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TOUCHING GREATNESS: THE CENTRAL MIDWEST BARRY MANILOW FAN CLUB

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PREFACE

The editor of this book wanted a photo-essay involving naturalistic research from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey. What I gave him is qualitative, but not strictly naturalistic. It doesn't depend on photos, and I would not characterize it as an essay. Further, only some of the data reported were actually collected on the Odyssey. Yet, despite the qualifications, the Touching Greatness idea took initial empirical form on the Odyssey.

INTRODUCTION

During my month with the Consumer Behavior Odyssey, I collected the initial data involving what I now refer to as the "Touching Greatness" phenomenon. The essential research idea was to gain a better understanding of the constellation of behaviors in which consumers attempt to gain closer contact with those public figures whom they perceive as great. To gain this closer proximity, consumers engage in all sorts of consumption activities ranging from the truly excessive fan club member who buys and collects everything even remotely related to a celebrity, to the far more subtle and much more common behavior of asking for an autograph.

Traveling roadside America with a group of colleagues seemed a perfect way to see the Touching Greatness phenomenon in a variety of forms, and with an economy of time and money. When Russ Belk told me of the proposed Consumer Behavior Odyssey, I made my initial foray into a project which was solely qualitative.

The a priori model with which I entered the field was a religious one. I believed we had celebrities because we first had gods. The form of celebrity worship is substantially borrowed from religion, perhaps so too is its substance. Fan clubs seem like congregations, and stars a bit like gods.

MODERN CELEBRITY

Christianity will go. We're more popular than Jesus now.

- John Lennon(1966)

It seemed to me then, as it does now, that one of the undeniable hallmarks of American consumer culture is a fascination with celebrity. Each week approximately 3.3 million Americans read People (Simmons Market Research Bureau 1990). Anyone who reads newspapers or magazines or watches television, will have no doubt noted that a great deal of air time and print space is devoted to covering celebrities. This interest and attention is not restricted to a certain social class; all have their celebrities, although each class tends to think the other misguided or too unsophisticated to appreciate the truly great. Some read of their admired ones in tabloids, others in the chic magazine of the "intelligentsia."

At the center of all this attention is a great deal of consumption. At least one million Americans belong to a fan club (Domay 1989). Approximately five million tourists have visited Graceland since being opened to the public in 1982, 60,000 alone during "Elvis Week," [An Elvis week consists of nine days.] marking the tenth anniversary of Mr. Presley's death. Tourists throng to celebrity graveyards in Los Angeles; the most famous of them, Forest Lawn is often referred to as the Disneyland of cemeteries. others take drive-by bus tours of the homes of the stars. "Meet-a-Celebrity" tie ins and other promotions are becoming routine. The production and marketing of celebrity could
and two women, a backstage press area secured exclusively for our use before and saw no men, but were told that there were a few male members. Most women. Most were in their mid-thirties to mid-forties. Socio-economic status varied, but was typically observed to be substantial vestigial. The practice satisfies even though it is absent of much social system, and a clearly stable social system, and a rather specialized to allow stars the kind of institutionalized power that shadowy. Alberoni (1972) argues that the modern “star” does not and Dyer (1979), Reeves (p. 150) argues that television stars help the individual connect who he or she is with “appropriate modes of being in American culture,” or cultural “types,” while at the same time providing just enough quirks against type to believe that we, like the stars, are actually unique individuals.

The findings being reported here are based on thirty hours of interviews along with collected several illustrative text and photos. Braudy (1986) traces the notion back to Homeric legends and early concepts of gods. Another frequently applied model is the traditional hero within the context of myth, probably best described by Campbell in his classic, Hero With a Thousand Faces (1949). Heros and their associated myths help us make sense of our lives, better understand our connections to each other, and our culture. There is also something special about heroes in a techno-scientific culture where the concept of god is so fundamentally threatened. The need for magic may be at its greatest in such a world. This is the modern “crisis of heroism” put forth by Becker (1973) in The Denial of Death. When heroes and gods are reasoned away, a vacuum of anxiety remains. Amplifying Becker (1973), Rollin (1983, 38) says:

the therapy for the Age of Anxiety is apothecosis, the transformation of a human being into a heavenly being, a star, a hero, a god, a symbol of human potential realized. Others (i.e. Klapp 1969; Lowenthal 1961) have argued that celebrities exist to give the individual identity in a modern mass culture. In this moment’s most recent incantation, Reeves (1988) presents an intriguing thesis on starhood, casting it as a cultural agent of personality development and social identification. Even though his specific focus is television stardom, the idea that stardom is a “cultural ritual of typification and individuation” extends well beyond that particular medium. Drawing on the work of Carey (1975), Geertz (1973), Bakhtin (1981) and Dyer (1979), Reeves (p. 150) argues that television stars help the individual connect who he or she is with “appropriate modes of being in American culture,” or cultural “types,” while at the same time providing just enough quirks against type to believe that we, like the stars, are actually unique individuals.

