

The X Factor Enigma:

Simon Cowell and the Marketization of Existential Liminality

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Abstract

In this paper we attempt to understand the dynamic underlying the success of Simon Cowell's *X Factor* TV talent show which, along with its many brand extensions, epitomises the new marketing priorities in the media convergence era. We seek insights not from formal theories of marketing management but in the myth and magic of Cowell's enchanted TV presence as the mystical authority, the trickster figure, conducting a mass-mediated experience of Turner's (1969) 'existential liminality'. Detached from formal rites of passage, this simulation of liminal ritual temporarily, and symbolically, subverts formal social barriers and opens up the possibility of transformed identity for the contestants. We suggest that TV viewers partake both vicariously and actually in this marketized experience of existential liminality. We review literary as well as anthropological antecedents to the media role Cowell personifies and we critique and extend previous applications of Turner's work in marketing and consumption to illustrate its continued resonance in ordinary, as well as extraordinary, consumption phenomena.

Introduction

In this paper we analyse the music and entertainment media marketing success of Mr Simon Cowell, arguably the quintessential experiential marketer in the Western world, focusing on his major success, the UK TV talent show, and now international franchise, *X Factor*. While Cowell's extraordinary impact on marketing and entertainment is of interest from a business research perspective, the popularity of his TV show formats has also become a cultural

phenomenon. Academics have commented on the way his shows satisfy a human need for community and for sensational entertainments, and stimulate the desire to engage with universal narratives of human experience (Day, 2010). Arguably, the show also carries superficial elements of carnival in its subversive laughter, the juxtaposition of the high and the low and the theme of personal renewal for the contestants (Bakhtin, 1965). We suggest, however, that Victor Turner's (1969) anthropological concept of existential liminality offers more penetrating insights into *X Factor's* appeal than Bahktin's (1965) literary theory of carnival because of, among other things, the rigid formality of the show's process, the centrality of the authority of the judges to the format, and the very controlled and strictly demarcated ways in which social structure is symbolically suspended or subverted in *X Factor*. In particular, we suggest that *X Factor* is premised on a need not only for the kind of social connection seen in other media rituals such as royal weddings and funerals, but also for a sense of ritual which, temporarily and symbolically, opens up the possibility of transformed identities. We illustrate that, while applications of Turner's ideas have been fruitful in understanding 'extraordinary' consumption phenomena such as white water rafting and extreme mountaineering (Tumbat and Belk, 2011), they have a wider resonance in the marketing of 'ordinary' and mass mediated consumer experiences.

We will begin by outlining the *X Factor* TV show format, for those who have managed to avoid this particular televisual treat. We then reintroduce the basis of Turner's theories of liminal ritual in order to clearly ground our subsequent analysis. We then offer a brief review of relevant literature before giving a more detailed account of the complex marketing effort underpinning the extraordinary success of Cowell and his *X Factor* franchise. Finally, we analyse *X Factor* as an example of the marketization of existential

liminality, taking in Cowell's crucial role as a composite of the mythical trickster/shaman figure in literature and anthropology. To conclude, we examine the marketing implications of our application of Turner's theory.

The X Factor process

By way of a brief introduction to this (now globally franchised) entertainment phenomenon, *X Factor* is not just a TV singing talent show but a new paradigm in TV talent shows. British TV has a long tradition of popular Saturday night talent shows, notably *Opportunity Knocks* in the 1970s and *New Faces* a decade later. Both shook a tub of saccharine over the traditional British pub 'open mic' format where anyone could get up and sing, and took it to mass TV audiences. What Cowell has done is to put dramatic light and shade, story arcs galore, and massive production budgets into this cheesy old genre. *X Factor* is, by some distance, the biggest show on UK television in terms of viewing figures, advertising revenue and the publicity it receives. Simon Cowell owns the format and the *X Factor* brand and his company has a major share in the production of the show and its many spin-off activities, from TV shows about the show ('*Xtra Factor*'), to the *X Factor* magazine, live performances in major venues, and internet downloads of the performances. Cowell also acts as agent to the winning singers, and he also takes on some losers especially chosen for their commercial potential. He has been the lead judge, featuring prominently on every live show, in each UK series up to 2011 when pop star Gary Barlow took over the role in the UK shows to allow Cowell to focus on the newly launched American franchise.

In the first stage, nationwide auditions are held for up to 200,000 hopefuls. Selected auditions appear on the early shows. It is a feature of *X Factor* that it was the first talent show to use the very worst auditions as entertainment material, with added edge brought

by Cowell's (and latterly, Barlow's) frank, some would say cruel public announcements on the worst auditionees' lamentable lack of talent, personality, charm, or all three. This freak show element to the show attracts criticism for presenting the caterwauling performances of the deeply deluded as comic entertainment. Yet the car crash auditions also serve a dramatic purpose, since they offer a stark contrast which accentuates the miracle of talent actually emerging from this primeval sludge of solipsistic ego and tone-deaf ambition.

Performances which are no better than competent appear by contradistinction to be shining beacons of showbusiness talent worthy of a standing ovation from the studio audience, that is, until they are exposed for their mediocrity in subsequent trials as the drama oscillates around the continually shifting construct of talent, and not-talent. After several rounds of auditions, with the human stories of the aspirants retold on TV and in carefully crafted press releases, a lucky few score are elected to go to boot camp, a residential talent-churning event from which a smaller set of semi finalists are chosen. The discarded losers, distraught and perplexed, slope back to their anonymity, with a story to tell of their brief encounter with fame.

The surviving neophytes are allocated to one of four categories: over 25s, girls, boys and groups, and each gets a judge as dedicated mentor. They are then sent to exotic, sunny locations (unless they get Louis Walsh as their judge/mentor, in which case they go somewhere rainy like Dublin) to rehearse intensively under the close scrutiny of their mentor. Many tears are shed before 12 finalists are chosen to compete in the live TV shows, amidst much controversy about the judges' decisions. This elite group of liminars are taken from their homes and families and installed together in a luxury house under tight security in order to rehearse every day for the live show competitions. Their daily dramas and family

and personal problems are filmed and retold in Britain's celebrity, showbusiness and, often, news media too, as the aspirants occupy a marginal state on the threshold of stardom, yet also, still, deeply ordinary losers. Somehow, the contestants who make it through to the finals normally tend to be the ones who have either irregular employment status or unskilled work outside their singing. If they fail at this chance of stardom, they can't go back to their salaried profession, because they don't have one. It's all or nothing. They are besieged by press and fans in their self-contained compound for the duration of the show, and trips out into 'real' life, even to meet with family members, are closely controlled, choreographed and exhibited as vignettes in the TV shows.

