-related thoughts associated with the celebrity in consumers' associate memory network (Hayes et al., 2010). In other words, when consumers think of David Bowie or Carrie Fisher, death-related thoughts are activated along with other associations related to the celebrity's life or works. Celebrities' posthumous SNS constitute a unique environment to witness the digitalization of traditional forms of grieving rituals (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013) and, as such, the increased level of death salience after the celebrity's death. Posthumous SNS function as online bereavement platforms where fans mourn the celebrity by posting messages that convey their emotional reactions following the celebrity's death (Church, 2013). However, the death of the celebrity does not prevent the distribution of further marketing content, especially celebrity memorabilia, on posthumous SNS.

Receiving the news of the loss of a celebrity produces intense feelings for fans (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003) because death puts an end to their relationship with the beloved celebrity. As bereaved persons, the celebrity's fans address separation through grief work, which includes missing, remembering or crying (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Radford & Bloch, 2012). Challenging the long-standing Freudian belief that ties to a deceased person need to be relinquished, the continuing bonds theory proposes that maintaining psychological association with the deceased helps to counteract bereavement-related distress (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). After the grief work, during which they are submerged by emotions (Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005), individuals cope with their loss through meaning reconstruction strategies that allow the continuation of the relationship with the deceased person (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Likewise, it is expected that bereaved fans will protect themselves from pain and cope with grief work by restoring meaning to maintain a psychological relationship with the celebrity. Given Radford and Bloch's (2012) proposition that celebrities reach the immortal status of icons after their death, it can be expected that by coping with grief work, fans eventually dissociate the celebrity from death-related thoughts.

In contrast, non-fans would be less likely to engage in grief resolution strategies. Because these individuals did not have a strong relationship with the celebrity, they should be relatively unaffected by the celebrity's death. Despite the passage of time, death-related thoughts are likely to remain strongly associated with the celebrity in non-fans' minds given that no grief work is undertaken to ensure the dissociation of the celebrity from death-related thoughts. As an illustration, Marilyn Monroe may be an everlasting celebrity for her fans, but non-fans may consider her a former (deceased) celebrity. Accordingly, the activation of death-related thoughts should be stronger for non-fans than for fans because the two units (i.e., celebrity and death) would have been dissociated by fans' grieving process.

Prior studies have documented a strong negative response toward market-related activities using or surrounding sacred items (Belk et al., 1989). Infinite values such as death or life contrast with finite commercial or economic values (Curasi, Price, & Arnould, 2004; Kozinets, 2001). To avoid possible profane contamination (including contamination from market-related activities), consumers act protectively toward the items they consider sacred (e.g., values, objects, persons, or activities). For instance, Veer and Shankar (2011) demonstrated that high-religiosity consumers are less inclined to acquire products that have an explicit materialistic nature. Similarly, market-pricing strategies used by religious or healthcare organizations are judged unacceptable by consumers because they mix sacred and profane values (McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012). By extension, because the death of a celebrity should increase death salience, consumers are likely to reject promotional messages on posthumous SNS. However, because celebrity attachment should reduce death salience over time, we predict that it has a positive impact on the acceptability of promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS.

Below, we present three experiments to test this prediction. By employing the actual temporal proximity of the celebrity's death, Studies 1A and 1B show a positive influence of celebrity attachment on the reduction of death salience and attitudes toward promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS. Study 2 replicates this result in a setting that differs in the experimental manipulation (death salience priming) and stimuli.

3. Studies 1A and 1B

The objective of Studies 1A and 1B is to provide initial evidence of our basic proposition: celebrity attachment positively impacts attitudes toward promotional messages on celebrities' posthumous SNS because it attenuates death salience through the passage of time.