One of the more influential thoughts in conceptualizations of celebrity is Max Weber’s (1968, v. 1, 241.) concept of “charisma:”

to be endowed with powers and properties which are supernatural and superhuman, or at least exceptional even where accessible to others; or again as sent by God, or as if adorned with exemplary value and thus worthy to be a leader.

However, as impactful as this concept has been, few suggest a wholesale application of the “charismatic leader” (Weber 1968) concept to modern celebrity. The reasons are generally because the sociologist- economist Weber’s formulation requires a purposeful leader, a stable social system, and a clearly discernable power relationship. Two of these almost never exist in the case of modern celebrity, and the other, a stable social system, is a matter of some debate and interpretation (see Dyer 1979 and Alberoni 1972). Edward Shils (1965) also takes Weber to task for his narrow institutional conceptualization of charisma, and offers a much broader view of the concept. Still, it is Italian sociologist Francesco Alberoni who proposes an apolitical and modern model of celebrity..

Alberoni (1972) argues that the modern “star” does not and cannot possess generalized “charisma” in the true Weberian sense. Modern societies are too specialized to allow stars the kind of institutionalized power that Weber’s charismatic leader demands. However, he does believe that they are perceived by their adoring masses as possessing some demi-divine characteristics that makes them “elite” rather than charismatic. They are seen as spiritually special, but lacking any type of political power. Alberoni thus terms stars the “powerless elite."

In fact, it could be that ritual is the central element in the Touching Greatness phenomenon. Rituals linger well beyond their substance. They can still be comforting even though their spiritual basis is long gone. Prayers said to a god not truly believed in may still benefit the supplicant. So too may be visiting the place of rituals, the church–even though the gods have gone away. Touching greatness may be a form that is substantially vestigial. The practice satisfies even though it is absent of much contemporary meaning. This could help explain why we seem to have such a need for celebrities which Boorstin (1962), saw as nothing more than “human pseudo-events,” and people famous for being famous.

TOUCHING GREATNESS

The Touching Greatness project began at Mann’s Theater in Los Angeles. We (Belk, O’Guinn, Sherry, Wallendorf interviewed several people engaged in what seemed a particularly interesting form of consumer behavior. People spent from a few minutes to a few hours milling around looking at the hand and foot prints of movie stars. Some, such as the individuals in photo 1, chose to bend down, often while being photographed by family member or friend, and place their own hands or feet in the impressions left by the stars. Some bought Hollywood and celebrity related souvenirs, signed up for tours of the stars’ homes, and otherwise participated in the celebrity centered consumption experience. Interviews then and during a return trip by Belk and O’Guinn two years later revealed that to many it was merely something to do, just situationally normative behavior and curiosity. For others, it meant something more: a chance to remember and pay homage, to explain to their children who these men and women were and why they were important in their lives. Touching Greatness is more about the latter, or “true fans,” but is not wholly without connection to the former appreciative masses. It remains an interesting and legitimate question why behaviors such as those at Mann’s Theater are norms within our culture, and why such popular shrines exist at all.

PHOTO 1

The Central Midwest Barry Manilow Fan Club (CMBMFC) data are offered here as a case within the larger phenomenon and not as complete ethnography. These data will not allow the reader the depth necessary to fully appreciate the unique character of this particular club, for they were not collected for that purpose. Rather, they illustrate some of the themes observed across locale and fans...

CENTRAL MIDWEST BARRY MANILOW FAN CLUB

Barry Manilow [Barry Manilow is a popular contemporary song stylist.] is a celebrity. I talked to some of his fans. At the time the data were collected several themes had emerged from work at other Touching Greatness sites. “Me data collected here and at subsequent locales were used to expand upon what had already been learned, and to test the evolving model with new data. What follows are some of these findings, along with illustrative text and photos.

