



The Kobe Bryant effect: Celebrity death, consumer grief and product attachment

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Keywords: consumer grief, product attachment, celebrity death, grief

## **Background**

On January 26, 2020, the world unexpectedly lost a legend, Kobe Bryant, a retired professional basketball player recognized globally by only his given name. Kobe Bryant's impact was felt from the United States, to the Philippines, and from Africa to China (Davis, 2020). As people mourned the loss of a legend, they also began to consume. There was a rush to purchase Kobe Bryant jerseys and sneakers (Pesce, 2020). Every single pair of Kobe Bryant Nike shoes was listed as sold out. Apparel and accessories were not the only memorabilia people consumed. The LA Times newspaper sold out the special edition dedicated to Bryant. The world grieved and consumed any remnants of Kobe Bryant in the wake of his tragic death.

Little is known about underlying consumption motives following sudden death of a celebrity (Radford & Bloch, 2012), which can heavily impact the consumer market if thousands of individuals are looking to purchase memorabilia items associated with the deceased icon. Thus, the purpose of this paper was to develop a conceptual framework to explain rampant consumption urge resulting from a celebrity death. To develop the framework, literature from clinical psychology, psychiatry, sports studies, and consumer behavior was analyzed and synthesized, following the process outlined by MacInnis (2011).

## **Literature Review**

The construct of grief was identified as a critical research concept. Grief is “the characteristic response to the loss of a valued object, be it a loved person, a cherished possession, a job, status, home, country, an ideal, a part of the body, etc.” (Engel, 1960, p. 18). Grief is a normal reaction to the death of a close friend or loved one and typically has five distinct stages (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001). Radford and Bloch (2012) argue that an individual's relationship with a celebrity can be similar to that of a close friend or loved one. Bonanno and Kaltman (2001) found that individuals often experience grief-related disruptions to their lives for a year after the death. For example, after the death of a professional racecar driver, fans experienced a long-term grief and desire for related products (Radford & Bloch, 2012).

In the context of this study, the consumption of memorabilia is expected to take place in the second stage of grief, dysphoria (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001), where emotional responses

occur. In this stage, individuals experiencing the loss can feel “distinct yearning or pinning for the dead person” (Adolfsson & Larsson, 2010, p. 202). Using the Kobe Bryant example, when individuals worldwide yearned for Kobe and went to the Nike website to order in mass, this was the point when grief resulted in the desire for product associated with the celebrity.

Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim (2008) define consumer product attachment as “the strength of the emotional bond a consumer experiences with a durable product” (p. 1). There is an emotional component to the relationship between the grieving individual and the product (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001). Radford and Block (2012) noted a significant relationship between grief and emotional consumption. The emotional response of grief can impact a fan’s desire to consume, and ultimately their attachment to a product. Furthermore, in psychology, grief and more specifically, thoughts attributed to grief stages have been used as a mediator to understand grief outcomes (Kho, et al., 2015). Based on the grief studies in psychiatry, grief impacts all the responses an individual manifests in regard to the death of a loved one, which is likely to include consumption.

Mugge et al. (2005) proposed determinants of the product attachment construct. Three of them were applicable to the context of this study: group affiliation, memories, and pleasure. Grief has been shown to have relationships with memory (Jorgensen- Earp, & Lanzilotti, 1998), identity (Maccallum & Bryant, 2013), pleasure (Shear et al., 2013), and centrality (Bugen, 1977).

Group affiliation exists when a “great deal of emotional significance and value are derived from the group membership” (Dionisio et al., 2008, p. 19). For example, within the sporting world, fans are members of a community and their sports products, such as jerseys or footwear, are part of their group identity (Underwood et al., 2001).

Memories are “the formation of associations between products and people, places or events” (Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008, p. 8). Memories can serve as a reminder as well as be representative of the importance to the individual (Mugge et al, 2005). Sporting or cultural events often represent lived experiences with family and friends. Those lived experiences become significant memories (Underwood et al., 2001) that can be attributed to the experience surrounding a deceased celebrity. For example, purple and gold items could assist an individual in remembering Kobe Bryant as a Laker when they experience the emotional yearning for the deceased (Adolfsson & Larsson, 2010).

Pleasure is hedonic satisfaction through aesthetics or functionality (Mugge et al, 2005). Pleasure relates to the enjoyment or positive emotional response to a product (Mugge et al., 2005). A fan is likely to experience a highly positive emotional response to a celebrity’s jersey or pair of shoes, describing them as treasured or cherished (Radford & Bloch, 2012).

In psychiatry, centrality is “the closeness of the relationship between the mourner and the deceased” (Bugen, 1977, p. 197). In the context of the study, centrality of the deceased celebrity

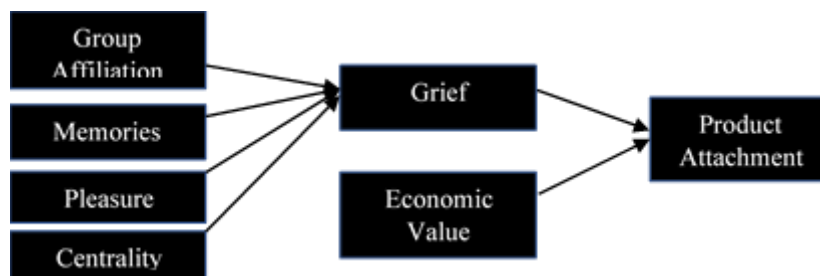
to consumer identity determines the power of grief. In a qualitative exploration, Radford and Bloch (2012) found that the consumption of products related to a celebrity was motivated by how important the celebrity was to the consumer. The stronger the relationship was, the more likely the consumer desired a product related to the celebrity.

Potential product resale value is important to consider (Andon, 2011). Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim (2008) separated economic value from the emotional value. In our study, the emotional component is represented by grief, whereas economic value must be accounted for separately. As the product ages, the potential of future economic value is likely to impact product attachment, such as in the case of collectors of baseball cards (Bloom, 1997).

### Conclusion

The proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1) aims to explain underlying motives for mass consumption of memorabilia associated with celebrity loss. The framework links the loss of a beloved celebrity manifested through public grief and public desire to “consume” the celebrity as a coping strategy by acquiring celebrity-related products. In the framework, group affiliation, memories, pleasure, and centrality as motivators of developing product attachment are mediated by grief.

Figure 1: The emotional determinants of product attachment: The mediating role of grief



Better understanding how grief impacts a devoted fan’s consumption behavior after the death of a celebrity can be useful to manage sudden consumer demand. The framework could help measure the impact of grief and allow for continued sale of celebrity-related products over time. In addition, it might be useful for future research across disciplines to offer support and coping strategies to grieving individuals.

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