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Megan E. Carter  
*Grand Valley State University*

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A Study of Lady Gaga's Brand, Branding Techniques, and Their Application to Other Brands

Megan E. Carter

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## A Study of Lady Gaga's Brand, Branding Techniques, and Their Application to Other Brands

### **Introduction and Research Question**

As far as breakout musicians go, few artists have had quite the zero-awareness to ubiquity time- warp of Lady Gaga. As far as brands go, few marketers of any kind have leveraged social media the way she has to drive sales of their core product – in her case, albums and digital singles. (Hampp, 2010, p. 42)

The ideas presented in this quote, from the *Advertising Age* article “Gaga, Oooh La La: Why the Lady Is the Ultimate Social Climber,” inspired this project. The article seemed to leave two questions unanswered. First, what did she do to raise her awareness so quickly? Second, how exactly does she leverage her social media? In the beginning the goal of this project was to study if Lady Gaga used any special social media techniques that contributed to her rapid rise to fame. During the research process, however, it became apparent that the scope of the project needed to be expanded. There are millions of Internet results, blogs, articles, etc on Lady Gaga, dozens on how she promotes herself, but none seemed to take a close look at her brand and if it contributed to her success. The goal of this project became to fill that gap and take it a step further by explaining how other brands can apply, not just understand, her techniques. The research question now includes three parts:

1. Brand Basics- What is a brand? Can celebrities be considered brands? What are the characteristics of a strong brand?
2. Brand Gaga- What techniques did Lady Gaga use to rise from obscurity to fame so quickly? What are the characteristics of Lady Gaga's brand? How are they similar or different from the characteristics of a strong brand?

3. Brand Gaga Applied- What can other brands learn from Lady Gaga? How can they apply her techniques?

### **Research Methods**

The research was unusual because Lady Gaga is a new public figure. When it was conducted, only one scholarly peer-reviewed article in which Gaga was the main topic could be found. The sources relied on most heavily were books on advertising and branding, biographies of Gaga, newspaper articles, articles from trade publications, interviews, Gaga's website, and her Twitter and Facebook messages. Information from blogs was included only if it could be verified or emphasized that it was opinion.

### **Brand Basics**

Definitions of a brand or branding are as varied as Lady Gaga's outfits. However, they generally include the idea that a brand is the way consumers perceive a product, service, or company and that branding is the various methods used to build the perception of a brand.

Tom Altstiel and Jean Grow (2006) define a brand as "shorthand for all of a product's attributes, good or bad" (p. 23). A brand gives the product personality, and its personality in turn says something about the consumer who buys it (Altstiel & Grow, 2006, p.23). Today consumers base their buying decisions more on "symbolic attributes" than product features (Neumeier, 2003, p. 8). A brand is more than just a physical product.

Luke Sullivan (2008) also says that a brand is more than a product; he defines a brand as "the sum total of all the emotions, thoughts, images, history, possibilities and gossip that exist in the marketplace about a certain company" (p. 20). Sullivan's (2008) principles for branding are

simplicity and finding the “one thing.” It is essential to attach one idea or adjective to a brand and take every opportunity to communicate it (p. 26). Consumers will not take the time to find this one thing so Sullivan recommends that advertisers make it simple for them (p. 27). To illustrate the power of branding ask someone to think of the first adjective that comes to mind for each of these three car brands: Porsche, Jeep, and Volvo. If the consumer thinks fast, tough, and safe respectively then these companies’ branding efforts have had the desired effect (Sullivan, 2008, p. 28).

Thomas C. O’Guinn, Chris T. Allen, and Richard J. Semenik (2009) define terms related to brands and branding. Brand equity is built when consumers have long-term, positive views of a brand (O’Guinn et al., 2009, p.24). They define buzz marketing and viral marketing as branding techniques designed to increase positive peer-to-peer communication about brands through word of mouth and the internet, respectively (O’Guinn et al., 2009, p. 664). Seth Godin (2000) takes a more holistic view and calls any contagious idea an ‘ideavirus;’ he defines viral marketing as a special kind of ideavirus where the product is the medium that transmits the message (p. 13, 55). Another result of branding identified by O’Guinn, Allen, and Semenik is brand communities, which are “groups of consumers who feel a commonality and a shared purpose attached to a consumer good or service” (O’Guinn et al., 2009, p. 188). In his research Jim Aitchison quotes Richard Kirshenbaum and Jonathan Bond, who describe brands as communities made up of the people who use them. They say that strong brands “have a cultish quality, bonding consumers to the brand through a sense of belonging. A perfect example is Harley-Davidson, which has engendered a sense of community beyond its physical products, a virtual blood brotherhood where users are members” (as cited in Aitchison, 2004, p. 95). Strong brands often create a bond with and among their users.

