An Empirical Study Of Celebrity Philanthropy And Non-Profit Cause Endorsement In Australia

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Empirical Concern: This paper examines celebrity philanthropy and non-profit cause endorsement in the Australian context. The use of celebrities in nonprofit fundraising and advocacy campaigns seemingly offers a constructive means to increase awareness and grow resources. Nonetheless, if poorly executed, it risks devaluing complex social problems, while more broadly challenging the sector’s role as a site of social change. The objective of this paper is to present an empirical study that examines the utility, influence and implications of engaging celebrities for philanthropic and non-profit purposes. It offers an Australian perspective to the growing body of research into the sometimes problematic, yet often uncontested, strategy of celebrity philanthropy and endorsement of non-profit causes.

Location in the Literature: Celebrity endorsement is an increasingly popular strategy employed by nonprofit organizations to engage interest in, add credibility to, and generate funding for their causes (Cooper 2008; Davis 2010; West 2008). It has also been the site of a range of controversies; raising about the sometimes fickle politics of endorsement, the most appropriate use of donor funds, and the degree of influence celebrities can exert on the development of public policy, at both the international and domestic levels (Bishop 2008; Dieter and Kumar 2008; West 2008). Underpinning this is the more fundamental issue, highlighted by Nickel and Eikenberry (2009), of the growing “marketization” and “depolitization” of philanthropy. This is seen as divesting philanthropy of its role as a vehicle of social change, whereby philanthropy becomes an “uncritical celebration of celebrities”, who become the focal point of the campaign at the expense of the cause (Nickel and Eikenberry 2009:981). In spite of these challenges and complexities, the use of celebrities to publicise and fundraise for philanthropic and not for profit causes is fast becoming ubiquitous in Australia, yet remains relatively unexamined from a scholarly perspective in this region.

Methodological Approach: In this paper we offer the initial findings from a series of interviews with key decision makers from non-profit organizations who are engaging (or who seek to engage) celebrities to advance philanthropic and not for profit causes. Through these interviews we explore what these organizations hope to gain from these strategies and to develop an understanding of what motivates and guides non-profit decision-makers and fundraisers to prioritize celebrities in awareness raising, fundraising and advocacy strategies. We document the contractual arrangements and risk management strategies that organizations use to manage these relationships and explore the effectiveness and challenges of these approaches.

Conclusions and International Relevance: This paper offers critical insights into
the broader impact of the growing obsession with celebrity-driven campaigns (Bulbeck 2009), on the contemporary discourse and practice of philanthropy in the Australian context. It explores the perceived value and challenges of this approach from a non-profit sector perspective and adds an Asia-Pacific regional perspective to this issue of contemporary global interest.

References
Bulbeck, C 2009, ‘Young Australians’ political engagements: Rich, famous and humanitarian?’ paper presented to the Australian Sociological Association Conference, digital.library.adelaide.edu.au