At this stage, the viewing public, previously represented by the baying Coliseum crowd in the studio, are transformed into quasi-judges through the telephone voting system. Each finalist has a story arc developed by Cowell and his team which fuels blanket national PR and press coverage. Each week, another show requires the acts to perform under the strict guidance of the judges who make all creative decisions on behalf of the performers. The TV audience phones in to vote (generating huge revenues for Cowell and his partners), and a candidate or two eliminated each week until the tumultuous final when the winner earns a recording contract, and a shot at superstardom. The finalists are in competition with each other, yet a policy is strictly enforced under which only public statements of mutual appreciation, gratitude and camaraderie are permitted. Some private disagreements, or romances, do tend to leak to the press. Stories of the judges' rivalry and supposedly bitter arguments also find their way into the media as each judge hopes 'their' act will win. The contestants meet their many humiliations with ritual humility, thanking the judges for their sometimes coruscating and personal criticisms. The live shows are lavish affairs, bringing

production values never before seen on TV talent shows and the (usually mediocre) talents receive the very best of professional voice and dance coaching, musical backing, elaborate stage sets, expert PR guidance and, for a lucky few, commercial contracts and management.

Having outlined the *X Factor* process we will now introduce Turner's (1969) notion of liminality. Several of Turner's concepts, liminality and *communitas* among them, have become part of a taken-for-granted vocabulary of interpretive social science which often fails to reference Turner's original conceptual scheme. It is therefore important to reiterate some foundational issues in order to clearly identify the points of resonance with *X Factor*.

Victor Turner and liminal ritual

The liminal zone was a phenomenon anthropologist Victor Turner (1969: see also 1967; 1974) had observed in ritual process, building on the work of Van Gennep, (1961). Turner's (1967) initial ideas were grounded in his ethnographic observations of the ritual rites of passage of the Ndembu tribe. Rites of passage are rituals noted in all societies to mark transitional phases of life such as birth, death, marriage, puberty and so forth. As we note above, Tuner (1969) had commented in his later work that, in economically advanced societies, a phenomenon he termed existential liminality had emerged wherein elements of ritual were present in a form detached from traditional rites of passage.

Previously, van Gennep (1961) had noted that the ritual process consisted of three stages:

1. Separation
2. Liminal period

3. Reassimilation

This categorisation was also referred to by Turner (1969) as preliminal, liminal and postliminal. The key element is the possibility of transformation into a new status in social structure. Firstly, there is a separation in which the subject (also known as the liminar, or the passenger) is divested of their usual social context and its symbolic accoutrements. This can be seen as a symbolic death. But the subject is neither quite dead to their old life, nor quite alive in their new life. In Turner's (1969) phrase, they are 'betwixt and between', just as the *X Factor* finalists are neither stars nor anonymous bar or shop workers. This occurs in a realm Turner called 'anti-structure', in that the imprint of social structure is momentarily erased from the social interaction of this group of liminars. There then follows the liminal phase of trial, test and potential transformation. The liminal process is characterised by a number of features, including the observance of a strict procedure enforced by a figure of mystical authority: a sense of the infinite possibility of change; playful and irreverent reversal and subversion of normal social structural roles; marginalisation in that the subjects are simultaneously members of two or more social groups; and what Turner (1969) called 'communitas'. Communitas refers to the momentary experience of mutual connection which can occur in the absence of social structure. Turner (1969) was very clear that communitas is not the same as solidarity or community: it cannot persist over time and occurs in momentary experiences 'in the interstices of social structure' (p.153). Most importantly, the liminal phase must be orchestrated by a trickster or shaman figure who lies outside social structure, yet holds mystical power over its domain. The trickster's authority is absolute within the liminal process. Finally, in the re-assimilation stage, the initiates who

have been judged successful in their progress through the liminal passage are received back into social structure, with due fanfare and ceremony, in a new and elevated position.

Turner (1969) felt that the cultural resonance of liminality was by no means limited to traditional rites of passage marking life crises, transitional or calendrical events in pre-or indeed post-industrial societies. He referred to aspects of liminality evident in sub-cultural movements such as religious pilgrimages, cults and the hippie movement, and as a concept helping to illuminate structural and psychological experiences of change in much wider cultural arenas of politics, religion and revolution. He also allowed that *communitas* can occur in the absence of a liminal process (p.109), but most of his examples also exhibit aspects of liminal ritual.

Turner (1969) referred to three kinds of *communitas* that can arise from different forms of liminal process. These are:

1. Existential *communitas*
2. Normative *communitas*
3. Ideological *communitas*

Existential *communitas* is spontaneous and fleeting, what might have been described in the 1960's hippie movement as a 'happening' (1969: p.132). Turner (1969) also used the term liminoid experiences to refer to existential *communitas*. We suggest that it is this form of *communitas* which most aptly fits marketing and consumption phenomena. Normative *communitas* occurs where there is a shared goal which demands organization and resources. Ideological *communitas* refers to utopian social movements. In all three, *communitas* is spontaneous and momentary, and in its latter two forms the 'seeds of

structural segmentation and hierarchy' are already sewn (p. 136). Turner also allowed for 'pathological communitas' (p.129). The Manson 'family' or criminal gangs might be examples of this. It is not entirely clear whether Turner intended communitas to be conceived as a collective emotion, or as a system of relationships and practices. It seems clear that the latter may arise from the former, and communitas may generate communitarian ideals. However, when this happens, social structure has re-asserted itself and the moment of communitas has passed. Turner (1969) stated that if individuals act 'in terms of the rights conferred by the incumbency of office in the social structure' or, if they follow their 'psychobiological urges at the expense of one's fellows' (p.105) then communitas is violated. In other words, whenever individuals assert their individuality, that is, they revert to the status-seeking behaviour of social structure, communitas is no longer present. This is an important distinction since it reasserts the difference between communitas as an emotional bond which is sufficient in and of itself, and community (or solidarity) as a bond which is structured by mutual obligations and practices. Sub-cultural groups oriented around consumption (for example extreme mountaineering, biker groups etc) might be seen as examples of the creation of anti-structural spaces, yet the experience of communitas need not be implicated in them unless some other characteristics of liminal ritual are also present, such as obedience to the strict and absolute moral authority of a non-participant leader.