Marty Neumeier (2003) described what a brand is not; it is not a logo, a corporate identity system, or a product. Instead, Neumeier defines a brand as:

a person's gut feeling about a product, service, or company. . . . When enough individuals arrive at the same gut feeling, a company can be said to have a brand. In other words, a brand is not what you say it is. It's what THEY say it is. (2003, p. 2)

He proposes that strong brands are developed by bridging the gap between strategy and creativity. Neumeier also includes aesthetics as one of the most prominent characteristics of a strong brand; he says that people are overwhelmed with more information than they can process, so instead they value how brands makes them feel (Neumeier, 2003). There seems to be an emphasis on how brands relate to people's feelings.

Martin Lindstrom (2005) focuses on building brands by appealing to all five senses. He believes that the next movement in branding will be the Holistic Selling Proposition (HSP). HSP brands take on religious qualities and appeal to all the senses; their brand identity "is expressed in its every message, shape, symbol, ritual, and tradition" (p. 5). He lists ten characteristic of brands that take on religious qualities: "1. A unique sense of belonging 2. A clear vision with a sense of purpose 3. Taking power from your enemies 4. Authenticity 5. Consistency 6. Perfection 7. Sensory appeal 8. Rituals 9. Symbols 10. Mystery" (Lindstrom, 2005, 175-176). Later in the paper these 10 characteristics and other components of a strong brand will be compared to Lady Gaga's brand. Lindstrom also touches on an important aspect of branding, perception. According to Lindstrom (2005), "Building brands requires building perception – nothing more, nothing less" (p. 34). How much of a brand is the tangible product and how much is perception depends on the brand and who one asks, but Lindstrom (2005) states his

opinion clearly; "Perception of a brand is as good as reality" (p. 102).

Based on the research and for the purposes of this paper, a brand is defined as the consumers' perception of a product, service, or corporation. Strong brands start conversations and build communities based on a relationship with and trust of the brand; they encourage the consumer to adopt the desired view of the product, service, or corporation. Brands are, however, not solely limited to products, goods, or services. According to Gerrie Lim (2005), celebrities can also be considered brands. His research looks at "the intriguing relationship between global celebrity culture and the phenomenon of branding. There is a sense of wonderment in the way certain people have become commodified into products" (p. 23). A celebrity like Lady Gaga is a brand; this paper will study how her brand compares to the characteristics of a strong brand.

### **Brand Gaga**

The reality can be very difficult to separate from the perception of Lady Gaga's brand. Like studying any other product, it is necessary to start with the facts as the basis for understanding how she has built her brand. Lady Gaga's real name is Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta. She was born on March 28, 1986 to Joseph and Cynthia Germanotta; she also has a sister named Natali, who is six years younger (Lester, 2010, p. 9). Her family is wealthy and she grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan (Lester, 2010, p. 9) and attended the private Catholic school Convent of the Sacred Heart (Callahan, 2010, p.14). Gaga claims that she taught herself to play the piano by ear at age four (Callahan, 2010, p. 21). Around age 13 she started singing and playing in clubs, accompanied by her mother because she was too young to go there on her own (Lester, 2010, p. 14). During high school she took part in musicals and plays, and her friends remember her as being well-liked and fairly 'normal.' Gaga, however, recalls feeling

like “a freak” in high school (Callahan, 2010, p. 15). Whether she actually was or not does not matter, though; what matters is that her fans perceive her this way and identify with her.

Lady Gaga started college at the prestigious Tisch School of the Arts at New York University at age 17. She was one of only 20 people in the history of the school to gain early admission (Lester, 2010, p. 18). Gaga was known for being a strong student and involved in many extracurricular activities; however, she dropped out after one year because she didn't feel like she or her art fit in there (Lester, 2010, p. 18- 20). In 2006, while working as an intern at a record company, she met and befriended musician Wendy Starland (Callahan, 2010, p. 24). After hearing Gaga play, Starland introduced her to producer Rob Fusari, who, as the story goes, got out his Blackberry to ask management for a contract as soon as he heard her sing (Callahan, 2010, p.24, 33). Fusari was also the one who convinced her to change her musical style to dance pop in order to stand out and break out (Callahan, 2010, p.37- 38). There are many stories about how she got the name Lady Gaga (Callahan, 2010, p. 55), but the most common one is that he meant to text her Radio Gaga, the name of a song they both liked, but his phone auto-corrected it to read Lady Gaga. She loved it and never went back (Lester, 2010, p. 41).