The findings being reported here are based on thirty hours of interviews with eighteen members of the CMBMFC. The informants were all women. Most were in their mid thirties to mid forties. Socio-economic status varied, but was typically observed to be lower middle class. We saw no men, but were told that there were a few male members. [Most males mentioned were Barry impersonators.] Interviews were conducted in three places: a small restaurant, the home of the CMBMFC president, Bobbie, six hours prior to a Barry Manilow concert, and in a backstage press area secured exclusively for our use before and after the show. Besides the author, five graduate assistants, three men and two women, participated in the fieldwork.
The Touching Greatness phenomenon has a broad cultural foundation. Apart from aspects of religion, I observed evidence of the fan club as surrogate family, and what could reasonably be viewed as a socialization outcome of life in a society in which the average family watches over seven hours of television a day (Condry 1989). Yet, the single best organizing structure is the first of these: religion. Perhaps it is because it is such a primal structure. Humans have been using it as a conceptual framework for explaining their existence, plight, and just about everything else for centuries. It is a very convenient and familiar source for interpretation and attribution. Religion has so many points of contact with so many aspects of believers’ lives, that it is sometimes hard to see where it starts and stops. With this caveat in mind, a discussion of some of the uncovered themes follows. They are not exclusively religious, but are not inconsistent with a religious interpretation.

Barry is Everything:

"He's a husband, he's a lover, he's a friend, he's everything."

Barry Manilow pervades the lives of the members of the CMBMFC. In a very real sense, he is "everything." Evidence of this comes in several forms. First, there is the more concrete, such as the expenditure of time and money. It is not uncommon for the members to attend five shows a year, often traveling considerable distances. There is also the purchase and creation of Barry Manilow paraphernalia. These include hundreds of photographs, extensive album and video collections, clipping files and other memorabilia. Large phone bills from calling other Barry Manilow members are common. Vacations are scheduled around four dates. Life revolves around Barry. In terms of time and money, Barry is a primary beneficiary of these typically scarce resources.

Invoking Barry's name and spirit also makes important rituals and life events even more special, or sacred (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1991). A particularly palpable example was when Bobbie and her husband were married. The couple had a number of Barry's songs played at the wedding, and the sheet music to a particular song, "Who Needs To Dream," was superimposed over the couple's wedding photograph (photo 2). Many religions place a god or other important personage (i.e., saint, martyr, prophet, etc.) at the center of celebrations and rituals marking important life events, such as weddings, which thereby come to be regarded as sacred institutions.

Barry's pervasiveness in the lives of the CMBMFC members was also apparent in that they often referred to him in terms of a significant other, most typically as lover, husband or friend. This love was, however, rarely sexual. It was rather more spiritual love, though often with an idealized romantic pallor. For example, one woman who describes herself as a very faithful wife, says she takes off her wedding ring on only one occasion: to attend Barry Manilow concerts. She does this although she and Barry Manilow have no personal relationship in any traditional sense; yet, she sees important symbolism in the act. This is an important thing for her to do. It would, after all, be wrong to be married to two men at once. Extending the religious metaphor, some nuns wear wedding bans to symbolize their marriage to Christ.

Perhaps most significantly, informants explain that Barry is able to provide the emotional support and understanding they need, like no one else in their lives. I was told that he "never lets them down." CMBMFC members frequently describe him as "all" of these important roles or personages "rolled into one," someone who can be all, provide all.

I believe in God, and I kind of think God sent Barry to help me. I think a lot of people feel that way, he's got a special gift and he kind of reaches out to a lot of people.

Barry's specialness occasionally borders on the miraculous. Bobbie tells of a time when a group of CMBMFC members were camping out for tickets in cold and wet weather. They had been out all night in rain and cold when sandwiches and coffee arrived "from nowhere." Bobbie was amazed that what initially seemed like a meager special gift and he kind of reaches out to a lot of people.

