**Star Quality: Celebrity Casting in London West End Theatres**

Abstract

Purpose: This article investigates the practice of casting celebrity performers in London West End theatres. The paper uses the literature on celebrity to explore the impact that casting a celebrity has on the London theatre audience.

Design/methodology/approach: The pervasiveness of celebrity culture forms the background and starting point for this research. In the first phase, theatre managers, directors and producers were interviewed to explore their views on the practice of celebrity casting. In the second phase, an audience survey was conducted. The approach taken is exploratory and is intended to illuminate the conditions under which a successful celebrity-focused strategy can be constructed.

Findings: A distinction between fame and celebrity was drawn by both theatre professionals and audiences, with celebrity status being seen as something that is created by media exposure and being in the public eye. This is in contrast to fame, which is earned by being famous for something, or some achievement. Theatre audiences are more likely to be attracted by celebrities who have theatrical expertise and not by someone known simply through film, television or the all-pervasive gossip columns. Celebrities with a background in theatre and film were seen to strongly draw audiences to the theatre, as opposed to those with a background in reality TV shows, search-for-a-star shows or for being half of a famous couple.

Originality/value: The article is focussed on the theatre and makes an original contribution to the current discussion of the power wielded by celebrities. It is the first empirical research on this aspect of the theatre business. Its contribution lies in understanding audience members’ interpretation and understanding of celebrity to ascertain the extent to which they perceive celebrities as credible to perform theatre. This is based on a differentiation between their mediated fame and expertise. It is helpful and useful information for producers when deciding whether or not to cast a celebrity and to which audiences that the celebrity might appeal.

Keywords: Celebrity casting; London West End Theatres; Audiences; Celebrity culture

**Introduction**

“It has become increasingly difficult for a straight play to succeed in the West End without a big name attached; and, where once that would have meant a star of the calibre of Maggie Smith or Judi Dench, it now refers to someone known simply through film, television or the all-pervasive gossip columns.” (Billington, 2007:406)

British theatre has historically cast famous actors to draw in their audiences, particularly in the time of Shakespeare when actors such as Richard Burbage often had scenes written specifically for them, to entice them to play the leading role. However, criticisms such as that of Billington above, regarding the use of ‘celebrities’ within the theatre, are becoming louder, and numerous negative articles, reviews and blogs appear every time a new theatre production with a ‘celebrity’ cast is announced. In contrast, there are many who feel that not all ‘celebrities’ are a bad thing, and can in fact not only enhance theatre-goers’ experiences, but also encourage new and larger audiences to attend the theatre. The research presented in this article reports the results of the first empirical study of the phenomenon of celebrity casting. It is an exploratory study which gathers data from theatre professionals and audiences on the power of celebrity. Following this introduction there is a section which explains the methodology of the study. The article then outlines the historical antecedents of celebrity casting in British theatre and the current situation. The marketing literature on celebrity is then discussed with a view to understanding the broad currents of research which have been developed up to now in this complex field of study. Finally the results of the empirical research are presented and interpreted.

Studies in the field of arts marketing have traditionally concentrated on “high” culture. This study has its focus on the audience experience within popular culture. There is an engaged debate about the role of cultural capital and consumer trends in relation to the performing arts (Caldwell and Woodside, 2003). By “returning to concerns with experiential and hedonic consumption,” Bradshaw *et al*., 2010 remind us that arts marketing is a diverse field, and the lived experience of star-struck audiences in the West End deserves attention equal to that given to audiences attending the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. They urge that we should resist the “impulse towards invidious class comparisons as the dynamic which underlies the discourse of good-versus-poor taste” (Bradshaw *et al*., 2010:9). Setting to one side the debates about high-versus-low culture and good-versus-bad taste, the use of celebrities as a business model for popular culture is the main focus of the research presented here. The larger question motivating this study is whether such a celebrity strategy is sustainable in the long term. There are transferable lessons from the not-for-profit to the commercial arts. Stephen Preece’s analysis of the Performing Arts Value Chain (Preece, 2005) suggests a valuable framework for capturing the impact of programming and production decisions which contribute to the overall viability of an organisation. However discussion of those issues would take us beyond the current scope of the study.

The topic of celebrity culture has received considerable critical attention within both public and professional theatre discussion. The practice of casting celebrities as a marketing tool to draw in bigger audiences is now endemic. Many critics argue this is simply to generate revenue and may be damaging theatre as an art-form, while others suggest it is a suitable modern day method of encouraging people, who may otherwise have no interest, to go to the theatre.

In the current economic climate funding has become a key issue for the arts, and in particular the theatre industry, with Arts Council England cutting more than £19 million from the 2011 budget. From April 2012 the Arts Council's overall annual budget will continue to decline by £20 million (11.8 per cent) by April 2015. Although the West End Theatres do not typically receive Arts Council subsidy, they set the trends which affect both commercial and not-for-profit arts organisations.