Existential liminality

In this paper we focus on existential liminality, which Turner (1969) also referred to as liminoid experience. The characteristics of this are 1. Participation is voluntary (as opposed to being a compulsory consequence of marriage, death, birth etc) and 2. resolution is not

necessary to the experience of transformation. Turner (1969) gave the example of citizens living under a semi-permanent state of political chaos and/or warfare. In such circumstances, the experience is liminoid in the sense that the experience of being in a state of transformation may not be resolved during a lifecourse. Another example Turner gave was in the Judeao/Islamic/Christian traditions where life on earth is a liminal experience with the desired resolution occurring only after death (and indeed the same may be said of Buddhism and Hinduism, with a different eschatology).

Turner (1969), then, extended Van Gennep's (1961) ideas well beyond traditions of ritual in pre-industrial societies. As he put it, 'The very flexibility and mobility of social relations in modern industrial societies...may provide better conditions for the emergence of existential *communitas*, even if only in countless and transient encounters, than any previous forms of social order. Perhaps this is what Walt Whitman meant when he wrote 'One's-self I sing, a simple separate person, Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse' (p.203).

Whitman's phrase has a more than superficial similarity to the *X Factor* format of singing for popular acclaim. Turner's work gave the notion of liminality far wider currency beyond anthropology and into sociology, political, anthropological and cultural studies (e.g. Szokolczai, 2000; Horvath et al, 2009; Haywood and Hobbs, 2007). Liminality has been applied to small groups, sub-cultures, historical epochs, entire nations or to individuals: psychoanalysis, for example, can be understood as a liminal process. Turner (1969) suggested that liminality is a time and/or place in which normal social structures and action can be reversed and subverted. It acts not only as a playful counterpoint to everyday norms but also as a site at which the values and practices of the surrounding social structure can be brought into relief. This has helped extend the concept to political anthropology and to the

examination of cultural and sub-cultural phenomena. It is in this spirit of political and cultural anthropology that we turn Turner's (1969) ideas to an examination of a hugely popular TV show.

Before embarking on our analysis, it must be admitted that Turner's ideas may have been over-extended, and some commentators feel that they lose some more of their explanatory power the further away they are applied from traditional sacred rites of passage. There is a danger that the idea has become too abstract and, therefore, is too easily applied in new contexts. What is more, phenomena such as *X Factor* are open to analysis by other conceptual frames. As we note above, the show could resonate to some degree with Bakhtin's (1965) literary theories of the carnivalesque in its playful and chaotic subversion of social hierarchies. However, the carnivalesque may represent manifestations of anti-structure, but it displays few of the other characteristics of liminal processes such as strict procedure, the authority of the trickster/shaman, or the ritual reassimilation of the passenger into social structure. In the management literature, the *X Factor* might be seen as an example of 'karaoke capitalism' (Ridderstråle and Nordström, 2004) in that it makes a virtue of the copy. Then again, *X Factor* is deeply original in its unoriginality.

While acknowledging that Turner's ideas are open to interpretation, we argue that Cowell's activities have, unwittingly, marketized existential liminality, adding a deep cultural resonance to a profoundly prosaic entertainment. As Turner (1969) explained: 'Society seems to be a process rather than a thing- a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and communitas. There would seem to be- if one can use such a controversial term- a human "need" to participate in both modalities. Persons starved of one in their functional day-to-day activities seek it in ritual liminality.'(p.203). Here, Turner (1969) clearly

identifies *communitas* as a consequence of liminal ritual, and we conceive of the consumer experience of *X Factor* not only in terms of a need for anti-structure (which can, after all, be served in other forms of group human interaction) but as an experience which is given a powerful resonance by its analogy with liminal ritual processes. Now, before embarking on our analysis, we outline relevant previous literature before offering a more detailed account of Cowell's role in the ubiquitous marketing entity that is *X Factor*.

Explaining Cowell's Marketing Nous

Accounting for major marketing success is all-too-often beyond the clichéd prescriptions of typical text books (Brown, 1995; Hackley, 2003). Cowell's complex business model does not naturally fit the stereotypical one-size-fits-all marketing approach of researching consumer needs, and then satisfying them (Kotler, 1967). Giving consumers what they say they want is not only a tautological explanation of business success but a palpable misrepresentation of the tactics of many leading business figures from Henry Ford to Michael O'Leary (Brown, 2010). Cowell's basic product consists of unknowns singing cover versions of past hit songs, a case of karaoke capitalism (Ridderstråle and Nordström, 2004) if ever there was one. Of course, while the core product may be yet another contribution to the postmodern 'culture of the copy' (Schwartz 1996) it is the endless augmentation that transforms Cowell's simulacra into compelling set of marketing propositions. Cowell himself is lauded as the preeminent marketer of his generation – today's P.T. Barnum, no less – someone who has single-handedly transformed a failing and disillusioned industry (the post-download music business) into a veritable fountain of gold discs (and all manner of ancillary merchandise).

Previous research focusing on the style and strategies of legendary marketers has noted their insistence on stubbornly following their personal vision. For example, Brown (2010)

shows that Thomas Edison, Walt Disney, James Dyson, Steve Jobs and many more marketing titans eschewed formulaic approaches and, instead, learned from abject failure before they achieved their historic successes on their own terms. Hackley (2009) points out that 'The commercial insight of visionary entrepreneurs such as Ray Kroc, Akio Morita, Bill Gates, and Richard Branson, to take a few examples, apparently owed little to formal, textbook models of strategic marketing planning' (p. 8). But, the transcendent personal force of legendary marketers aside, most marketing successes can be seen as the results of powers greater than any individual. Holt (2004), for example, describes the success of iconic brands such as Coca Cola and Volkswagen as a brand story which is written by the owner to resonate with the cultural experience of the target market. He argues that brands are in part created by consumers, and he suggests that astute brand management consists not in blindly pushing the management line but in listening, and responding to, the subtle currents of consumer culture. Managerial paradigms such as relationship marketing (Gronroos, 1994; 2006; Gummesson, 2002) or service based models (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) may have an intuitive appeal in the post-industrial Western world but the intangible commercial instinct, negotiating skills and sheer clarity of vision that characterises the *art* of marketing (Brown, 1996) seem more pre-eminent, and more elusive, than ever.