At age 19 Lady Gaga signed with Def Jam Records but was quickly dropped (Lester, 2010, p. 42-43), possibly because management didn't understand her vision and her audience (Callahan, 2010, p. 92). She was heartbroken, but Fusari was able to get her an audition at Interscope Records and she was signed to that label (Callahan, 2010, p. 99-101). At first she did mostly songwriting, until Akon, a singer, producer, and songwriter, heard her work and began to promote her within the label (Callahan, 2010, 102-104). After Gaga wrote the song “Just Dance” the label executives realized her potential for success and offered her the chance to move to Los Angeles and work full-time on her album (Callahan, 2010, p.112).



Lady Gaga's first single, "Just Dance," was released in April 2008 (Herbert, 2010, p. 69). She paid close attention to where it was on the charts and did everything she could to promote it (Callahan, 2010, p. 139). Gaga purposefully developed a relationship with well-known blogger Perez Hilton; she sent him exclusive information and in return he said positive things about her on his blog (Callahan, 2010, p. 133-134). When her music wasn't getting a lot of play on the radio she turned her focus to television appearances (Herbert, 2010, p. 76). One especially astute move was playing live during the Miss Universe Pageant swimsuit competition; she got 10 minutes of free television coverage across the world as well as in all the Internet views that the swimsuit competition would generate (Callahan, 2010, p. 145). She also began to actively cultivate a devoted audience in the gay community by hiring FlyLife, a public relations firm focused on reaching gay consumers, and playing at gay clubs and events (Callahan, 2010, p. 120, 131, 140, 143). Her brand community is a very important part of her brand and her community-building techniques will be discussed later in the paper.

In August 2008 Lady Gaga's album "The Fame" was released to mostly positive reviews, but she was not famous yet. She traveled the country nonstop, playing anywhere she could, doing radio station promotions, and meeting with record label representatives (Callahan, 2010, p. 149-150). She was the opening act for New Kids on the Block and then for The Pussycat Dolls' European tour (Callahan, 2010, p. 150, 162). When she returned to the United States she went out on her own small tour and performed on shows like *The View* and *Jimmy Kimmell Live* (Callahan, p. 163, 165). In December 2008 "Just Dance" received a Grammy nomination (Callahan, 2010, p. 166). According to Maureen Callahan (2010), the tipping point of Gaga's fame was the Music Television Video Music Awards (MTV VMAs) in September 2009 (p. 197). She won the Best New Artist Award and performed her song "Paparazzi." The performance,

which included dripping fake blood and hanging above the stage, was designed to get people talking (Callahan, 2010, p. 197).

Lady Gaga went from being signed with Interscope Records to this pivotal moment in about two years (Patten, 2010, para. 3). Since then she has also performed for the Queen of England (Herbert, 2010, p. 250) and been named one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in the world ("The 2010," 2010). Within 14 months Gaga had six number-one singles (Patton, 2010). Worldwide she has sold over eight million records and a record 22 million digital singles, to name just a few of her accomplishments (Patton, 2010, para. 3). How was she able to reach this level of success in such a short time frame?

It seems that the power of Lady Gaga's brand has enabled her to achieve such success so quickly. Because her brand flows seamlessly from her branding they will be discussed together. The first key element of her brand is the community that she has built. Gaga started with a niche, gay consumers. Tony DiSanto of MTV explained that artists have to "superserve those niche fans and get them to come along with you. Then you use your niche to be your root and blow up from there" (Callahan, 2010, p. 135). If she failed to become famous she still had the gay community, a loyal group with a large disposable income, supporting her (Callahan, 2010, p. 120). Even now that she has become mainstream, she still is devoted to her gay fans (Stein & Michelson, 2010, para. 9). Her message, that it is ok to be different and people should be themselves no matter what that looks like, appeals to gay consumers; however, it is also something that resonates with nearly everyone. *Out.com* said:

Each one sees in Gaga a reflection of him or herself, picking from her array of looks and melodies and messages those that appeal to them. Gay, straight, misfit, mall rat, teen,

tween, or twink, look at Gaga and you'll see yourself. (Stein & Michelson, 2010, para. 14)

Her message speaks powerfully to her niche audience but also to the general public.