Based on a pretest ($N = 38$), two celebrities with comparable numbers of fans on Facebook, David Bowie ($M = 6.9$ M) and Freddie Mercury ($M = 6.7$ M), were selected as an appropriate pairing of celebrities for Studies 1A and 1B. This pairing ensured the manipulation of temporal proximity of death since David Bowie died five months prior to data collection while Freddie Mercury had passed away >24 years before. The celebrities obtained similarly high levels of familiarity ($M_{\text{Mercury}} = 5.15$, $SD = 2.02$ versus $M_{\text{Bowie}} = 4.73$, $SD = 2.26$, $\Delta = 0.42$, $t(37) = 1.28$, $p > 0.05$; *I am familiar*; Keller, 1993), attitude ($M_{\text{Mercury}} = 4.86$, $SD = 1.84$ versus $M_{\text{Bowie}} = 4.55$, $SD = 2.17$, $\Delta = 0.31$, $t(37) = 1.00$, $p > 0.05$; *I like*; Grohmann, 2009) and attachment ($M_{\text{Mercury}} = 4.42$, $SD = 2.07$ versus $M_{\text{Bowie}} = 4.10$, $SD = 2.26$, $\Delta = 0.32$, $t(37) = 0.84$, $p > 0.05$; *I am a fan*: Till & Shimp, 1998). Participants also indicated that they had an overall similar image ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.88$; *Please rate the following celebrities according to the degree you think their image – i.e., the ideas that come to your mind when you think of them – is coherent with that of David Bowie*).

3.1. Study 1A

3.1.1. Method

Study 1A aimed to verify that there is an impact of celebrity attachment on death salience through the temporal proximity of the celebrity's death. It used a 2 (temporal proximity of death: proximal vs. not proximal) \times 2 (celebrity attachment: fans vs. non-fans) completely randomized factorial experimental design. A total of 124 adult individuals (54% female; age ranked between 18 and 71, $M_{\text{age}} = 33$) were recruited through a large crowdsourcing platform, Clickworker, in a Western European country. They were told that the study aimed to explore their cultural consumption preferences. First, they answered an open-ended essay question: "Jot down, as specifically as you can, the thoughts you have when you think about celebrity". No visual support (text or images) was presented to avoid influencing the respondents. On a second page, to measure death salience, the participants completed a death-thoughts accessibility measure consisting of 16 word fragments, five of which could be completed with a death-related or a neutral word. For example, SK_LL and COFF_ _ could be completed as skill and coffee or as the death-related words skull and coffin (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Schimmel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007). Other death-related words included murder (M_R_ER), grave (GRA_E) and buried (BUR_ED). On a third page, participants answered questions measuring familiarity with the celebrity (*I am familiar*; Keller, 1993) and celebrity attachment (*I enjoy listening to celebrity's music, My friends and I like to discuss what celebrity has done, I love to talk with others who admire celebrity, Keeping up with news about celebrity is an entertaining pastime*; McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002; 77%, $\alpha = 0.901$). Following Hung (2014), participants who scored ≥ 4 on all four questions were categorized as fans of the celebrity. The other participants were categorized as non-fans. The last page contained demographic items and one question to ascertain that no participants identified the study's goal.

3.1.2. Results

Death-thoughts accessibility scores were computed by summing the total number of word fragments completed using a death-related word (Schimmel et al., 2007) and were then subjected to a two-factor ANCOVA (temporal proximity of death \times celebrity attachment and familiarity with the celebrity as a covariate). The interaction was statistically significant ($F(1, 119) = 9.48$, $p < 0.01$). The results are displayed in Table 1. Fans of Freddie Mercury presented a lower level of death salience scores than non-fans did ($M_{\text{MercuryFans}} = 2.77$, $SD = 1.17$ versus $M_{\text{MercuryNonFans}} = 3.53$, $SD = 0.56$, $\Delta = -0.76$, $t(61) = -3.27$, $p < 0.01$), but fans of

Table 1
Interaction Effect of Temporal Proximity of Death \times Celebrity Attachment on Death-Related Thoughts.

Source of variation	df	Mean squares	F statistic
Intercept	1	122.02	169.70***
Familiarity	1	1.53	2.13
Temporal proximity of death (A)	1	1.45	2.02
Celebrity attachment (B)	1	3.75	5.21*
A \times B	1	6.81	9.48**
Error	119	0.71	

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

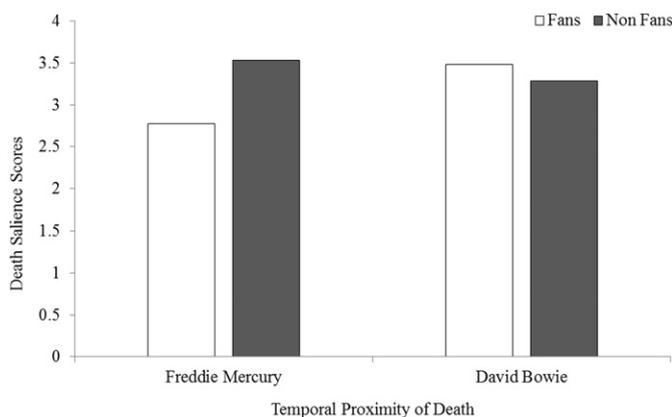


Fig. 1. Influence of Celebrity Attachment and Temporal Proximity of Death on Death Salience Scores.