Some academic consumer researchers have focused less on the rationality than the irrationality of marketing success. For example, the pursuit of pleasure is seen as a foundational concept in consumer research (Goulding, Shankar, Elliott and Canniford 2009), and those marketers who understand the deep motivations of pleasure seekers have a head start in building strategies around the consumption of these pleasures. If Simon Cowell knows anything, he knows what kind of entertainment pleases TV and music audiences.

There are many varieties of pleasures which may confer, if not necessarily a sense of *communitas*, then at least a sense of occupying an anti-structural space for a moment, such as the adrenaline rush of white water rafting, skydiving or mountain climbing (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993), the sweeter but less intense pleasure of indulging in nostalgia (Schindler and Holbrook 2003), or the imaginative transformation of fantasy, passion or hedonic gratification (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2003). A sense of being outside the established social structure yet also mutually bonded often accompanies collective consumption experiences, although this need not preclude intensively individual behaviour (Tumbat and Belk, 2011). The sense of the social, set in the context of extraordinary consumption experiences, is here conceived as a key component of pleasure. One interesting aspect of the experience of Cowell's TV shows is that the pleasure of partaking is dialectically solitary and social: one can watch the shows alone yet enjoy them as a collective experience, and perhaps phone in to cast your vote or go online to chat about the performances.

Of course, some pleasures are not only solitary as well as social but potentially or actually transgressive or damaging, such as excessive alcohol consumption (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Szmigin and Mistral, 2009), dance raves and associated drug taking (Goulding, Shankar, Elliott and Canniford 2009), illicit sex (Belk, Østergaard, and Groves 1998) or getting tattoos (Patterson and Schroeder 2010). All these examples can be seen as attempts to escape the suffocating roles and obligations of social structure, to some extent. Seen as pleasures, they are acquired tastes. The pleasures of *X Factor*, solitary or social, seem to range from the rather vindictive pleasure of watching the ritual humiliation of desperate but talentless auditionees, to the para-social identification with the finalists as quasi-soap opera characters, along the way taking in the fascination of unpicking just what, exactly, are the

components of showbusiness stardom. While *X Factor* is not really a transgressive pleasure, it is certainly a guilty one. It is the most unashamedly lowbrow of popular entertainment and is scorned by music fans who feel that it suppresses and devalues more spontaneous eruptions of popular music talent. Nonetheless, there are many in the *X Factor* audience whose demographic profile suggests that they ought to be watching opera instead (Day, 2010).

The pleasures of social experience can refer to mundane, everyday consumption (Holt and Thompson, 2004) or in activities that are overtly conceived as attempts to escape the strictures and confines of marketized experiences (Kozinets, 2002). Major media events such as hugely popular TV shows, celebrity weddings or indeed tragic disasters have been theorised as homogenizing collective experiences which give people a renewed sense of being bound together within the prevailing social order (for example, see Pantti and Sumiala, 2009). In contrast, *X Factor* has anti-structural elements in its raucous, baying live crowds and its glorification of the contestants, the great majority of whom as we note are marginal characters of low social status. The show gives a platform to individuals who would never achieve fame and renown by any other means. It is plebeian entertainment given all the wealth and gloss of high society, in which the final judgement ultimately rests with the ordinary viewers at home. In these senses *X Factor* can be seen not to support the social order but, symbolically and superficially, to subvert it. The power of the crowd to recognise the quirky talent of an unknown can transform that individual into a world of immense wealth and fame. It goes without saying that *X Factor* is also deeply conventional. The early auditions often have something of the freak show about them as the odd, the deluded or the personality disordered are mocked and sent back to their dismal lives: the finalists are forbidden from engaging in sexual relationships or excessive partying for the duration of the

show; the show's PR machine makes Herculean efforts to represent them as 'nice' people, sometimes against huge odds; and the show as a whole is, in truth, more of a showcase for the established talent of invited artists and featured songwriters than a trailblazing pioneer for new artists or new musical forms.

Some other consumer research studies might also have some contribution to make to understanding the *X Factor* appeal. For example, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) allude to the fragmentation of traditional social bonds which presses people into seeking multiple and fluid relationships via online media (see also Baudrillard, 1981; McAlexander et al, 2002) and which drives the expansion of virtual communities. The notion of the consumer tribe has also gained resonance in recent years (Cova et al, 1997: 2007). Bauman (1992, in Cova 1997 p.301) suggests that postmodern tribes subsist in a perpetual state of becoming which only lasts as long as the power of rituals to attract. This chimes with Turner's (1969) notion of existential liminality as a collective and momentary engagement with the possibility of change within a fluid social context. The *X Factor* tribe is not only an online phenomenon-thousands of fans attend the live shows, read the press coverage, buy the magazine and engage in physical as well as virtual modes with the *X Factor* brand. However, the online extensions of the show, as we shall see later in the paper, are hugely significant in extending the reach of the brand and deepening the fans' collective sense of personal engagement.

We will now explain more of Cowell's business practices and the huge scale of his success with *X Factor* before moving into our analysis of the ritual dynamic which underpins it. Central to this, we suggest, is Cowell's media persona as the ultimate trickster figure of the entertainment world.