Celebrity culture is now at the height of its powers. Even your next door neighbours, when they appear on X-Factor, can be transformed into celebrities. As O’Reilly notes, “[c]elebrities and stars can come from the more traditional areas of arts-cultural activity such as opera, the media, fine arts, film, fashion, rock music, and theatre, but also from areas such as politics, sports, education, religion and science, as well as from the house next door” (O’Reilly, 2005:574).

Although extensive research has been carried out on the impact of celebrity endorsement on a products’ brand equity (e.g. Costanzo and Goodnight, 2006; Agrawal and Kamakura, 1995), no marketing study has yet been conducted which investigates the effect of the use of casting celebrities within the theatre industry. Unlike advertising and marketing, celebrities working within theatre cannot be described as endorsers, as they do not simply recommend the product, they are in fact part of the product/experience itself. For this reason, this study will refer to celebrity casting and/or celebrity performers rather than celebrity endorsement when referring to the theatre industry. The study asks the following questions;

1. What do professionals working within theatre think about the trend towards casting celebrities and what do audience members think?
2. Does the casting of celebrity performers in theatre productions affect audience awareness and opinion of the theatre, and therefore their attendance?
3. Do different types of celebrity performer, i.e. celebrities with different characteristics or industry backgrounds, affect audience opinion?

**Research design**

The study reported here was conducted in London in the summer of 2011. London was chosen because there are over 800 registered theatres in London, compared to between 1 and 100 theatres in other regions of the country (Society of London Theatre (SOLT), 2009) and so London theatre audiences are much more likely to choose to go to a theatre for reasons such as production and casting rather than location. The use of specific theatre names will be avoided, except where the name is connected to a particular production.

To answer the first research question a sample of 20 theatre professionals was contacted by email and telephone. Potential respondents were drawn from a pool of professional contacts known to one of the researchers (Iacobucci, 2010). They included people working in established commercial and national theatres as well as independent theatre producers, marketers and directors. Theatre professionals were targeted since they could provide theatre-specific terminology and they had industry experience with celebrity casting. Seven people agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. The topic guide for these key informant interviews allowed for exploration of themes surrounding the definition of celebrity and the use of celebrities in theatre productions (Berg, 2007). Respondents were asked to name relevant celebrities and to discuss whether the background of the celebrity had any bearing on their decision to cast them in stage roles. In the findings section below, the views of the professionals will serve as an introduction and a point of contrast with those of audiences. (See Figure 1 and 2 following.)

To answer the second and third research questions a survey was developed using the categories identified as important from the key informant interviews. The respondent-completed survey (n=211) was conducted within the theatre district. This technique is borrowed from the Purchase Intercept Technique (PIT) (Aaker, 2013: 197) in which consumers are intercepted in a shopping environment. The advantage of the location is that it aids memory recall both in the case of shoppers and similarly in the case of theatre goers. Local businesses allowed the surveys to be completed within their café premises. A convenience sample of 211 responses was collected. While the authors recognize that small samples can result in wide confidence intervals relating to the results, the cost of collecting further data limited the scope of the study. In the discussion of the findings the focus will be on exploring how people define the term ‘celebrity’, who their favourite celebrities are, and what backgrounds are preferred for celebrities performing in the theatre. The qualitative research yielded the categories which were used in the quantitative questionnaire. In particular the ‘phrases used to define celebrity’ (see Figure 4 following) and ‘where do celebrities come from?’ (see Figure 5 and 6 following) are both based on the observations of the professionals who were interviewed. The main benefit of using a qualitative/exploratory phase prior to the quantitative data collection is that it identifies the significant categories and topics from the perspective of industry experts. When the questions are put to audiences we can have some confidence that they are not wasting time on irrelevant concerns.

**British theatre: a (very) short history**

London theatre began to flourish following the English Reformation, and the first permanent theatre, known as The Theatre, was built in Shoreditch in 1576 by James Burbage. This was shortly followed by the construction of The Curtain which, along with The Theatre, was used by William Shakespeare’s company (Narey, 2006). Over the following centuries, censorship kept a tight rein on what could be shown in theatres, and only patented houses were permitted to produce dramas, while all other theatres were allowed to perform only musical entertainments (Lathan, 2004). Despite this, the end of the seventeenth century saw the emergence of what is known as the West End, when a number of theatres and halls were built, such as the Adelphi on the Strand. The Theatre Act of 1843 relaxed the laws regarding the performance of plays and, with a growth in the popularity of musical hall entertainment, loopholes were found in order to produce drama-based work, known as melodrama, by the clever inclusion of a small element of music (Donohue, 2004). The 1950s and 1960s saw the production of plays in clubs to avoid the restrictions of stage censorship, which was finally abolished by the Theatres Act of 1968 (Lathan, 2004).