Barry's Work:

Like most religions, this church has a mission; there is work to be done. Among the important duties are taking care of Barry, protecting him from bad fans, recruiting new followers, and always being there for him. These are all seen as important functions for members of the CMBMFC. Perhaps chief among them is the idea of providing emotional support to Barry and otherwise taking care of him. Sometimes, we think of gods taking care of their followers, and not vice versa. But in fact, in many religions that is precisely the purpose of human existence, to serve god. Christians, for example, are told that the path to heaven and happiness is through serving the Lord, doing His work. Sometimes "His work" is in the form of altruism, serving god by serving others. Christians, for example, are told taking care of their followers, and not vice versa. It is here that the role of wife/mother becomes most intermingled with other, most typically as lover, husband or friend. This love was, however, rarely sexual. It was rather more spiritual love, though often with an idealized romantic pallor. For example, one woman who describes herself as a very faithful wife, says she takes off her wedding ring on only one occasion: to attend Barry Manilow concerts. She does this although she and Barry Manilow have no personal relationship in any traditional sense; yet, she sees important symbolism in the act. This is an important thing for her to do. It would, after all, be wrong to be married to two men at once. Extending the religious metaphor, some nuns wear wedding bans to symbolize their marriage to Christ.

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Important to those being an important part of the link. Buying, giving and collecting things in a non-trivial way. There was a son. For others, the stars were known-in-common referents. Their films marked communication among visitors, much.

Touching Greatness also provides other social benefits. When at Mann's Church of Barry interpretation, the centrality of fellowship. They gather in his name, but reminisce, and share one another's joys and others' well.

Fellowship seemed to be the greatest of all the benefits of CMBMFC.

Suffering for Barry:

"Our day will come."

"Mostly they just sit and shake their heads at us."

"I mean he cares for us too. In fact, he even told us ... ; "I know you put up with a lot of grief and I've heard every name in the book just like you've heard every name in the book and you put with a lot," and he said "I want you to know I'm here" and he did everything he could do to make sure it doesn't happen but it's always gonna happen and he feels terrible about it because we're considered his ladies and he takes care of us ... "

"he realizes what he puts you through."

The members of the CMBMFC speak of the ridicule and oppression they must face for their beliefs. Their families, particularly their husbands, do not understand their devotion and love for Barry. People make fun of them. Yet, it is suffering not entirely without reward; there is a bit of martyrdom related satisfaction apparent in some informants.

Shrines and Relics

Many fans have collections of Barry Manilow things. Some have special "Barry Rooms" set aside for the display of their collections. Others have only parts of rooms, some just closets. Almost all attribute lack of room for Barry to unsympathetic husbands. Consistent with other research on collections (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), the job is never done, collections are never complete. There's always more Barry stuff. Few would sell even a single piece of their collections, and they rank their contents as their most prized and meaningful possessions.

Bobbie's room is featured in two photographs (Photos 3 and 4). She devotes one of the bedrooms of her house to this pursuit. The room is covered in posters, photographs, clippings, letters, autographs, etc. These things have a great deal of meaning for Bobbie. These are special because they involve Barry, and form an important emotional conduit to networks of friends, memories and an important sense of self.

The highest status things in the collections are the things actually touched by Barry. This somehow proves that Barry exists for them, through this person-to-object-to-person connection (McCracken 1986). It is physical evidence of a personal relationship. A good example was a Perrier bottle from which Barry had drank. This bottle occupies a prominent place on Bobbie's shelf. The smaller bottles belong to members of Barry's entourage.

This collecting of things actually touched by the admired one is a particularly interesting aspect of the Touching Greatness phenomenon. It was observed consistently across venues and celebrities, and is very consistent with a liturgical interpretation, going as far as the levels of sacredness assigned to religious relics (Geary 1986) depending on how "near" they were once to the sacred being. It also draws us back full circle to the behavior observed at Mann's Theater, of wanting to actually touch the concrete images left by the stars. It wouldn't be the same consumption experience if Plexiglass covered the concrete impressions.

Yet another important distinction concerning collections should be noted. Apparently, "real fans" don't sell Barry things at a profit. This helps distinguish the infidel from the true believer. One of the most common behaviors at a Manilow concert is taking photographs of Barry, lots of them. Bobbie, for example, will take four to eight 24 exposure rolls per show, and see several shows per year. The photos taken of Barry are sold at cost or traded with other fans, but "it would be wrong" to sell them.

"The only thing I ever charge is if they want copies and they send me just for the print. Barry doesn't like when you make a profit."

This is very reminiscent of the parable of Christ driving the merchants from the temple. Apparently, putting a price on something that is seen as without price would seem profane or vulgar and would move something sacred into a the secular domain, and thus cheapen it (Belk, Sherry and Wallendof 1989).

