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To cite this article: Chris Baumann, Julian Knowles, Andrew R. Timming, David P. Price, Wirawan Dony Dahana & Yun Shen (2025) Necro-branding: Elvis Presley as a necro-celebrity, *Celebrity Studies*, 16:2, 180-207, DOI: [10.1080/19392397.2024.2393804](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2024.2393804)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2024.2393804>



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Published online: 02 Sep 2024.



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## Necro-branding: Elvis Presley as a necro-celebrity

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### ABSTRACT

A myriad of investigations has examined the life and works of Elvis Presley from music, entertainment, and cultural perspectives. There is little doubt about his remarkable longevity and marketability. Yet, surprisingly, there has been little scholarly work attempting to explain the entertainer's impact on a global scale, specifically from a branding perspective. Drawing from the emerging stream of research on necro-marketing, we introduce the novel concept of 'necro-branding' and associated, 'necro-celebrity', into the literature. We develop insights into consumer comments of 13,000 Elvis Presley YouTube videos via sentiment and lexical analyses. Key themes emerging from that investigation provide insights into that new concept of necro-branding. In particular, religion, musical talent, American culture, ceremonial and ritualistic elements, affect capturing, and mystical aura 'the eternal' resulted from our analysis. While these themes relate specifically to Elvis Presley, we argue, they would also be directly applicable to other famous dead celebrities, or as we now coin the term, necro-celebrities. Finally, theory stemming from our analysis presents a framework to explain a fan and other stakeholders (Elvis Presley Enterprises EPE, family, impersonators, festival organisers, Graceland) co-created Elvis brand that may have equal applicability to other necro-celebrities, just with different context.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 April 2024  
Accepted 14 August 2024

### KEYWORDS

Elvis Presley; necro-branding; necro-celebrity; necro-branding theory; longevity of brands; Graceland; YouTube; Sentiment analysis; Thematic analysis

**'Everything starts and ends with Elvis', Bruce Springsteen<sup>1</sup>**

## 1. Introduction

Elvis Presley is one of the most widely recognised names in modern human history. The star is a prime example of an 'achieved' celebrity, i.e. one who attained status through talent, skills, and efforts, in contrast to an 'ascribed' celebrity such as royalty with fame, fortune, and entitlement through birth (Rojek 2001). Elvis was born into poverty, yet became the quintessential signpost of the American dream of success and progression from the bottom to the top of society within one generation. He has been the subject of

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considerable academic work, especially in the fields of cultural studies (Rodman 2013, Kellner 2017, Duffett 2020) and musicology (Fink 1998), and has even been referred to as a 'God' (Frow 1998), considering his extensive global cult following. He is much more than an iconic musician, actor, and fashionista, though; he is an iconic brand and, given that he is no longer alive and there is no new content from the star himself,<sup>2</sup> he now exemplifies what we label 'necro-branding'.

Necro-branding is defined as:

*The process whereby a necro-celebrity is positioned to the public by direct stakeholders (such as the estate) and indirect stakeholders (such as the fanbase) to differentiate the dead star from competitors (dead or alive). Necro-branding is based on the celebrity's talent, cultural positioning, ceremonial and ritualistic elements, and affect elicitations based on love, a mystical aura, and an eternal presence.*

Associated to necro-branding is thus the term necro-celebrity, which we define as:

*Necro-celebrity is a celebrity that is no longer alive.*

This is, of course, opposed to a celebrity still alive, which is the common use of the term. We add to the literature this much needed clarity since, we argue, the marketing and branding mechanisms are quite distinct for a celebrity still alive vis-à-vis dead.

Returning our attention specifically to Elvis, countless attempts have been made in various formats from scholarly to lay comments on the Presley phenomenon since his death in 1977 and have overall established its remarkable longevity and marketability. Indeed, the Presley phenomenon has even been analysed from a marketing perspective, for example in a detailed book-length study titled 'Elvis, Inc.' by O'Neal (1996) which also included branding issues. As for cultural studies, the literature explored the Elvis phenomenon as a lasting impact on US Culture (Rodman 2001) as well as a posthumous career of a living legend (Rodman 2013), and more recently as a comeback phenomenon (Duffett 2020).

We argue that for a super star such as Elvis, the branding of a dead celebrity includes a number of stakeholders, from the commercial side of the estate (Elvis Presley Enterprise, or EPE), to his global fans, to a public interested in his celebrity culture and history, to the media, and even his critics. They contribute to how the brand lives on, to the understanding of Elvis in the current milieu based on a long history since his death, and then a lifespan of 42 years of his biological life. In and of himself, he is a veritable marketing juggernaut (O'Neal 1996).

Our research focuses on Elvis as a necro-brand. We aim to demonstrate how individuals, and especially organisations, can leverage learnings from the Elvis phenomenon of necro-branding to reproduce his positioning success in the marketplace. From a marketing perspective, a number of key research streams apply to the wider context of celebrity studies: first relationship marketing; second brand management, and third necro-marketing. This paper proposes a framework to explain the fan co-created Elvis brand and serves as a new template for the study of necro-branding.