The West End theatre district traditionally includes the London area between The Strand in the south, Regent Street in the West, Oxford Street in the North and Kingsway in the East, with some of the most famous theatre streets being Shaftsbury Avenue and The Strand (Donohue, 2004). The West End contains approximately 40 venues and has been branded as ‘Theatreland’ by the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) and Westminster council. Theatre in the West End district usually consists of musicals, comedies and classic or middle-brow plays. Along with Broadway in New York, the West End is considered to “represent the highest level of commercial theatre in the English speaking world” (Johansson, 2011), and attending a show there is commonly considered to be a desirable tourist activity. The majority of West End theatres receive productions from elsewhere and are therefore known as receiving houses, but there are some that produce their own work, which are themselves called producing houses. The majority of producing houses, however, are found in other London theatre areas. The main off West End theatre districts include the Southbank, Waterloo, Southwark and the East End, and these districts house more non-commercial or government subsidised theatres such as the Royal National Theatre, the Royal Court Theatre, the Almeida and the Globe.

London theatre audiences

London theatre attendance surpassed 12 million for the first time in 2002, and then 13 million in 2007 (“SOLT Annual”, 2011). The latest SOLT annual report revealed a further record breaking number of over 14 million attendees, equating to total revenues of £504 million, with the impact of London theatre on the UK economy at around £2 billion per annum. The Arts Council England (ACE) annual report 2009/10 discusses the statistical findings of the 836 organisations it funds, including London and regional theatres. The 271 arts organisations in London funded by ACE make up 32% of its portfolio. Of all the art-forms funded across the UK, theatre is the largest portion with 26%. Total attendance across the country is clearly dominated by London, with 53% compared to the nearest competitor, the North West, with only 10%. Theatre also grosses the highest earned income compared to subsidised income among all the arts. A staggering 40% of all UK theatre ticket sales were generated in London, and 48% by theatre organisations (Arts Council of England, 2013).

<Insert Table 1 here>

The celebrity casting trend

The annual results published by SOLT for 2013 (in Table 1) were surprising. Many feared that the recession which began in 2008 would damage the theatre industry and significantly reduce attendance. There was also a fear that the London Olympics in Summer 2012 would lure ticket sales away from the West End. Instead, revenue has enjoyed an uninterrupted climb. However, despite such good financial results, there are still real concerns within the industry about its financial viability (Hartley, 2009). These concerns have led to increased spending by producers on casting actors with recognised names in the hope they will excite greater interest and attendance, or raise the profile of a show in a period of decline (Santana, 2009). But, some believe that the use of celebrity casting is just as concerning as the financial downturn (Lawson, 2009) and that, while the benefits to the box office of using a familiar name to advertise and produce merchandising are obvious, there may be unintended, damaging effects on productions (Santana, 2009). Others believe the financial gain that a celebrity can bring to a production is welcome in today’s economic climate, allowing a show to be “more or less sold out before it opened” (Lawson, 2009). On New York’s Broadway (which uses similar marketing strategies to London’s West End), ticket sales for the Harold Pinter play *Betrayal* starring Daniel Craig and his wife Rachel Weisz broke all records, grossing $1,100,000 for 6 performances (Brantly, 2013). Notwithstanding this type of success, Sir Jonathan Miller considers the modern day “obsession with celebrity” (quoted in Adams, 2008) to be a blight on British theatre.

The increasing trend of celebrity casting has run parallel to the growing number of reality TV programmes aired, particular those of a specific TV-to-theatre casting nature, such as “I’d Do Anything”. These programmes, also referred to as ‘search-for-a-star’ shows, are audition-like on-air competitions that the general public can enter, and the winner (as voted by the viewing public) is cast as the next lead role in a West End musical. Allot (as quoted in Lawson, 2009) argues that “the BBC and ITV have been able to do more to promote the West End in the past few years than the best intentioned arts departments of those broadcasters ever could.” His views are substantiated by the figures that two-thirds of theatre tickets sold in 2007 were for musicals, and that the most popular of those were the shows that had been cast from the Saturday night television casting shows. This is consistent with Lathan (2011) who discusses how the 2006/7 increase in new theatre-goers was “buoyed by 2006’s glut of new musical productions and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s venture into reality TV”, and goes on to suggest that this method of casting is a trend that is unlikely to slow down. These casting choices are not without their critics, and in articles and reviews concern has been voiced about the artistic damage this could do to theatre “in favour of something shinier and more easily marketable, built around TV and celebrity” (Hartley, 2009).