Fellowship:

Fellowship seemed to be the greatest of all the benefits of CMBMFC membership. Respondents talked at length of how much getting together with one another meant to them. Many said that relationships started via membership have become some of the most important in their lives. The behavior we observed supports this assertion. The members of the CMBMFC seemed very close and legitimately interested in each others' well being. The greatest thing they have in common is the love for and devotion to Barry Manilow. They get together and talk and reminisce, and share one another's joys and sorrows. There was a clear bond between them. This may be the strongest evidence for a Church of Barry interpretation, the centrality of fellowship. They gather in his name, but for each other.

Touching Greatness also provides other social benefits. When at Mann's Theater it seemed that the concrete shrines facilitated communication among visitors, much of it inter-generational. Why Jimmy Stewart or Marilyn Monroe were important to father was explained to son. For others, the stars were known-in-common referents. Their films marked time, set events in context, and seemed to provide meaning in a non-trivial way. There was something important underneath this, a connection to culture and the individual within it, with consumption being an important part of the link. Buying, giving and collecting things within the touching greatness phenomenological frame is common and important to those involved. It concertizes the experiences and facilitates social interaction.

PHOTO 3
Religion is one of the oldest of culture's creations. Yet, "dead are all the gods" (Nietzsche 1893). Science and the ascendency of the individual has either killed them or made of them vestigial forms which only vaguely resemble their ancestors. As the traditional social structures are challenged, evolve or succumb, contemporary cultures recast old into new. What were god-centered religions may be easily converted social structures for celebrity worship. Even though few if any CMBMFC members actually believe Barry Manilow to be a god, they do attribute the qualities of the religiously blessed to him. They certainly believe him to be closer to god than they are. Clouds part when his plane lands: he supplies food in mysterious ways; and he possess a special sense of knowing about his followers' lives that is clearly beyond mortal. This is a religious system. By any standards Barry Manilow is worshipped by his fans. He is someone more than a priest and someone less than son of God in a traditional Protestant Christian model. In contrast, data from Elvis Presley fan clubs show his fans as seeing him closer to truly divine: whereas data from Johnny Cash fan clubs show a very fallible mortal but still spiritually special.

The Touching Greatness data provide support for the thesis that celebrities perform some of the functions of gods, or god-sent beings. Yet, also clear is support for the idea that the fan club serves some of the social function churches once did. There, people who share a deep devotion or admiration for a special individual, meet and form important bonds, and fulfill important social needs once facilitated by the church. Maybe these fan clubs have taken on such a liturgical feel because the religious form was simply the most familiar, the most easily borrowed and transformed. The church is replaced in form, if not substance because it has the best, most familiar and most comfortable bundle of social uses, gratifications and shared meanings. We may miss God less than we miss each other.

While it is sometimes argued that extreme or marginal forms of behavior such as fanaticism are both qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from their more "normal" expression, it seems difficult to explain one without the other. The very fact that Graceland and Mann's Theater exist and flourish means something apart from fanaticism. Likewise, the significance of the Touching Greatness phenomenon exists beyond the dispositional properties of individuals. It says something about the stage of a society's development (Alberoni 1972), our collective needs, motivations and values, and how these are expressed through consumption.

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Fan clubs keep the flame alive for stars fading from memory. Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, Doris Day. Barry N. Wood, president of the Pittsburgh chapter of the Nelson Eddy Jeanette MacDonald fan club, has a large collection of memorabilia of the movie stars at his home. Barry Wood is a devout Presbyterian, but today he also be worshipping at the altar of two other gods. As president of the Pittsburgh chapter of the International Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy fan club, Mr. Wood, 71, of Houston, Pa., will be hosting a local meeting at his Washington County home with Sharon Rich, international president of the club. Even for those who have never heard of the singing screen duo Barry Manilow is such a huge slice of pop culture. There is nobody under the age of 40 that has not been touched by Barry Manilow’s music. This iconic talent brought the world some of his best music in the 1970s and 1980s and he is still performing today and has a huge fan base with not only an International Fan Club but many local statewide fan clubs as well. It was not easy narrowing his great music down to a top 10 list but here they are: 10. "Copacabana." Co-written by Manilow, Jack Feldman and Bruce Sussman and released in 1978 as a single on Manilow’s 5th album. This song tells th