Lady Gaga uses the Internet to build her brand community. As of July 2010 she had 10 million Facebook fans and 4.8 million Twitter followers (Charles, 2010, p. 1). She was also the first artist to have her videos viewed one billion times on YouTube ("Lady Gaga is", 2010, para. 1). Gaga's communication is more effective because, even though she is communicating with thousands or even millions of people, she is able to make it seem personal. For example, she gave her fans the nickname Little Monsters, had the phrase tattooed on her arm, and then posted the picture with the caption "Look what i did last night. little monsters forever, on the arm that holds my mic. xx [sic]" (Pemberton, 2010, para. 1). She also calls herself the "MotherMonster", "Mother", or "gagaloo" ("ladygaga," 2010). In an article in *The Indianapolis Star*, fan Evan Wallace talked about how he found Lady Gaga on the social networking site MySpace during a difficult move across the country. He said that "it was like building a new friendship" (Lindquist, 2010, p. H10). Gaga's communication is powerful because she seems to understand people's fears, motivations, and desires and uses this understanding to make her communication more effective and personal.

Studying her "tweets," or messages posted on Twitter, reveal some interesting insights into her communication. Her tweets do not seem stiff, formulated, or look like anything that a PR department might write; whether they are actually written by her or a member of her team is unclear. In the author's analysis they seem to fall into 7 categories: taking a stand, addressing her fans directly, announcing awards or milestones, talking about her album, talking about her

tour, combinations of categories, and an other category. Of her last 100 tweets posted over the past 4 months, 29 fell into the other or random category. For example; “I promised unicorns would survive the bloody monsterball! OtherStuffedPrincesses will be beheaded. X [sic]” (“ladygaga,” 2010). This lack of formality helps her come across as more genuine and relatable. Twenty-seven of the 100 tweets were about current issues like Don’t Ask Don’t Tell; 17 were statements and 10 contained calls to action. Her calls to action encourage Little Monsters to take part in fighting injustice and reinforce the feeling of being part of a community and of something bigger than themselves. In 19 tweets Gaga addressed her fans directly; often thanking her Little Monsters or telling them how they inspire her. This creates a reciprocal feeling that makes fans feel more like they have a personal relationship with her. She also makes sure to thank her fans when she wins awards. Out of the fourteen tweets that were combinations of different categories, half included the combination of addressing her fans directly and thanking them after winning awards. Finally, four of the remaining tweets talked solely about winning awards or reaching milestones, four were about the new album she is working on, and three were from when she was on tour. Based on the fact that 44 of her tweets contained a link to a photo or video, Gaga also seems to connect with fans through multimedia (“ladygaga,” 2010).

Table 1

*Lady Gaga's tweets by subject*

Subject of Tweet	Number of Tweets	
Other	29/100	
Stand	27/100	17/100 statements and 10/100 calls to action
Fans	19/100	
Combinations	14/100	7/14 were Awards/Milestones + Fans
Awards/ Milestones	4/100	
Album	4/100	
Tour	3/100	
		44/100 Tweets contained links to pictures or video

The message that Lady Gaga communicates through Twitter is consistent with the rest of her brand. Lindstrom (2005) posits, “Consistency! Consistency! Consistency! This is the mantra for success. Consistency doesn’t mean that things have to stay the same. On the contrary, it means that you stay true to your core values . . . Sensory consistency is what creates loyalty” (p. 114-115). Gaga tends to not come across as fake, formal, or trying to sell something. Her tweets about her album or tour do not say ‘buy my tickets or album,’ instead they say ‘I can’t wait to sing for you.’ Her ‘random’ tweets communicate her genuineness and consistent inconsistency. Her stands on issues and calls to action make her fans feel like a part of something bigger; her tweets to her fans make the communication seem more personal. The importance of each of these parts of her brand and their expression in other areas will be discussed more fully later in the paper.