David Bowie had a similar level of death salience scores as non-fans ($M_{\text{BowieFans}} = 3.48$, $SD = 0.73$ versus $M_{\text{BowieNonFans}} = 3.28$, $SD = 0.81$, $\Delta = 0.20$, $t(59) = 1.01$, $p > 0.05$) (Fig. 1).

Overall, these results establish that the two celebrities activated death-related thoughts in the participants' minds to a different extent depending on celebrity attachment. In particular, celebrity attachment reduced death-related thoughts associated with a celebrity whose death was not proximal. We then proceeded to test the effect of celebrity attachment on attitudes toward promotional messages on these celebrities' posthumous SNS.

3.2. Study 1B

3.2.1. Method

The goal of Study 1B was twofold. First, it tested the predicted interaction effect between celebrity attachment and death salience on attitude toward a promotional message. Second, it sought to test if the predicted positive effect of celebrity attachment would only affect attitudes toward a message promoting a product strongly related to the celebrity. To that end, Study 1B tested the interaction effect between celebrity attachment and death salience with messages promoting two types of memorabilia: a) a product explicitly related to the celebrity through the name or representation of the celebrity (*celebrity-branded products*; e.g., an "Amy" t-shirt on Amy Winehouse's SNS) and b) a product implicitly related to the celebrity (*non celebrity-branded products*; e.g., a scientific book on Albert Einstein's SNS). Our prediction was that only products strongly associated with the celebrity may be likely to maintain a psychological relationship between fans and the deceased celebrity. Consequently, the positive impact of celebrity attachment on attitudes may not affect messages promoting non celebrity-branded products.

The study used a 2 (temporal proximity of death: proximal vs. not proximal) \times 2 (celebrity attachment: fans vs. non-fans) \times 2 (product type: celebrity-branded vs. not celebrity-branded product) completely randomized factorial experimental design. The sample consisted of 324 adult participants recruited through Clickworker. Fifteen questionnaires were excluded due to missing data, leaving a final sample of 315 participants (52% female; ages between 18 and 65, $M_{\text{age}} = 31$). The participants received a fixed monetary compensation of \$2.

The participants were told that the purpose of the study was to explore their cultural consumption preferences. Four screening questions on 6-point scales measured the participants' attachment to the celebrity (similar to those used in Study 1A; 81%, $\alpha = 0.924$). Then, the respondents were exposed to a fictitious screenshot of the celebrity's Facebook page that included three posts. To recreate the conditions of a realistic posthumous page, all of the texts, comments and images were selected from the real posthumous Facebook pages. Two posts consisted exclusively of pictures and quotations from the deceased celebrity, whereas the last post presented the launch of a guitar. In the celebrity-branded product conditions, the guitar bore a drawing of the celebrity, and the text indicated that it was a "*celebrity name guitar*". In the non-celebrity branded product conditions, the promotional message included no brand name or explicit association with the celebrity.

All items were measured on a seven-point scale and were drawn from prior research. On the first page, the participants answered questions regarding their attitude toward the promotional message (*appealing, pleasant, good, I have a favorable opinion about it, I like it*; Choi & Rifon, 2012; 89%, $\alpha = 0.969$). On the second page, to control for the manipulations, the participants answered questions regarding the strength of association between the product and the celebrity (*This guitar is strongly related to celebrity*), the temporal proximity of the celebrity's death (*Celebrity died a long time ago*), and familiarity with the celebrity's SNS (*I am familiar with celebrity's Facebook page*). On the third page, participants answered questions regarding the quality of the stimuli (*I find these stimuli realistic, The quality of these stimuli is very high, I find this situation believable*) and socio-demographic questions. Finally, they were asked about the point of the experiment to uncover any suspicions about the experiment's actual goal (Chartrand, Huber, Shiv, & Tanner, 2008).