It is not only musicals where the celebrity casting trend is visible; plays, which have been gaining in popularity, have closely followed suit (Lathan 2011). Arguments in favour of using celebrities include the fact that they are thought to be likely to encourage a newer and younger audience to attend the theatre (Lawson, 2009) and are seen to be an effective way of marketing and promoting shows in order to draw in better audiences, reputation and energy (Pincus, 2001). Poyhonen (2010) notes that “…the theatres actually done something amazing there – by drawing people into the theatre using the celebrity brand, the theatre is making money, the fans are getting their fix and are simultaneously watching a brilliant piece of theatre….” This trend is driven by the stars’ ability to gain media awareness through their own public presence, and by their ability to influence their fan base using the personal connection that audiences feel for them (Marshall, 1997). However, this sense of personal connection that the public can have with a celebrity also has the potential to change and possibly damage the celebrity’s effectiveness in a live performance (Pincus, 2001). Quinn (1990), as actor and director, discusses the effect celebrities can have on a theatre performance, stating that all actors bring to the stage some element of previous roles and, in the case of celebrities, this also includes their public persona. Any “overexposure of his or her personal life” (Quinn, 1990) means that audiences may be more aware of the celebrity than the character they are trying to portray, making the performance not credible (Stephenson, 2007); this in turn is damaging to the whole production. Quinn (1990:155) was one of the first to analyse the impact of celebrities: “…their contribution to the performance is often a kind of collision with the role, sometimes hard to accept, but sometimes too, loaded with the spectacular energy that an explosive crash can release”. When the celebrity actor appears on stage the audience sees both the role that they are playing on stage and the celebrity persona known through media exposure. This is the collision to which Quinn refers above. There is potential for disaster (a horrible collision) or great entertainment (spectacular energy). In either case the celebrity casting will influence the experience of the audience regarding the performance onstage. The aura of celebrity acts as a lens through which a dramatic character is linked to a public figure; the gamble of theatre producers is that their chosen celebrities will either meet the challenge of the stage role or be seen as out-of-place or miscast.

The theatre critics’ view of celebrity casting

Theatre critics agree that celebrity casting can detract from the production as a whole, particularly when more than one celebrity is in a production. Such a situation was highlighted in a review of *Resurrection Blues* at the Old Vic in 2006, described as a “bizarrely awful” (Taylor, 2006) piece of theatre that, due to the overuse of celebrity casting, was not given a chance to shine as a whole production (Billington, 2008). Quinn (2009) points out that the celebrity actor not only affects the performance for the audience but also for the critics. They feel that they are unable to evaluate the performance without being influenced by pre-existing judgements about the celebrity performer. The considerations of acting technique are distorted by the ‘celebrity lens’: “There is a link between the life of the performer and the knowledge of that life that the audience brings to the performance” (Quinn, 1990, p.156).

Many theatre critics feel that “the number of shows *without* an established star in them is ever-diminishing” (MJGREVIEW, 2008). However, as critics they are indeed able to distinguish between the different calibres of celebrity performers, of which there are those who “give the whole idea a bad name” (Crompton, 2007) and those who reap substantial accolades (Hartley, 2009). Overall, the critics seem to feel that if a celebrity can perform well they will be reviewed and applauded accordingly, and if not, they will be considered as miscast and given no approval. Spencer (2007) comes to the conclusion that if the celebrity is sufficiently talented, any existing associations the audience may have with them will be put aside. One widely debated celebrity casting choice was that of David Tennant as Hamlet for the RSC in 2008, which spawned a huge amount of press on both sides of the debate. Sir Jonathan Miller (cited in Adams, 2008) referred to Tennant as “that man from Dr. Who,” while others described his performance as the best Hamlet they had ever seen.

**Celebrity endorsement**

The phenomenon of celebrity endorsement first came to the attention of marketers in the 1970s. Friedman (1976) tested the use of advertising for wine using celebrity and non-celebrity endorsers and concluded that it is probably worthwhile for an advertiser to use an endorsement for his product, rather than utilize a similar advertisement without an endorsement. Kamen (1975) studied the first use, starting on January 1, 1972, of a celebrity: Johnny Cash as the spokesman for Amoco in its commercials (then known as American Oil). Although some respondents questioned whether a singer such as Mr Cash could be relied on to know much about gasoline, the evidence of the study overwhelmingly supported a connection between the use of a celebrity and successful marketing. From that point onwards there has been a long history of using celebrities to influence consumers and promote products (Seno and Lukas, 2007), and this is commonly referred to as celebrity endorsement (e.g. Keller, 2008; Till, 1998, Seno and Lukas 2007). Celebrity endorsement has become so widely used by advertisers that in 2001 approximately one in five UK campaigns featured a celebrity endorser in some form (Erdogan *et al*, 2001). A more recent study cited in Spry (2011: 882)) claimed that “one-in-four advertisements use celebrity endorsement.” This trend seems to be irreversible and confirms Marshall (1997: x), who suggested that “within society, the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channelled into the media systems as being legitimately significant.”

Significantly, a study by Agrawal and Kamakura (1995) analyses the economic worth and effect of celebrity endorsement announcements within advertising, concluding that there can be both positive and negative responses to celebrity endorsement. This is consistent with Till (1998), who discusses how, despite its popularity, celebrity endorsement, it is not always a success. The dramatic falls from grace of Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong are recent reminders of the perils of celebrity endorsement.