In With a Bullet- the Simon Cowell Media Phenomenon

As the pre-eminent entertainment impresario of the digital era, Simon Cowell's marketing genius, built on his talent as a music and TV impresario, seems beyond question. But the precise nature of his legendary marketing savvy is an enigma, and some of the contradictions in his CV are striking. For example, by his own admission Cowell can't sing, doesn't play a musical instrument, and doesn't produce records. In an interview with *Playboy*ⁱ magazine he admitted that his keynote TV talent vehicle, *American Idol*, is a soap opera not a music show. Yet he has sold over 150 million records. As a talent manager Cowell spotted the music selling potential of acts as unlikely as the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, the Tellytubbies, Robson and Jerome, and professional wrestler The Undertaker. Cowell has also enjoyed consistent success with more mainstream pop artists like 'boyband' Westlife, million-selling 80's singer and sometime girlfriend Sinitta and, latterly, his string of talent show winners headed by superstar Leona Lewis and boy band brand JLS. Other contradictions are equally arresting. He learned his trade as an artists and repertoire (A&R) man in the record business and had no training in TV, yet Cowell holds the rights to some of the most lucrative TV show formats in history. Even more paradoxically, Cowell claims he doesn't know how to work a computer or an iPod, yet a cursory examination of the web-based activities around his TV shows reveals a cutting-edge case study in leveraging value from digital and social marketing. Finally, and most significantly, Cowell appears to be an opinionated but grounded individual who boasts of his lack of personal sophistication. Yet, leering over the sweeping panorama of his marketing landscape, are the botox-smoothed features of the most recognisable global celebrity since Muhammad Ali.

Cowell's peerless PR and expensively veneered smile has made him the biggest reptile the TV celebrity jungle has ever known. He claims his talent is simply that he knows how to make money by exploiting his sense of the popular taste. And this is not disingenuous- Cowell happily concedes that his personal tastes are irredeemably vulgar, from his love of chips and pizza to his vulgarly ostentatious cars and houses. He was a private school dropout who learned the music business from a lowly position in the company post room, and he watches the same popular genres of TV that he makes. He is a sharp dealmaker who understands the politics of TV contracts – he is said to have invented the *X Factor* franchise to give him more leverage in his contract negotiations with his American Idol partner Simon Fuller. The resemblance between Fuller's original UK success Pop Idol and *X Factor* is such that Fuller sued Cowell for copyright infringement. The case was settled out of court, with reports suggesting that Cowell had agreed to appear in more series of *American Idol* while Fuller's company, Entertainment 19, received a minority interest in various *X Factor*-related intellectual propertiesⁱⁱ.

The marketing power of the TV persona

Cowell knows how to negotiate from a position of strength but his unparalleled gift for launching one successful entertainment brand after another is underpinned by his instinctive understanding of his consumers. He knows what people want, because it's what he likes too. Cowell's status as a cultural icon might be the result of a combination of experience, instinct, happy accident and the astute skills of his close associate, PR guru Max Clifford. But, just as Cowell admits to being fascinated (and not always in a good way) by the people he auditions for his shows, the fascination of Cowell lies in the extraordinary force of his TV persona. His early successes could be understood in terms of the nuts and bolts of

talent spotting and the management of media rights, music publicity and broadcasting royalties. But Cowell the icon has emerged after he made it big, went bankrupt, then made it bigger in the music business. Cowell has only existed for the general public since his TV career took off with his role as an invited judge on *Pop Idol* in 2001. It is worth, then, looking at the persona, the cultural icon that is planet Cowell, in order to try to understand something of the marketing universe that orbits around it.

There is nothing in conventional marketing management theory that explains the publicity leverage which charismatic individuals can give to their business brands, but the alchemy of publicity can transform a brand and everyone knows it. A production line of TV entrepreneurs has followed in the footsteps of Sir Richard Branson, Sir Philip Green, Donald Trump, Lord Alan Sugar and Steve Jobs, seeking to build their brands – or indeed rebuild in the cases of Donald Trump and Alan Sugar – on the back of increased personal exposure. Perhaps more apposite analogies with Cowell might be legends of entertainment like circus impresario P.T. Barnum, Elvis Presley's darkly mysterious manager 'Colonel' Tom Parker, or British television entrepreneur cigar-toting Lord Lew Grade. All these peerless publicists knew exactly how to whip up the public's passion for diverting spectacle, and, moreover, how to make top dollar from it. But Cowell's public face reaches beyond all these in the intimacy and authority he achieves with his audience. His viewers feel that they know him personally. Even more strangely, they like him. Cowell is a classic narcissist, a commitment-phobe who has publicly left a trail of women moving reluctantly into their thirties still yearning for his babies. Yet his audience admire his chutzpah and like him for his rakish affinity with much younger women, his dislike of 'posh' food, and his instinctive anti-snobbery. They also know his human side. Vignettes from his life story are well publicised,

among them his misdemeanours as a rebellious schoolboy, his business failure at 30 which meant that he had to move back in to live with his parents, and his grief the day that he phoned home to announce he'd had his first number 1 chart hit, only to find that his beloved father had died that very day of a tragically unexpected heart attack. Cowell was known initially for his cruel integrity in publicly crushing the aspirations of earnest but talentless hopefuls. However, this initial positioning for his persona has gradually been moderated and warmed with a steady PR leakage of stories about his vulnerability, charitable work and personal loyalty. His role in his shows was to supply the dark shades which contrast with the unbearable lightness of talent show optimism. This contrast, and the spurious authority he brought to his TV presence, brought a dramatic resonance to the format which utterly transformed the cheesy old talent show genre. Today, Cowell has all but dropped his role as a pantomime British baddy: the Mr Nasty motif has been replaced by Mr Sensitive. What remains of his role in *X Factor* is the trickster's unfathomable yet effortless authority, played to a 'T' by his successor in the UK series, the inexplicably iconic Gary Barlow of chart-topping band *Take That*.