3.2.2. Results

A three-way (temporal proximity of death, celebrity attachment and product type) MANOVA confirmed that the high levels of stimuli realism ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.48$), quality ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.48$) and credibility ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.52$) did not differ across conditions (all $p > 0.05$). Additionally, a three-way ANOVA using the strength of association between the product and the celebrity as the dependent variable resulted in a statistically significant main effect of product type ($F(1, 307) = 26.22$, $p < 0.001$; $M_{\text{Branded}} = 4.39$, $SD = 1.92$ vs. $M_{\text{NotBranded}} = 3.32$, $SD = 1.82$). No other effect of temporal proximity of death and celebrity attachment on the strength of association between the product and the celebrity was significant ($p > 0.05$). A three-way ANOVA using the item “Celebrity died a long time ago” as the dependent variable yielded a significant main effect of temporal proximity of death ($F(1, 307) = 242.47$, $p < 0.001$; $M_{\text{Mercury}} = 4.64$, $SD = 1.77$ versus $M_{\text{Bowie}} = 1.93$, $SD = 1.25$). No statistically significant effect of celebrity attachment, product type, or their interaction was identified ($p > 0.05$). Overall, these analyses confirm that the manipulations of celebrity attachment and death proximity were effective. In addition, none of the participants recognized the real purpose of the experiment.

A three-way ANCOVA using the attitude toward the message as the dependent variable and familiarity with the Facebook page as a covariate yielded a significant main effect of product type ($F(1, 306) = 9.86$, $p < 0.01$) as well as a significant celebrity attachment \times temporal proximity of death interaction ($F(1, 306) = 7.85$, $p < 0.01$). The 3-way interaction was not significant ($F(1, 306) = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$) (Table 2). When the celebrity had died long ago, fans had a more favorable attitude toward the message than non-fans did ($M_{\text{MercuryFans}} = 4.12$, $SD = 1.75$ versus $M_{\text{MercuryNonFans}} = 3.01$, $SD = 1.27$, $\Delta = 1.11$, $t(159) = 4.56$, $p < 0.001$). When the celebrity had died recently, fans' and non-fans' attitudes toward the message did not differ significantly ($M_{\text{BowieFans}} = 3.44$, $SD = 1.84$ versus $M_{\text{BowieNonFans}} = 3.10$, $SD = 1.49$, $\Delta = 0.34$, $t(152) = 1.23$, $p > 0.05$) (Fig. 2). In addition, attitudes toward the message were more favorable for celebrity-branded products than for non celebrity-branded products ($M_{\text{Branded}} = 3.70$, $SD = 1.58$ versus $M_{\text{NotBranded}} = 3.08$, $SD = 1.64$, $\Delta = 0.62$, $t(313) = 3.44$, $p < 0.001$). The prediction that the positive impact of celebrity attachment on attitudes may not affect messages promoting non celebrity-branded products is thus not supported. A weak and implicit association between the product and the deceased celebrity may be sufficient to help maintain a psychological relationship between fans and the celebrity.

3.3. Discussion

The results of Studies 1A and 1B support the initial research proposition of a positive impact of celebrity attachment on death salience reduction and attitude toward a message promoting a deceased celebrity's memorabilia when the celebrity's death is not proximal. However, because we did not control for potential differences between Freddie Mercury and David Bowie (e.g., in terms of image, “natural” strength of association with death-related thoughts, or pictures used for the stimuli), it is possible that such differences influenced the participants' responses. To rule out this alternative explanation, Study 2 used the same celebrity across all conditions.

4. Study 2

By using another operationalization of death salience (death priming), Study 2 provides additional support in the observed effect on consumer attitude toward a promotional message on celebrities' posthumous SNS. Study 2 also replicates the effect observed in Studies 1A and 1B in another setting (i.e., a sample of participants drawn from the same population but recruited in a different manner with another celebrity, Marilyn Monroe, and another SNS, Twitter).

Table 2
Temporal Proximity of Death \times Celebrity Attachment and Product Type Effect on Attitude toward the Message.