The positive effects created by celebrity endorsement are widely documented, such as when an associative link forms between a brand and a celebrity so that they create a concept group that becomes meaningfully related to the brand (Meyers-Levy, 1989; Till, 1998). For example, David Beckham endorsing a football brand would create a concept group involving football, success and sport, as these are his qualities that would, through his endorsement, become linked to the brand. Therefore, a celebrity is a channel by which meaning can be directly transferred to a brand (McCracken, 1989) and hence celebrity endorsers become a powerful tool for brand equity management (Petty *et al*., 1983). This demonstrates the strategic reasons for using celebrity endorsers in the brand management process. However, the transference of the celebrity persona to the brand also poses the threat that declining celebrity can bring negative associations to the brand. The connection with the theatre study is that declining celebrity performers (for example, David Hasselhoff) can create negative associations for both the production and the theatre in general.

**Models of understanding celebrity endorsement**

In the literature on celebrity endorsement there are three major streams of thought: the meaning transfer model, the cultural embeddedness model and the source credibility model. In the following section these three groupings will be examined, but it should be remembered that the phenomenon under investigation is the same (celebrity power) although the emphasis in each case varies. The empirical research in this study is mostly indebted to the source credibility model, and makes use of the results of Ohanian’s 1990 study since it provides a validated model of the components of celebrity credibility.

*Meaning transfer*

McCracken (1989), who wrote the first systematic work from a consumer research perspective, defines a celebrity endorser as “any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement” (p.310). The importance of McCracken’s study is that he introduces the concept of “meaning transfer”, whereby “celebrities deliver meanings of …subtlety, depth, and power” (McCracken, 1989:315). The meaning transfer concept sets his theory apart from the “source credibility” or “source attractiveness” models which originated in social psychological research. Source credibility posits that the message depends for its effectiveness on the “expertness” and “trustworthiness” of the source (Hovland *et al*., 1953:20). And source attractiveness claims that a message depends for its effectiveness chiefly on “familiarity,” “likeability,” and/or “similarity” of the source (McGuire, 1985: 264). The source models are focussed on the persuasiveness of advertising communications. In McCracken’s view these models are too narrow since they are based on the view that as long as the credibility and attractiveness conditions are satisfied then *any* celebrity should serve as a persuasive source for *any* advertising message, but research has shown that not all celebrities are equally useful in all product categories. The reason for this is that celebrities carry with them a bundle of meanings which are a composite of their fictional or other roles.

*Cultural embeddedness*

In recent studies of celebrity the ‘meaning transfer’ model, which positions celebrities as the intermediaries who form the vital link between consumers and the world of endorsed consumer goods, has come under attack in the work of O’Reilly (2005), Hamilton and Hewer, (2010), Ritson and Eliott (1999), Banister and Cocker (2014), and Arnould and Thompson (2005). The unidirectional flow of meaning transfer put forward by McCracken has given way to ideas about the co-creation of meaning. These other authors argue that celebrity meanings must be understood in a broader cultural context in which consumers are active in their appropriation of and identification with celebrity glamour. These authors share a view of the cultural embeddedness of the concept of celebrity. Much fascinating work has come from this direction, for example the study by Hewer and Browlie of Nigella Lawson, the celebrity chef, which shows how consumers create new forms of social relations mediated by the online forum Nigella.com. (This study which was conducted before her celebrity divorce court case.) The celebrity chef website serves up “emotional and seductive entanglements” with its “recipes for comfort and enlivenment” (Hewer and Brownlie, 2013). Consumers actively engage with, and appropriate individual meanings from the aura of celebrity in a web 2.0 world; they are not simply the passive recipients of a cultural meaning transfer.

*Source credibility*

A celebrity’s attributes are imperative to the successful transference of association and image (Byrne *et al*, 2003). Those attributes identified through research include *credibility, attractiveness and power* (Kelman, 1961; Ohanian, 1990; Belch and Belch, 1995). Fowles (1992) discusses the power a celebrity can hold over the public. He believes that it is not power of a historical nature, which is seen as a legitimate way to exert control, but a more modern power “by which few have license to influence on a vast scale” (p.176). A source’s credibility is the degree to which the consumer sees them as having the expertise or skill, combined with trustworthiness, to deliver objective and impartial information (Goldsmith *et al*, 2000; Ohanian, 1990). This credibility can have a positive effect on influencing consumers about the product they are endorsing (Seno and Lukas, 2007). A study by Ohanian (1990) examines celebrity endorser credibility and tests the creation of a scale to measure this based on specific dimensions of credibility. The resulting dimensions are trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness, and these are affirmed in several other studies (e.g. Lord and Putrevu, 2009).