Delineating the X Factor money machine

Cowell's marketing modus operandi epitomises the convergence of media, marketing, and celebrity culture. At the time of writing, he has reportedly signed a deal to keep his hit show *X Factor* on UK TV until 2013ⁱⁱⁱ. In the meantime, he has exported the format to the USA to rival the success of another Cowell vehicle, *America's Got Talent*. *X Factor's* real time viewing figures in the UK of 15-17 million have leveraged the price of 30-second advertising slots up to an estimated £150,000, rising to around £250,000 for the series final. Other revenue streams bubble from the *X Factor* spring. A reported 10,000,000 viewers paid

around 35 pence each to vote in the 2009 final, revenue that is shared between ITV, production company Freemantle Talkback Thames, and Cowell's SYCOtv. There are sponsorship deals on the main show and its spin-off show *Xtra Factor*, and additional interactive and online content revenues from the show's website, ITV.com/TheXFactor. The website attracted more than 95 million page views and 30 video views during the 2009 series. Downloads of the performances generate revenue that is shared between Freemantle, the production company that makes the show, ITV, the UK commercial TV channel that shows it, and *iTunes*. The website also sells tickets for national tours of sell-out live shows featuring the performers. The site also facilitates crowd sourced insights through forums and blogs, and offers the opportunity to buy the contestants' recording releases or join an online community of karaoke singers (for 99p a song). It carries click-through links to all the main social networking websites (*X Factor* has almost 1,000,000 *Facebook* fans) and clips of interviews and performances. There is a spin-off magazine, and last but not least there are record sales from the most popular contestants, signed to Cowell's *SyCo* label. The show's winner normally stands top of the record sales charts each Christmas.

There may be mythic elements to the appeal of Cowell's TV persona, but there is nothing misty about his marketing triumphs. The all-important bottom line is that Cowell earns serious income from some of the biggest shows in TV history. For example, *American Idol* regularly attracts 30 million viewers for the Fox network, which earned Cowell an annual salary alleged to exceed \$30 million^{iv}. In 2008 Cowell was the highest earner on American TV at around \$75 million according to *Forbes* magazine^v. UK *X Factor* is credited with carrying the ITV network through a serious financial crisis by boosting its advertising income by an estimated £100,000,000 in 2009. A single 30 second spot during the show's final on

December 13th 2009 reached more than 19,000,000^{vi} viewers at a reported cost of around £250,000^{vii}. ITV hadn't seen viewing figures like that since, well, since Cowell's previous vehicle, *Britain's Got Talent* earlier in 2009. On top of the advertising there is sponsorship from broadband supplier *Talk-Talk*. The most powerful man on television owns the rights to *I'm A Celebrity* and *Dancing on Ice* as well as producing *X Factor* through his Syco music company in partnership with TV production outfit Freemantle^{viii}. And this is just the beginning. Other TV formats are being piloted at the time of writing.

Cowell's success has been massively leveraged because what he does translated so effectively from terrestrial TV and hard copy CD sales into a fluid, cash-generating format for a digital media environment. In today's virally enabled, 24/7 marketing democracy, the central tasks are to stimulate demand and facilitate consumer involvement without losing control of the brand (Hackley, 2010). Even the hyperbolic Barnum might have struggled to exaggerate the difficulty of this high-wire balancing act. And while *ITV* provides *X Factor* with a website for managing branded content and facilitating viewer engagement, Cowell has found that internet plebiscites don't always deliver the desired result. His *X Factor* 2009 winning artist Joe McElderry lost out on the UK Christmas pop chart number one spot to *Killing In The Name* as a result of a *Facebook* campaign protesting against Cowell's hegemony over the UK music charts. Cowell initially betrayed his anger at this spontaneous show of public defiance with some ill-judged comments, but in time wiser counsel prevailed and he offered the organisers of the *Facebook* rebellion his compliments and a job with Cowell Inc. As for young Joe, the pint sized warbler was reported in 2011 to be living back at home with his mum.

A more recent rebellion in the 2010 series had supporters making hundreds of calls each just to keep Wagner, a tone deaf Brazilian with the sense of rhythm of a three wheeled shopping trolley, on the show to discredit it as a talent vehicle. Happily for Cowell this failed, but only after the hapless rebels had generated yet more publicity for the show and poured their phone revenues into the Cowell bank account. Incidentally, it is a curiosity of the *X Factor* appeal that, for the rebels, it epitomizes the corporatization of music and entertainment and therefore represents the most conformist and oppressive forces of social structure: capitalism. Anti-social structure? Hardly. Yet, for its aficionados, large numbers of whom fit a surprisingly affluent and well educated demographic (Day, 2010), part of its appeal appears to reside in the anti-corporate democracy of the show. Perhaps this is less of a paradox than it appears, given the variety of ways in which the capitalist culture industry is able to re-appropriate attempts at subversion.

X Factor as marketized liminal ritual

It is no accident that the initial success of *X Factor* is so closely identified with the massive presence and persona of Simon Cowell. We see his TV role as a mythical enchanter, the trickster figure in liminal rituals, who mobilises and orchestrates a mass media experience of existential liminality. The trickster and master of ceremonies was a character who stood outside of social structure and who was invested with mystical qualities and an awesome authority, such as the witch doctor or magic man. It should not go un-noted that Cowell's insight into the importance of the dramatic inter-action of his TV judges has informed in the success of his replacement judge Gary Barlow. Barlow's cod formal stage demeanour, his mock horror at the auditionee's cheek and self delusion, and his withering yet unanswerable judgements could be a comic impersonation of Cowell's definitive shamanic persona. There

are other points of connection, too, between liminal ritual and the *X Factor* process. For example, in liminal rituals there is often a reversal of social status in which the low in status enjoyed the right to verbally abuse the high born, while the powerful had to humble themselves before the weak. In *X Factor*, the judges are exalted in the TV shows, their every appearance choreographed as if they were movie stars at the Oscars. Their red-carpeted walkway to the theatre is lined with adoring fans, and they sit on a raised dias to pass judgement on the liminals. But as the TV shows reach their climax they are placed symbolically below the voting public, who often thwart the judges' plans for victory. The sub-text of the show is also anti-structural in the sense that vast fame and riches are seen to accrue to people who enjoy the good fortune of a modest but popular talent. The structural norms of social progression via institutionalised education and professional accreditation are nowhere to be seen. Anyone can make it big in the realm of anti-structure, if the crowd wills it.

The audience (both in the live theatre and at home), along with the show judges, represent the absolute authority to which contestants are subject in their transformational quest from eccentric nobody to putative superstar. We see the huge success of Cowell's TV talent show genre as one, particularly vivid example of a wider trend toward the marketization not just of an ersatz communitas but of liminal experiences in their many manifestations. Cowell's TV talent shows, as liminal rituals, provide these states of existential liminality and communitas for both audience and participants. Cowell's role as chief judge directs the ritual, orchestrates the process and lights the liminal way as the trickster, the shaman, the jester, the witch doctor, the voodoo priest. He represents, in short, a charismatic outsider who lives beyond the conventional moral order yet performs

the function of legitimising the social structure through his mystical wisdom and sacred authority. He is someone who can 'symbolize the moral values of *communitas* as against the coercive power of supreme political rulers' (Turner, 1969, p.110).