Source of variation	df	Mean squares	F statistic
Intercept	1	642.34	280.34***
Familiarity	1	57.30	25.01***
Temporal proximity of death (A)	1	11.98	5.23*
Celebrity attachment (B)	1	5.21	2.27
Product type (C)	1	22.60	9.86***
A \times B	1	17.98	7.85**
A \times C	1	0.34	0.14
B \times C	1	0.88	0.38
A \times B \times C	1	0.20	0.09
Error	306	2.29	

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

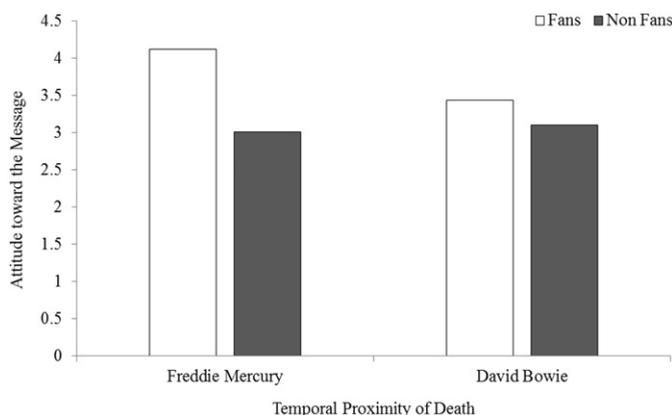


Fig. 2. Influence of Celebrity Attachment and Temporal Proximity of Death on Attitude toward the Message.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Design and sample

Half of the participants were randomly allocated into conditions with death priming, whereas the other half were exposed to stimuli with life priming. Priming was operationalized with a short biography of Marilyn Monroe prior to the questionnaire. In the death-priming conditions, the text described the actress' death, whereas in the life-priming conditions, it discussed her career with no mention of her death.

This study used a 2 (priming: death vs. life) \times 2 (celebrity attachment: fans vs. non-fans) design. The data were collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire delivered at the participants' homes in a large Western European city. One hundred and fifty-eight adult individuals (48% female; age from 18 to 74, $M_{age} = 32$) agreed to participate in this study with no monetary compensation. The experimenters randomly selected streets and knocked on the door of every second dwelling. Questionnaires were left with the respondents and picked up at their convenience. The final response rate was 47.7%.

4.1.2. Pretest

We conducted a pretest to confirm the effectiveness of the manipulation. A convenience sample of 50 participants completed the same death-thoughts accessibility measure as that used in Study 1A (Greenberg et al., 1994). Half of the participants were randomly exposed to death priming and the other half to life priming. The results showed that death salience scores were higher in the death-priming conditions than in the life-priming conditions ($M_{Death} = 2.32$, $SD = 1.28$ vs. $M_{Life} = 1.41$, $SD = 0.82$, $\Delta = 0.91$, $t(47) = 2.91$, $p < 0.01$). This finding confirms the effectiveness of the priming.

4.1.3. Experimental procedure and measures.

The participants were told that the study's goal was to explore their attitude toward celebrities. After the priming text, the participants were exposed to an excerpt of Marilyn Monroe's Twitter page. All of the images and text were extracted from the late actress' real Twitter account. The stimuli included a post presenting four sunglasses-dress pairs with the text "Channel your inner Marilyn with a glam giveaway from @MarilynEyewear".

The questionnaire included similar measures as those used in Study 1B. On one page, attitude toward the promotional message (86%, $\alpha: 0.921$), celebrity attachment (85%, $\alpha: 0.941$), and familiarity with Marilyn Monroe's SNS were measured. To verify that fans would consider the message a mark of the continued presence of the everlasting celebrity, two items were adapted from Richins (1994) to measure the degree of representativeness of the celebrity by the message (*This message reminds me of who Marilyn Monroe is*; *This message represents Marilyn Monroe*; 84%, $\alpha: 0.810$). On another page, the participants answered socio-

Table 3

Interaction Effect of Death Priming \times Celebrity Attachment on Attitude toward the Message.

Source of variation	df	Mean squares	F statistic
Intercept	1	808.98	608.59***
Familiarity	1	4.52	3.40
Gender	1	1.50	1.13
Death priming (A)	1	8.88	6.68*
Celebrity attachment (B)	1	15.72	11.82***
A \times B	1	6.68	5.03*
Error	151	1.32	

* $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

demographic questions and one open-ended question that confirmed that none of the participants had identified the actual purpose of the study.