O'Neal (1996) notwithstanding, to date no peer-reviewed scholarly attempt has been carried out to explain the entertainer's impact from a branding perspective, not just a broad marketing lens. The aim of this paper is to build on the extant literature on relationship marketing (Christopher *et al.* 2013), brand management, and specifically to

Elvis's post-mortem necro-marketing (Wojciechowski and Shelton 2014, Moravčíková 2014, Wojciechowski and Babjaková 2015) to illustrate how individuals and organisations can leverage (l)earnings – note it could indeed be learnings and earnings – from the Elvis phenomenon to reproduce his branding success in the marketplace.

It is already widely understood that firms leverage celebrity sponsors to establish personal connections with consumers (Kerrigan *et al.* 2011, Keel and Natarajan 2012, Pradhan *et al.* 2016) and that brands themselves possess certain personality traits that 'speak' to customers (Aaker 1997, Austin *et al.* 2003), but never before has Elvis' consumer appeal been subjected to an empirical analysis aimed at identifying driving factors that can be disseminated as foundational to a wider celebrity branding strategy.

Beyond its value as a source of marketing insight for organisations, the present study offers important lessons for the individual presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman 2002). Personal branding is an emerging field of study that straddles psychology, sociology, and strategic management (Gorbatov *et al.* 2018). It is arguable that Elvis represents the quintessential case study for the successful management of one's personal brand, even beyond death. To this end, the analysis presented here makes an important contribution to the social psychological literature on impression management and its myriad of individual benefits (Leary and Kowalski 1990).

In conclusion, the contribution of our paper is threefold. First, we introduce the new concept of necro-branding, and secondly and associated, coin the term necro-celebrity. Third, we present a framework visualising the necro-branding theory for Elvis with the premise that the framework and theory would be – more or less – directly applicable to other dead celebrities, or now: necro-celebrities.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Elvis Presley: an introduction

From the moment Elvis burst onto the music scene in the mid-1950s to his early death in 1977, he has been one of the most significant cultural and marketing phenomena of the 20th century (Rodman 2001, Guralnick 2012b). Dubbed the 'King of Rock and Roll', Elvis' music was a unique blend of rock, country, gospel, and blues. Throughout his career his songs and performances were characterised by his powerful voice, dynamic stage presence, distinctive style, and his ability to fuse different genres and styles (Schinder and Schwartz 2007, Doll 2009). These qualities collectively created his unique style and image, and when combined with the era of his emergence in the 1950s, gave way to a unique career and legacy that made him one of the most iconic figures in the history of music (Schinder and Schwartz 2007). His sound featured foundations of gospel, which was a significant influence on his singing style, and he recorded several gospel albums throughout his career, including the acclaimed '*How Great Thou Art*' album in 1967 and the '*Peace in The Valley*' album that became the best-selling gospel album of all time (Schinder and Schwartz 2007, Eder 2013), with the former winning him one of three Grammy Awards.

During the 1960s, Presley's music began to reflect the changing times and his career choices. He recorded many movie soundtracks and later began to incorporate more rock/pop influences. Elvis had 54 singles certified by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and was very popular internationally, being ranked second in the UK with 21.6 million

singles sold and spending 1,780 weeks in total on the Australian Singles Chart (Officialcharts.com). Elvis has sold over one billion records and received more gold and platinum discs than any other artist (Doll 2009). Importantly, his enduring popularity is evidenced by the time between hits: Elvis's first US No. 1 was his first single with RCA in 1956 '*Heartbreak Hotel*', and his last was a remake of '*A Little Less Conversation*' in 2002, 27 years after his death in 1977.

After his rise to fame in the mid-1950s, Presley embarked on a successful film career and had many songwriters at his disposal that produced a large catalogue. The total number of songs recorded by Elvis between his first demos at the Sun Studios in 1953 and his final concert on 26 June 1977, is estimated at over 700 songs (Guralnick 2012a, Graceland.com 2019). According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), Presley is ranked third among the best-selling musicians of all time. Based on the total certified albums sold in the US figures (including streaming), Presley ranks just behind The Beatles and Garth Brooks, as seen in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 Elvis Presley: rise and cultural influence

Elvis would eventually become one of the most discussed topics in the history of music (Keogh 2008). He was described as 'The King of Rock and Roll' or more simply 'The King', and while no one person can claim to have invented rock and roll, it is often credited to him (Guralnick 2012b). His music, along with his unique style, clothing, and dance moves, became the standard definition of rock and roll.

His ongoing impact on popular culture can still be seen today with the annual pilgrimage of over 600,000 people (about half the population of Hawaii) to his Graceland home in Memphis, Tennessee, one of the most visited homes in the United States, only behind the White House (Graceland.com 2019). It is considered so iconic that it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991 and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2006.