Brands become more powerful when people identify themselves with them. In an interview with *Cosmopolitan* Lady Gaga said that “In 20 years, I hope people will say, ‘Lady Gaga changed my life, and her music gave me an identity when I didn’t belong’” (Spines, 2010, p. 34). She already seems to be accomplishing this, as shown in an interview with fan Wendy Bond published in *The Indianapolis Star*. Bond said:

It doesn’t matter how I look or how I dress; I can be myself . . . That’s what she projects through her music. She loves you, no matter what. . . . She believes that no human being is less than another . . . She enforces that, and I totally respect her for it. It affects my life, as well as millions of others. (Lindquist, 2010, p. H11)

Gaga seems to have tapped into three human needs. The first is to have a personal identity, as she said in an interview with *USA Today* “My message as a woman, to my fans, is always: Love

yourself, free yourself, be whoever you want to be” (Freydkin, 2010, para. 7). The second need is to be understood and accepted, and the third is to be a part of something bigger than oneself, such as Gaga’s campaign for gay rights and HIV prevention (Callahan, 2010, p. 7). If her brand is defined as how she is perceived Gaga’s brand says Lady Gaga understands me, accepts me, and makes me a part of something bigger. This combination makes for a powerful brand.

How does outrageousness, for lack of a better word, fit into Lady Gaga’s brand? She has bled and hung herself onstage at the MTV VMAs in 2009 (Callahan, 2010, p. 197), worn little more than her underwear to a baseball game, worn a dress made of meat to the VMAs in 2010 (“Lady Gaga style,” 2010), and the list continues. Based on this author’s research, all these controversies have not diminished her popularity; if anything, she seems to have become more popular. This is the consistently inconsistent part of her brand. People expect that she will do something unusual, and she has created and encouraged this expectation by her behavior. Yet no one knows exactly what she will do next and this maintains interest and creates buzz. *Business Today Online Journal* says, “It is hypothesized that she utilizes fantastic imagery in live performances and outrageous disclosures during appearances to intentionally inject mainstream media as well as YouTube and Twitter with fresh material” (Li, 2009, para. 2). Her actions never really break any laws or hurt anyone; she is never caught unawares in scandalous situations so, instead of the media trying to expose her and use her, she begins to use them.

‘She’s a perv, but Lady Gaga understands viral marketing better than anyone on the pop scene today,’ says magazine industry veteran Simon Dumenco. . . . ‘She is directing every frame of her music and her life, imagining how clips will appear on YouTube and what people will tweet after she appears on the VMA’s.’ (Simillie, 2009, para. 5)

Being consistently inconsistent would not work for every product; however, Gaga has successfully integrated it into her brand, and it helps to reinforce her message that people should be themselves.

She is always the brand, always Lady Gaga. She has said that the only place she is called Stefani is in court (Spines, 2010, p. 34). In an interview with *Rolling Stone* she said “The largest misconception is that Lady Gaga is a persona or a character. I’m not – even my mother calls me Gaga. I am 150,000 percent Lady Gaga every day” (Scaggs, 2009, p. 34). Nicole Scherzinger of the Pussycats Dolls said, “She lives Gaga. I think sometimes she sleeps in fishnets and heels” (Callahan, 2010, p. 165). In an interview with Lesbian News she was asked how she behaved when the spotlight was not on her; she replied “I’m exactly the same” (Esther, date, p. 31). While she may be inconsistent, she is consistently Gaga.

Being mysterious is another part of Lady Gaga’s brand. She limits the amount of information available about her so that people are left wanting to know more. In a concert review for the *Hollywood Reporter* Craig Rosen (2009) wrote, “one of the most refreshing things about GaGa is her mystery. She often hid behind shades, and her mostly incomprehensible, coy and semi-robotic stage patter did little to tell us who’s that Lady” (para. 6). This technique only works, however, if people want to know more, and she creates this desire with her other branding techniques. The key to this mysteriousness is that she can maintain it without seeming cold (Callahan, 2010, p. 17). This is a final touch to her strong brand.

Lady Gaga’s brand fits the definition of a strong brand. Again, strong brands start conversations and build communities based on a relationship with and trust of the brand; they encourage the consumer to adopt the desired view of the product, service, corporation, or

celebrity. Gaga starts conversations by being consistently inconsistent and mysterious and has built a community by being understanding, accepting, genuine, and making her fans part of something bigger. She also has nearly all of the 10 traits that Lindstrom lists as being characteristic of brands that become like religions: they give a sense of belonging and purpose; they defeat enemies; they are authentic, consistent, perfect, and mysterious; they appeal to the senses; and they involve symbols and rituals (p. 175-176). She could improve her sensory appeal, and she is not seen as perfect, but in her case this works to her advantage because it makes her more relatable. Gaga's brand is consistent with the research on strong brands.