4.2. Results

A 2 (priming) \times 2 (celebrity attachment) ANCOVA using familiarity with Marilyn Monroe's SNS and participants' gender as covariates yielded a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 151) = 5.03, p < 0.05$) (Table 3). As expected, in the life-priming conditions, fans of Marilyn Monroe had a more favorable attitude toward the message than non-fans did ($M_{\text{LifeFans}} = 5.01, SD = 1.11$ versus $M_{\text{LifeNonFans}} = 4.00, SD = 1.32, \Delta = 0.99, t(78) = 3.60, p = 0.001$), whereas in the death-priming conditions, fans had a similar attitude as non-fans ($M_{\text{DeathFans}} = 4.08, SD = 1.12, \text{versus } M_{\text{DeathNonFans}} = 3.89, SD = 1.09, \Delta = 0.19, t(76) = 0.72, p > 0.05$) (Fig. 3).

An additional ANCOVA using the representativeness of the promotional message as the dependent variable yielded an interaction effect between priming and celebrity attachment ($F(1, 153) = 4.11, p < 0.05$). In the life-priming conditions, fans considered the promotional message more representative of the celebrity than non-fans did ($M_{\text{LifeFans}} = 5.32, SD = 0.79$ versus $M_{\text{LifeNonFans}} = 4.23, SD = 1.76, \Delta = 1.09, t(78) = 3.41, p = 0.001$). However, this positive effect was not identified in the death-priming conditions ($M_{\text{DeathFans}} = 4.03, SD = 1.52$ versus $M_{\text{DeathNonFans}} = 3.82, SD = 1.47, \Delta = 0.21, t(76) = 0.58, p > 0.05$). These results are coherent with the prediction that in low death salience conditions, fans would regard the late celebrity as a timeless individual.

5. General discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

While prior research has consistently documented consumers' rejection of market-related content in sacred environments (e.g., McGraw et al., 2012), the results of our experimental studies identify a positive impact of celebrity attachment on attitudes in a death-related environment. Specifically, the present research reveals an interaction effect between celebrity attachment and death salience on attitudes toward promotional content on celebrities' posthumous SNS. Study 1A indicates that celebrity attachment decreases death salience over time. This result provides important insights into the role of celebrity attachment in distancing celebrities from death-related thoughts, thereby preventing the clash activated by the opposition between the celebrity's death and the promotional content of the message. Prior research on human brands has defined iconicity as a transmutation of a celebrity's meanings across time (Eagar & Lindridge, 2014). Our results extend this proposition by demonstrating that celebrity attachment attenuates the salience of death-related thoughts over time. In particular, celebrity attachment may contribute to the iconicity of deceased celebrities through their immortalization. These results align with the proposition that the consumption of former brands, or retro consumption, concretizes symbolic elements in perpetuity (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). During grief work, celebrities' posthumous SNS may offer fans a communal grieving experience (Church, 2013). By materializing the memory of the late celebrity, posthumous SNS may offer the opportunity to virtually maintain the celebrity in life and relive the time when the celebrity was still alive (Baker & Kennedy, 1994).

Studies 1B and 2 show that celebrity attachment positively impacts attitude toward a message promoting a celebrity's memorabilia in a low death salience environment. When a late celebrity is strongly associated with death-related thoughts in consumers' minds (e.g., because of the temporal proximity of the celebrity's death), consumers' attitudes are negatively impacted by the resurgence of the death-profane clash. This impact affects both the celebrity's fans and non-fans. However, the results show that celebrity attachment hampers this negative impact through death salience reduction. These results conflict with prior studies that showed a "death effect", or an increase in the demand for and value of a celebrity's works or memorabilia immediately after the celebrity's death. Overall, these findings suggest different phases of post-celebrity death consumption. During the period

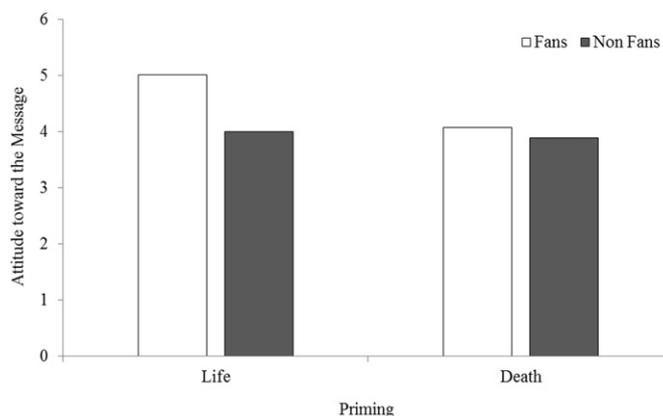


Fig. 3. Influence of Celebrity Attachment and Priming on Attitude toward the Message.