Source attractiveness can invoke likeability in consumers as a result of their “affection for the source due to their physical appearance, behaviour or other personal characteristics” (Byrne *et al*., 2003:292). The consumer can identify with the source if they believe that they hold similar preferences or beliefs (Belch and Belch, 1995), and so source attractiveness can have a positive and persuasive effect on the consumer (Till and Busler, 1983). Physical attractiveness combined with celebrity status is a key combination for advertisers when choosing celebrity endorsers and is thought to increase the recall and likeability of a brand (Kahle and Homer, 1985), providing a potentially powerful source of brand image (Kamins, 1990). Despite most of the literature agreeing that celebrity attractiveness enhances consumer attitudes concerning brands, there is some debate as to whether or not this will lead to actual purchase intention (Byrne *et al*., 2003).

**Findings**

In the research interviews with professionals, respondents were asked to rank three dimensions of celebrity credibility – trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness – in order of importance. These criteria derive from Ohanian’s 1990 study of celebrity endorsement in which he developed a semantic differential scale to measure perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. His scale was validated using respondents' self-reported measures of intention to purchase and perception of quality for the products being tested. The resulting scale demonstrated high reliability and validity, hence the key categories “expertise,” “trustworthiness” and “attractiveness”were used in this study to measure perceptions of celebrity.

<Insert Figure 1 here>

Theatre professionals (in Figure 1) were agreed that attractiveness is the least important dimension; they were split between expertise and trustworthiness in terms of importance. There appears to be a close proximity between these last two terms; in the context of celebrity casting they appear almost interchangeably. In contrast, audiences believed that expertise was overwhelmingly the single most important attribute. Their responses are shown in Figure 2.

<Insert Figure 2 here >

The results in Figure 2, summing up the audience responses, clearly indicate that they believe that expertise is considered the most important dimension of credibility for a celebrity performing in a theatre production, with 91% of respondents choosing this. Attractiveness was considered the least important dimension of credibility, although there was a narrow margin between attractiveness and trustworthiness, with a split of 53% and 47% respectively. What is suggested by the comparison between professionals’ views and audiences’ is that although they both believe that expertise is the most important feature, audiences are more swayed by attractiveness (physical, and sexual appeal) than professionals.

Celebrities with expertise in theatre belong to a wider class of people who are well-known or famous. The research asked audiences whether they believed there was any difference between being a celebrity and being famous. In the research reported here, some questions probed this connection. Figure 3 below indicates that a significant proportion of respondents, 86%, considered there to be a difference between someone who is a celebrity and someone who is famous.

<Insert Figure 3 here>

Other questions explored the definition that audience members would most likely use for “celebrity”. The seven categories listed were the emergent categories from the qualitative data findings. Figure 4 illustrates that more than half of respondents, 55.2%, would define a celebrity as “someone with a lot of media exposure and coverage”. No other category gained more than a 12% share of the results, with the next highest being “someone who is a household name”, with 11.9%.

<Insert Figure 4 here>

The results presented in the previous Figures (1,2,3 and 4) suggests that celebrities must have some kind of expertise, they must be known for something. In the results which follow, this distinction will be examined to consider what is the source of celebrity for a particular individual and determine their areas of expertise. International readers will recognise the celebrities named in the study, but there are a few of the ‘famous’ who are known only in the UK, e.g. Katie Price, also known as Jordan.

<Insert Figure 5 here>

In order to further investigate respondents’ views about the areas in which potential celebrities work, respondents were first given 12 categories and asked in which of these areas did they believe would be found the greatest number of celebrities in today’s society. Figure 5 shows that TV was the highest ranking category, while Theatre, Dancers and Scientists were the three lowest ranking categories (i.e., with the fewest celebrities).

Respondents were then asked which of the same 12 categories would be most likely to attract them to attend the theatre. Figure 6 below shows that Film was the highest ranking category (count: 58) and Theatre was the second highest (count: 53). Both of these categories were much higher than any other category, and together made up 64% of total responses. These values suggest that audiences know that celebrities can be found in many areas of Sport and Entertainment, but when they go to a theatre production they preferred the celebrities to have a relevant background.

<Insert Figure 6 here>

When asked about the impact of celebrity casting on their intention to go to a show, the vast majority of respondents (64%) said that it would depend on the celebrity (Figure 7, following). This suggests that audiences weigh up the celebrity according to some evaluative means. Not all celebrities are equally powerful. The remainder of respondents were divided between “less likely to attend a theatre production with a celebrity in it (21%)” and “more likely” (15%).

<Insert Figure 7 here>

A Chi-squared test was performed to determine whether there was a relationship between the likelihood that a celebrity performer would increase a respondent’s awareness of the theatre and the previous question of whether a respondent would be more or less likely to go to a theatre production featuring a celebrity. There was a strong relation between the two, which was highly significant (Chi=26.127, p < 0.001). This means that those who were more likely to have increased awareness of a theatre production based on having a celebrity present were also more likely to go to a theatre production with a celebrity in it.