Prominent examples of the mystical outsider who sanctions the moral order from cinematic art include Clint Eastwood's many manifestations of the moral outlaw; from visual art, the cavalcade of avant-garde iconoclasts, such as Manet, Salvadore Dali and Andy Warhol, who challenged the establishment; and from literary art, there are parallels with mythic Enchanter characters such as King Arthur's in-house magician, Merlin, Tolkien's imperishable Gandalf and J.K. Rowling's avuncular Dumbledore. Turner (1969) included political leaders in his pantheon of liminal tricksters- he suggested that, during times of social upheaval or uncertainty, trickster figures can be mistaken for charismatic leaders, leading to potential political turmoil and destruction.

Cowell as quasi-Svengali

The outsider is thus able to both challenge and legitimise the conventional moral order with a force which emanates from his or her semi-mystical persona. In his TV role, Cowell is famed for his forthright judgements not only on the candidates' performing talent or lack of it, but also for his comments on their moral demeanour – he 'really likes' some people for their conventional values of earnestness, hard work or charm, while others are sharply rebuked for their 'bad attitude', for being 'idiotic' or 'crazy', or simply for being 'annoying'. The authority of Cowell's pronouncements does not come from a conventional moral stance – he is utterly unlike the archetypal TV show host who renders the dangerously unconventional entertainers acceptable by embodying the most conservative elements of the audience. Examples include the ingratiating Hughie Green, who invented the prototype

talent show format which Cowell copied on UK TV, or American TV host Johnny Carson who so memorably sanitised Elvis Presley's lewd dancing so he could appear on prime time TV (Guralnick 1995). Cowell himself, in contrast, is well known for his contempt for conventional standards of politeness, reserve or sexual morality. He proudly boasts of his fondness for money, partying, strippers and himself. His sardonic TV performances are watchable for the emotional texture they bring to the format. Cowell's grandiloquent yet authoritative presence has massively expanded the audience for talent shows beyond ambitious kids and housebound grandparents (Nolan 2010). The persona Cowell pioneered melds a plethora of archetypal characters – the enchanter, the outsider- who are traditionally treated as separate mythic entities (Mark and Pearson 2001) but are somehow fused into what many deem a Frankensteinian televisual format (Newkey-Burden 2009).

Cowell's TV persona, then, is a coalescence, a composite, a conflation of primal prototypes. He is not without precedent, though. Indeed, he is often described in terms of his great predecessor, the original 'alien enchanter', Svengali (Pick 2000). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a Svengali is someone who exercises a controlling or mesmeric influence on another, especially in the music industry (Rogan, 1989). As Purcell (1977, p. 75) observes, however, 'chances are that scarcely one in a hundred knows the derivation of the term'. Svengali, in actual fact, was a character in an 1894 novel by George du Maurier (1834-96), the grandfather of Dame Daphne du Maurier. The novel was called *Trilby* and it was more than a mere mega-seller; it was a phenomenon on a par with *Harry Potter*, *Avatar* and *X-Factor* combined.

Despite the striking parallels, there are at least two noteworthy differences between the *Trilby* craze and the *X Factor* fad. In the contemporary version, Svengali does not lurk in the

background, staring maniacally at his malleable musical marionette. Nowadays, Svengali is the star, rolling his eyes in exaggerated exasperation or with pound signs where his pupils should be. The background has thus become the foreground and the foreground – i.e. the actual on-stage performances – serves as a backdrop for Svengali's money-making schemes and insatiable self-aggrandisement. The puppet-master's manipulations are there for all to see, in other words, though these manipulations are themselves manipulated into a rococo version of MacCannell's (1999) 'staged authenticity'. Staged inauthenticity, possibly.

More meaningfully maybe, the contemporary rerun of *Trilby*-mania hasn't ended in disaster. Not yet anyway. Du Maurier was completely destroyed by the ravening beast he created. Simon Cowell not only thrives on the incessant attention but realises that it is central to his shows' continuing success, since column inches equate to showbiz mileage. Du Maurier, moreover, made comparatively little money from the blockbuster he unleashed. Cowell, by contrast, has all his revenue streams perfectly aligned and heading straight for his gargantuan bank account. Svengali, similarly, came a cropper in the original version, as did his euphonious protégé, but Cowell's TV ratings continue to rise inexorably, for the time being at least. Cowell may be a pantomime villain – the 'great vampire squid' of the music business – but villains are the good guys nowadays. Yesterday's alien enchanter, it seems, is today's national treasure.

Shaman Cowell has, then, tapped into an inexhaustible public appetite for liminal ritual – and he markets it as an entertainment spectacle. In his iconic role as TV talent show judge, Cowell magisterially orchestrates the liminal rites of passage of countless hapless neophytes. His well-rehearsed one-liners carry the sacred authority of the jester, faultlessly expressing the collective need for moral judgements, and he serves as a shamanistic

intermediary between the mundane world of dead-end jobs and the sacred space of superstardom. Cowell's shamanism, admittedly, is essentially outsourced, since the music, costumes, drumming, dancing, ecstatic trances and indeed 'the journey' are provided by the contestants and a long line of specialists rather than the choirmaster (see Eliade 1972; Nicholson 1987; Stutley 2003). But he controls, patrols and provides safe passage across the seemingly impassable space between nonentity and celebrity, between penury and plenty, between karaoke and capitalism. Cowell judges and disciplines the participants but he also oversees their welfare in a paternalistic stance (which, coincidentally, also protects his investment).