immediately following the death of the celebrity, non-fans (re)discover the celebrity's works through strong media coverage (Brandes, Nüesch, & Franck, 2016), and fans buy large amounts of products of which no future supply is expected (e.g., autographed items) for collection or investment purposes (Radford & Bloch, 2013). Our research focuses on a different type of memorabilia, celebrity merchandise, which may not be affected by the death effect. Indeed, the opposite may be true because consumers may reject such products when the celebrity is still strongly associated in their minds with death-related thoughts. An alternative explanation lies in the proposition that attitudes toward the message may not predict attitudes toward the product. Fans may acquire celebrity memorabilia after the celebrity's death but not endorse marketing efforts to promote them.

5.2. Managerial implications

The current work presents practical implications because the marketing of deceased celebrities constitutes a lucrative business (D'Rozario, 2016). The findings of this research suggest that current practices of creating and maintaining active posthumous SNS for celebrities may be a relevant strategy because their main target, the fans of the celebrity, may respond favorably to their promotional content. Indeed, non-fans are unlikely to look for products or advertisements on such websites because their interest in and attachment to the celebrity are much weaker.

Celebrity teams should avoid promotional efforts when the celebrity has recently passed away or when the celebrity is strongly associated with death-related thoughts in consumers' minds. Although some celebrities' posthumous SNS include many promotional messages (e.g., those of Marilyn Monroe or Jimi Hendrix), others are mainly dedicated to grieving and remembrance messages (e.g., those of Michael Jackson or John Lennon). It is likely that death salience may be higher in the latter case because the association between the celebrity and death is activated by the content of the SNS. Our findings suggest that promotional content may be more acceptable in the former case because it fosters the illusion that the celebrity is continuing to post messages. As such, brands and social media teams should avoid posting promotional content if they favor a remembrance approach.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This research provides relevant insights into the impact of celebrity attachment on consumer response in a posthumous environment, but it also presents some limitations. In light of these limitations, future research avenues can be considered. First, two methodological limitations must be mentioned. Our stimuli to measure death salience were restricted to the names of celebrities in isolation. Therefore, we cannot ensure that similar findings would emerge from exposure to celebrities' posthumous SNS that contain other (potentially death-related) information. Additionally, because we did not measure consumer attitude toward the promoted products, we could not test the proposition that fans may acquire such products immediately after the celebrity's death despite their aversion toward related promotional messages. Future research is encouraged to test this potential dual attitude.

Second, we examined only celebrity-related products with no brand other than the celebrity's brand. However, current practices indicate an increasing presence of brands on celebrities' posthumous SNS. Future studies could manipulate different brands as well as their level of relation to and congruence with the celebrity. For example, it could be expected that consumers' attitude toward a branded promotional message would be more favorable when the brand is congruent with the celebrity. Likewise, a strong association between a celebrity and a brand during the celebrity's lifetime, particularly through celebrity endorsement, could favor the acceptance of a posthumous endorsement.

In addition, given that some celebrities hold stronger commercial value than others do, it may be worth investigating the impact of this characteristic on fans' response. Our studies focused on highly commercial celebrities and, as such, may not have captured the full extent of consumers' response to less commercial celebrities (e.g., scientists or political activists). Such an investigation might provide a better understanding of the reasons why fans dissociate the deceased celebrity from death-related thoughts over time. We favor the proposition that celebrity attachment fosters iconicity. However, our results invite an alternative explanation. It is possible that instead of achieving immortal symbolic status, celebrities become commodified after their death; they are transformed into primarily commercial entities (Goulding, 2000). This commodification process may not impact less commercial celebrities, resulting in fans' rejection of promotional messages. Future research could test this proposition.

Finally, although the context of the research was SNS, we did not take into account the potential impact of the interactions of the SNS community on consumers' attitude. Further research should explore how online bereavement communities might impact the acceptance of promotional communications on celebrities' posthumous SNS.

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