Another test was used to determine whether there was a relationship between the likelihood that a celebrity performer would improve a respondent’s opinion of the theatre and the likelihood that a celebrity performer would improve a respondent’s awareness of the theatre. There was a strong relation between the two which was highly significant (Chi=40.488, p=<0.001). This means that those who were more likely to have a higher opinion of a theatre production (with a celebrity in the cast) were also more likely to have increased awareness of a production because of having a celebrity in the cast.

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<Insert Figure 8 here>

Figure 8 shows the 10 most frequently-mentioned celebrities along with whether they would have a positive or negative effect on possible theatre attendance. Katie Price is a local British celebrity who is known for her media exposure. While she was significantly the most- mentioned celebrity (7% of the 841 celebrities mentioned), she also received the highest number of ‘negative’ responses for any celebrity. However, in terms of response for a single celebrity, Victoria Beckham had the most ‘negative’ votes, 100%. Of the 10 most frequently-mentioned celebrities, 6 had an overall negative effect rating.

The relationship between demographics and celebrity effect was also analysed.

<Insert Figure 9 here>

With the exception of the 55 – 65 age range, the data implies that older people are less likely to be persuaded to attend a performance with a celebrity cast member in it. Spearman's rho was used to confirm this relationship. There was a correlation between demographics and celebrity effect which was moderately significant (r = -0.198, p = <0.01). This implies that younger people are more influenced by the power of celebrity and are more likely to be influenced by the presence of a celebrity, regardless of the specific talent which that celebrity brings to the performance.

**Discussion**

The results of the interviews and survey clearly demonstrate that theatre-goers are more likely to be attracted to the theatre by celebrities who have theatrical expertise and not by “someone known simply through film, television or the all-pervasive gossip columns” (Billington, 2007). A distinction between fame and celebrity was drawn by both audiences and theatre professionals consulted in the study, with celebrity status being seen as something that is created by media exposure and being in the public eye, in contrast to fame which is earned by being famous for something or some achievement. Celebrities with a background in theatre and film were seen to strongly draw audiences to the theatre, as opposed to those with a background in reality TV shows, search-for-a-star shows or being part of a famous couple; these latter were very much rejected as being suitable for theatre. (There may be a difference between West End audiences and a Broadway audience which is revealed by the new Broadway Pinter play mentioned above. A comparison of two theatre districts should be explored in further research.)

The age of the audience member was seen to play an important role in whether or not celebrity casting would be effective. Significantly, whereas previous research suggested that celebrity casting encourages those who attend the theatre less frequently to become more active attenders, this was not found to be the case in the study reported here.

As mentioned above, the survey results reported here clearly indicate that audiences considered there to be a difference between someone who is a celebrity and someone who is famous (86%). This was also supported by the qualitative findings. By far the most prominent definition of celebrity was “someone with a lot of media exposure /coverage”. This supports the existing literature that the modern day interpretation of celebrity refers to someone with media-created public status.

However, the present study contests the existing literature that implies that celebrities are not suitable to perform on the stage. It found that, from the audience point of view, different attributes of specific celebrities can make them either suitable or unsuitable to perform on the stage. One of the most important findings concerns the development of celebrities from within the theatre. The findings reported here show that although theatre was considered one of the lowest celebrity-producing categories tested, it was also seen as the second most likely category of a celebrity’s background to attract audiences to see a production. This implies that it is not the phenomenon of celebrity itself that is the affecting factor, but the relevance of the celebrity’s theatrical experience. There is a shortage of celebrities who learned their craft within the theatre. The death of Elaine Stritch in 2014 is a symbolic reminder that we are at the end of an era in which celebrities were created by virtue of their stage experience.

The recall test asking respondents to name the first 5 celebrities who came to mind, and whether they would have a positive or negative effect on their opinion of theatre, established a clear link between the two main elements of brand equity: awareness and opinion. The results undoubtedly show that one element can be prominent without the other. Specifically in the case of the four most-mentioned celebrities, there was a very high level of awareness (established by recall frequency) but also a very negative opinion. This indicates that it is possible to have a negative correlation between awareness and opinion, which would be damaging for a brand overall. This is because a large number of people would know of the celebrity, but also have a negative opinion of them, e.g. Victoria Beckham.

In order to manage the risk level associated with celebrity casting, it would be useful to recognise that a celebrity’s theatrical expertise has been found to be the main indicator of whether they would have an overall positive or negative effect on theatre attendance. Previous research into theatre and celebrity endorsement discusses how a celebrity’s public perception can enhance or damage a production in which they perform (Quinn, 1990; Stephenson, 2007). The research presented here further supports the results of these earlier studies, confirming that celebrities referred to in the qualitative phase of this research as ‘talented’, ‘fantastic’ or ‘amazing’ were found to attract audiences to the theatre, while those referred to as ‘idiot’, ‘washed up’ or ‘can’t stand them’ were found to discourage audiences from the theatre.