The Marketization of Existential Liminality

Cowell's role, then, is as a pilot, a priest, a (not so) hidden persuader, a postmodern purveyor par excellence of liminal experiences. Today, contemporary liminal experiences are attracting increasing academic attention. We have noted above several consumer research studies which draw on Turner's notion of *communitas* to illuminate 'extraordinary' consumer experiences. Additional examples can be found in sociological studies of the role of alcohol brand marketing in the UK's night time economy (Hobbs et al, 2000; Hayward and Hobbs, 2007) and in relation to cultural intermediaries who bestride the production and consumption of Australian wine (Smith Maguire 2010). Such consumption experiences may contain momentary and fragmented spaces of anti-structure, but, as Tumbat and Belk (2011) point out, they are by no means oppositional to the market or, necessarily, antithetical to the individualist ethos. Indeed, in this paper, we illustrate through one telling example how existential liminality, rather than *communitas*, can be seen as a superordinate

concept linking different forms of consumption through elements which echo the liminal rituals which have been largely abandoned in contemporary Western societies in favour of liminoid experiences. In our analysis we have referred back to Turner's original work to illustrate how different elements of liminal ritual, symbolically combined, might add anthropological resonance to ordinary consumption experiences, rendering them all the more compelling in ways which elude conventional management analysis.

Tapping into the elemental consumer need for existential liminality can entail simply offering consumers an experience of supposedly communitarian anti-structure, as in the 'extraordinary' consumption experiences related above, but the off-the-scale success of the *X Factor* brand hints at what might be achieved if more detailed attention is paid to the many other symbols of liminal ritual. The so-called experience economy is replete with 'immersion' activities, where audiences participate in 'pop-up' events, such as secret rock concerts, movie premieres in mysterious locations, or impromptu pyjama parties in boutique hotels. The authenticity and unpredictability of such an experience renders them potentially transformational or transgressive, or both. 'People', one immersion experience organiser observes, 'are fed up with overbranded, commercially driven entertainment. They want something personal and emotionally engaging. We get stressed City workers coming to us. Put them in pyjamas and show them something magical and it takes them on a Peter Pan journey for a while' (Richards 2010, p. 23).

Yet, powerful as these experiences of existential liminality may be, the *X Factor* illustrates how it can be translated into a mediated experience by replicating many other elements of the liminal process. Cowell, for example, is a far more than a group leader, but an archetypal shaman or trickster, enforcing strict procedures and giving the whole process an air of ritual

authority. His UK successor, Gary Barlow, has successfully copied the script. The way the finalists are cosseted away from their previous lives and placed under a strict regime of PR niceness accentuates their status as 'marginals'. Previous TV talent shows have engineered the reversal of authority over the studio judges by empowering viewers to vote for the winner, thus engaging them as quasi judges as well as vicarious contestants and viewers. Cowell's marketing genius has them paying a hugely inflated fee for the phone call.

What we see from *X Factor* is that the *communitas* aspect is by no means the defining characteristic of existential liminality. Indeed, as Tumbat and Belk (2011) suggest, its role in the consumption of 'extraordinary' experiences may well have been widely exaggerated. The potential for transformation, on the other hand, has been played down. It is present in the liminal ritual of a graduation ceremony, but can also be seen in its existential form in attendance at a rock concert, on a holiday, or in the consumption and display of a luxury car, bag or other brand. Brands transform experience, and in this sense they have a liminal potential to transform the identity of the individual. Transformation, as an existential possibility, is marketed through liminoid experiences which can be encountered again and again.

Concluding comment

The *X Factor* brand represents a marketing Leviathan of the convergence era. The consumer engagement and the revenue streams are tightly connected through a web of multi-format brand extensions which mock static marketing management notions like consumer orientation, brand loyalty and relationship management. The tie with entertainment may not suit every kind of marketing initiative but the broader implication of *X Factor's* success is that managing media content in ways which leverage consumer engagement around a

compelling brand drives the most successful practice in the digital marketing environment. But managerial explanations of Cowell's success, while appealing, cannot offer a basis for replication, and neither do they explain the cultural resonance of his TV talent show revolution. If we wish to generate deeper insights into this contemporary marketing phenomenon we must seek explanations in Cowell's TV role as an amalgam of ancient archetypes, in his function as trickster or Alien Enchanter (Pick 2000), directing the liminal ritual.

Our analysis of the *X Factor* as an example of marketized existential liminality suggests that Victor Turner's ideas have a potentially wider application than previously thought in illuminating deep consumer needs. The strong echoes of aspects of liminal ritual in *X Factor's* unparalleled success, including the reversal of social status, the ambiguity and marginalisation of the 'passengers', the imposition of strict procedures, the possibility of personal transformation, the audience participation as quasi-judges and, especially, the role Cowell has epitomized as trickster/shaman orchestrating the process, suggests that *communitas* is by no means the only attraction of liminoid experiences. Before Gary Barlow's Cowell accession to Cowell's throne in UK *X Factor*, Cowell himself seemed integral to the appeal of the format. But, while Cowell was the TV apotheosis of the trickster stereotype, Barlow's success in the role shows that it is but one of many elements of existential liminality which bring a dark ritual force to the format. We argue that existential liminality, understood as a many faceted ritual process of which *communitas* is by no means the only salient part, is a theory which extends across 'ordinary' consumption activities to shed light on the many ways in which brand marketing might tap into consumers' needs for ritual, momentary *communitas*, and a sense of the possibility of change and identity

transformation. With *X Factor* as the archetype, future research could deepen understanding of how existential liminality plays out in different marketing arenas.

ⁱⁱ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4482216.stm> accessed October 5th 2010

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<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/media/8071827/Simon-Cowell-secures-deal-to-extend-The-X-Factor-for-three-more-years.html>

^{iv} <http://www.playboy.com/arts-entertainment/features/simon-cowell/simon-cowell-03.html>

^v <http://www.forbes.com/2009/11/09/primetime-cowell-trump-business-entertainment-actors.html>

^{vi} <http://www.unrealitytv.co.uk/x-factor/19-million-people-watched-x-factor-final-2009/>

^{vii} http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/Business/The-X-Factor-ITV-Stands-To-Make-Millions-Of-Pounds-In-Advertising-Revenues-During-Final-Show/Article/200911215451502?lpos=Business_Top_Stories_Header_4&lid=ARTICLE_15451502_The_X_Factor%3A_ITV_Stands_To_Make_Millions_Of_Pounds_In_Advertising_Revenues_During_Final_Show

^{viii} <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/money/article-1228748/CITY-FOCUS-X-Factor-surgings-ITV-sales.html>

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