Lady Gaga does do some traditional promotion when it fits her needs. She has worked with marketing firms on specific projects such as reaching out to the gay community (Callahan, 2010, p. 120). Information about her branding and marketing is kept closely guarded; however, she seems to be the force behind the majority of the creative direction. Her manager, Troy Carter, says that their working relationship is 95% and 5%. He is in charge of the vision and does 95% of the business work; she does 95% of the creative work. "The other 5% is where we debate about things like, 'Do you really want to bleed to death on stage at the [MTV] VMAs?' She wins even when we have those debates 5% of the time" (Hampp, 2010, p. 42). Steve Berman, President of Sales and Marketing at Universal Music, also gives Gaga credit for her branding; "When you're dealing with someone as good as Gaga, a lot of it is to stay the f\*ck out of the way" (Hampp, 2010, p. 42). Though Gaga does do some traditional promotion, she remains the major force behind her brand.

Lady Gaga's combination of talent, smarts, and drive has enabled her to build her brand into what it is today. First, talent: as with any artist, especially one as big as she is, there will be debates about her level of talent. Again, though, she was one of only 20 students to have ever



been given early admission to Tisch School of the Arts (Lester, 2010, p. 18). Dan Neil (2010) of the *Los Angeles Times* said, “The Lady’s got pipes, for sure” (para. 3). Elton John called her, “the best thing out there at the moment and the only exciting thing out there at the moment” (as cited in Faces, 2010, p. 21). Gaga would not have been able to accomplish everything that she has without talent.

Lady Gaga also works very hard. When asked how she became as successful as she did she responded:

I did this the way you are supposed to. I played every club in New York City and I bombed in every club and then killed it in every club and I found myself as an artist. I learned how to survive as an artist, get real, and how to fail and then figure out who I was as singer and performer. And, I worked hard. (Lady Gaga bio, n.d., para. 12)

Gaga was on tour for 12 months straight, and while she was promoting her new album she slept about four hours a night for six months; as a result she has been hospitalized several times for exhaustion (Callahan, 2010, p. 149, 183, 185). This level of dedication might not be healthy or recommended, but it seems to have been important to her success. Her record label “made her a top priority, due in no small part to her insanely strong work ethic. ‘Her commitment to her performance was really what did it,’ Woodberry [her creative director during the New Kids on the Block tour] says” (Callahan, 2010, p. 151, 155). Gaga’s commitment has been a big part of her success.

Finally, Lady Gaga’s intelligence also contributes to her success. She was known as a good student in high school and during her year at Tisch School of the Arts (Lester, 2010, p. 15, 18-19). Gaga says:

I actually think that my education is what really set me apart, `cos [sic] I'm very smart. I don't know that my schooling was conducive to wild ideas and creativity, but it gave me discipline, drive. They taught me how to think – I really know how to think. (quoted in Lady Gaga Queen of Pop, Herbert, pg. 8)

Gaga is not just book smart; she seems to be able to read society very well. She can sense what will appeal to people, how far to push the boundary, what will make people talk, how to make mass communication personal, what drives people, etc. In *The Wall Street Journal* article “The Lessons of Lady Gaga” John Jurgensen (2010) wrote:

Underneath Gaga's haystack wigs is a case study of what it takes to succeed in the music business today. Gaga, 23 years old, has made shrewd use of new digital platforms, while still leveraging the clout of a major label, an institution deemed obsolete by many proponents of DIY [Do It Yourself] culture. . . . Though she writes her own material, she is as focused on visual theatrics, fashion, and global appeal as she is on the music. (para. 6)

Her smarts and understanding of what motivates people is an essential part of her branding. Gaga's strong brand can be described as accepting, genuine, consistently inconsistent, mysterious, talented, hard working, and smart.

### **Brand Gaga Applied**

How can other brands apply what Lady Gaga is doing? It is one thing to see her success and understand how she got there, but other brands do not want to be on the outside looking in; they want a piece of it. It may be hard to see beyond the outfits and performance art, but what she is doing can be applied to any brand.

**Be Real**

The definition of a strong brand says that they are based on a relationship with consumers. One way to begin to form this relationship is to make the brand more human.