The analysis presented here shows that theatre-going frequency bears no relationship to whether or not a celebrity performer will increase the likelihood of an individual’s attendance at a production. This finding contradicts the general view within the literature that the casting of celebrities, often with no former theatrical expertise, encourages people to go to the theatre that otherwise would not (Lathen, 2011). However, Lawson’s (2009) belief that celebrity casting would draw in younger audiences is supported by this research, for we found there to be a clear relationship between age and the potential effect of celebrity casting. With this in mind, marketers will be able to use the age-profile statistics alongside their productions’ target-market age-group to build a better picture of how effective a proposed celebrity cast member may be in bringing in audiences.

**Conclusions**

This study was designed to explore the effect of celebrity casting on West End theatre productions. The research has pointed to the differences between fame and celebrity in order to establish what underlying associations may impact upon possible theatre-goers’ intention to attend a production and the general view of the phenomenon of celebrity. It has examined the connection between celebrities and brand equity through celebrities’ influence on audience opinion and awareness of theatre productions. The study has highlighted the central importance of theatrical expertise in creating brand equity in theatre, and has given an account of the reasons behind these findings. Returning to the hypotheses posed in the conceptual development of this study, it is now possible to state that:

1. There is a difference between celebrity and fame;

2. Expertise is the most important dimension of credibility for a theatre performer;

3. Celebrities with theatrical expertise will have a positive effect on brand equity;

4. Celebrities without theatrical expertise will have a negative effect on brand equity.

The most striking finding to emerge from this study is that potential audience members believe that there is a difference between fame and celebrity. Although there is an inescapable cross-over in the way these terms are used within the media and marketing, it is clear that they send different messages and hold different associations in audiences’ minds. It is apparent that, for theatre audiences, ‘celebrity’ has potentially something of a negative association, being viewed as a media-generated status, and not automatically connected to fame or talent. This was clear from the mere 4% of respondents who believed that celebrity casting would improve their opinion of theatre, as well as the numerous qualitative responses that echoed the theme of “I can’t stand celebrities”.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that a celebrity’s theatrical expertise (or lack of such) will determine whether they have a positive or negative effect on audience members’ opinions and the likelihood of potential audience members attending a theatre performance featuring a celebrity performer. It was also shown that theatre and film celebrities were highly more likely to attract people to the theatre than celebrities from search-for-a star shows, the sports industry or those who are well known for being part of a celebrity couple (for example, Victoria and David Beckham) or simply being in the media limelight a great deal (for example, Katie Price).

These two main findings, both pointing to the importance of theatrical experience, are of strong interest because they contest some of the critical comments made in the literature, suggesting that people have an “obsession with celebrity” (Miller, 2008) and want to see celebrities from non-theatrical backgrounds, such as reality-TV personalities. It is also interesting that the results of the investigation reported here concur with the marketing and branding literature on celebrity endorsement in advertising, in which expertise as well as the perceived fit between the celebrity-endorser and the endorsed product have generally been found to be integral to successfully creating and managing brand equity. Although theatre is not a form of advertising, it is intriguing that producers and theatre marketers have sometimes taken an opposite approach to that suggested by the celebrity endorsement literature. The current study considers theatrical expertise to be the theatre equivalent of the celebrity-product fit theory used in the fields of advertising and branding. An implication of this is that theatre producers and markets should consider the celebrity-product fit model as a suitable brand equity model also for theatre.

These findings enhance our understanding of how celebrity casting can impact theatre-going audiences and affect the brand equity of theatre. The current findings add to audience research in the way that improves our understanding of London theatre audiences and their motivation to attend performances. This research also adds to a growing body of literature on celebrity endorsement and contributes towards creating an understanding of the phenomenon of celebrity casting in the theatre industry, which has until now been little investigated.

*Limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research*

A number of caveats need to be noted regarding the present study. The term ‘Star Quality’ was intentionally used in the title of this article. It usually signifies an intangible or indefinable quality. It is not the intention of this research to suggest that we can know precisely what makes a star, but we can learn from audiences about how they react to celebrities, and hence try to make our theatre marketing strategies more successful. The current investigation was limited by the categorical nature of its data which restricted the statistical analysis to non-parametric testing. Although this study was able to determine significant relationships between variables, a wider parametric study and analysis would be beneficial.

The current study has examined only London theatre audiences. Suggestions have been made as to how it could apply to the theatre in general, and it would be useful to repeat the study in other regions (particularly New York’s Broadway theatre district) to gain a wider understanding of the subject, and to ascertain whether similar views are in fact held by other theatre audiences. A future study investigating the difference between regions would be particularly interesting.

*Implications/recommendations for future practice*

An implication of the findings presented here is that both the professional background of a celebrity and the perceived expertise of the celebrity should be taken into account when deciding, firstly, whether or not to use celebrity casting at all within a theatre production and, secondly, which celebrity in particular to cast if this decision is taken. The information in the findings and analysis of this study can be used to develop targeted marketing strategies for different theatre-going age ranges when considering celebrity casting.

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