Neumeier (2003) says:

Let the brand live, breathe, make mistakes, be human. . . . Brands can afford to be inconsistent – as long as they don't abandon their defining attributes. . . . I'll venture one step further, and say that brands that don't project depth and humanity tend to create suspicion among consumers. (p. 133-135)

All of the brand communication should not look like it came straight from the public relations department; some messages must be more formal but other places, such as social media, are places for conversations, not for repeating talking points. In a blog post on branding oneself like Lady Gaga, Ryan Rancatore (2010) says that "So much advice out there today tells us to hide our true selves in order to create a "proper" image. I couldn't disagree more" (para. 7). Make sure the brand is genuine so consumers can connect with it.

**Stand Out**

Part of being human is having quirks, being a little crazy, making mistakes, and brands should have these characteristics as well. It does not have to look exactly like Lady Gaga, in fact it probably should not, but companies can do things in any industry to create water cooler buzz. Starting a conversation is another characteristic of a strong brand. Rancatore suggests accomplishing this by writing a blog post on an unusual view one holds on a relevant topic or actively participating on other blogs. In another blog post called "Lessons Learned from Lady Gaga," Dr. Lois Frankel (2010) said that Lady Gaga got her attention by opening her set on *The*

*Today Show* with “Someone to Watch Over Me” by George Gershwin, because it was so unexpected. She suggests doing something similarly unexpected “yet within the realm of acceptability for your corporate culture, that would cause others to pay closer attention to you, your ideas, or your product” (para. 5). Human beings are programmed to notice what is different, so be a little different (Neumeier, 2003, p. 37).

### **Make it Matter**

Another way to strengthen a brand is saying something that the audience cares about. According to *New Media Age*, most people follow companies on social media for what they can get out of it, like coupons or new product information. Many brands give consumers that, but some give them more as well. What if consumers followed a brand because they got something intangible out of it, because they felt accepted or a part of something bigger than themselves? Lady Gaga has been very effective at tapping into basic human needs and make her brand stand for something bigger than itself. Tim Whirledge of Cake, an agency that specializes in branding using social media, public relations, and experiential marketing, said that “the challenge isn’t setting up a Facebook page, a Twitter feed, a Flickr album and so on, it’s doing so with something to say which will contribute to the community” (“Cake Group,” 2010; “Top brands,” 2010, para. 8). Gaga stands for and talks about things that matter to people, and this has helped build and maintain her brand.

Part of the definition of a strong brand is one that creates communities. According to Lindstrom (2005):

Consumers get tired of talking about a product day in and day out, but they will latch onto individual aspects that unite them with other users forming a common bond. The

role of the brand therefore is simply to create the social glue to connect people, finding their common ground and thus, most importantly, generating a strong sense of belonging. (p. 177-178)

Lady Gaga is a master at doing this; one of the reasons why she has succeeded is that she has united a strong following of people who feel unaccepted or like outcasts. Being part of a community is something that matters to people.

### **Back It Up**

Advertising and branding can be very effective but the product must back them up. Lady Gaga has her talent, people-smarts, and hard work to support her brand. Also, there has to be a brand strategy. Lady Gaga's consistent inconsistency only works as well as it does because there is a plan and a rationale behind it. As a creative director quoted by Sullivan says, "Satisfy the strategy and the idea cannot be faulted even though it may appear outrageous" (as cited in Sullivan, 2008, p. 31). The brand must be supported by the product and the strategy in order to be successful.

### **Conclusion**

Lady Gaga has achieved unprecedented success in the music industry in a very short period of time and much of this is due to her brand. Her brand makes people feel accepted, understood and a part of something bigger. She also draws people by being consistently inconsistent, mysterious, genuine, and by creating a sense of community; she works hard, is smart, and understands what motivates people and how to communicate with them over the Internet. Though her performance art style may make it hard to see, many of her branding techniques can be applied to other brands to make them stronger.

## Appendix

### **Limitations of the Study and Areas for Further Study**

This study of Lady Gaga's brand was as thorough as possible but it has its limitations. First, the volume of articles makes it impossible to read everything that is relevant. Also, Gaga is does not reveal a lot of information on her advertising or branding so one is forced to make educated guesses based on the information available. The analysis of her Twitter account was based on the author's reading but a formal analysis could yield more information. There are many other areas of Gaga's brand that could also be studied in more depth. For example, her name and the product placement in her videos are just a few of the other areas for further study. These fell outside of the scope of the current project because the goal was an overview of her brand and its application.

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