The blend of traditional white country music with gospel sound and black R&B, together with his own brand of charisma and talent, resulted in prolonged success that has become a popular brand (Graceland.com 2019). His continuing legacy, cultural impact and marketing influence can be seen through the many thousands of Elvis impersonators that are known as Elvis Tribute Artists (ETAs). This industry continues to grow long after his

**Table 1.** List of the top 10 best-selling musicians of all time (RIAA).

| Rank | Musician        | Units Sold  |
|------|-----------------|-------------|
| 1    | The Beatles     | 183 million |
| 2    | Garth Brooks    | 157 million |
| 3    | Elvis Presley   | 147 million |
| 4    | Eagles          | 120 million |
| 5    | Led Zeppelin    | 113 million |
| 6    | Michael Jackson | 89 million  |
| 7    | Billy Joel      | 86 million  |
| 8    | Elton John      | 79 million  |
| 9    | AC/DC           | 79 million  |
| 10   | Pink Floyd      | 75 million  |

Source: Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA)/ Sony, 2023.

death and is now endorsed by Elvis Presley Enterprises with annual competitions that continue to grow his popularity and influence around the world.

### 2.3 *Elvis Presley: marketing and merchandising*

Elvis Presley has developed into one of the most iconic figures in the history of popular music. Beyond his musical legacy, Elvis has become a global brand in his own right (O'Neal 1996, Schinder and Schwartz 2007). The Elvis brand encompasses a wide range of products and services from music and movies to merchandise, experiences, and memorabilia. The brand is managed by Elvis Presley Enterprises (Graceland.com 2019) which is owned by Authentic, a global brand development company. The Presley family owns only 15% of EPE, but maintains the rights to the Graceland estate.

Early in his career, Presley, along with his mentor and manager Colonel Tom Parker, was a pioneer of self-promotion and branding. Through a deal made with merchandiser Henry Saperstein in 1956 to promote the image of Elvis Presley, he was one of the first artists to have his own line of merchandise that included not only records, but a myriad of products such as clothing and accessories that included autographed lipstick shades labelled 'hound-dog orange', and 'tutti-frutti red' and displayed taglines such as 'Always keep me on your lips' (Harrington 1986). A *Billboard Magazine* article on 29 September 1956, predicted Elvis's merchandising would be worth more than \$20 million a year (Friedman 1956), which is the equivalent of \$222 million in today's value.

The rise of mass media and consumerism during the 1950s and 60s offered tremendous growth opportunities for his brand at the time (Guralnick 2012b). His product lines were promoted through radio, television, and film, which helped to spread his popularity and influence around the world and launch new marketing channels (Keogh 2008). Therefore, a substantial proportion of overall revenue was generated from ancillary products and, as would be discovered, an income stream that would grow and outlive the artist. At the time of his death, Elvis was worth an estimated \$5 million dollars (\$40 m in today's terms), but by 2022, it was estimated that Elvis Presley Enterprises has a net worth of between \$400-500 million dollars (LA Times 2023). The use of his image on merchandise and memorabilia contributes to the continuation of his legacy, and as time has proven, his music transcends generations, genres, and socio-economic barriers.

## 3. Framing necro-branding

### 3.1 *Longevity of brands*

From a pure branding perspective, factors contributing to the longevity of brands have long been studied (Aaker 1996, Urde *et al.* 2007, Pecot *et al.* 2022), and the phenomenon of 'super brands' being used as a platform for extensions into many different product categories is well established in the marketing literature (Aaker and Keller 1990, Deng and Messinger 2022). Our study draws on the literature on place, destination, and tourist marketing (King 2002, Baker and Cameron 2008, Pike and Page 2014) since Graceland has become a place of pilgrimage for true Elvis enthusiasts, a tourist attraction for American families and international tourists, and a place of history for the more culturally bent

visitors. Moreover, the staging of the site strengthens the iconic, even quasi-religious, nature of Elvis' image among the visitors (Leaver and Schmidt 2010), providing nostalgia, authenticity, and sensitivity to the nature of their visiting experience.

One of the important strategies underlying brand management is the continued struggle to achieve longevity and the sustainability of the brand, allowing it to survive over the long-term (Aaker 1996). The Elvis brand has continued and even thrived since his death in 1977, which illustrates how a brand's continued relationship with consumers and familiarity with new generations allows for its sustainability and offers further leveraging opportunities (Smith 2011). The longevity of a brand allows continuity, and while social and societal changes occur, in addition to turbulent business environments, consistency through brand longevity adds considerable value to brand equity (Smith *et al.* 2007).

Part of the consistency and enduring Elvis brand should be attributed to EPE, as there appears to be a strong strategic marketing focus on promoting Elvis to younger generations. Granting licences to remakes of his music has had the effect of appealing to younger audiences around the world, as evidenced by Dutch musician Junkie XL, who had worldwide chart success with a remake of a lesser-known Elvis song 'A Little Less Conversation' in 2003. It reached number 1 in Australia, Denmark, and the UK (among others) and introduced Elvis to a new generation of fans. The Disney animated movie *Lilo and Stitch* was released in 2002, and the soundtrack included five Elvis tracks and a character that admired and portrayed Elvis, which underscored an insightful approach to maintaining the longevity of the brand with a new generation of fans.

A form of longevity in branding literature is known as heritage branding, or a brand that holds strong equity in a category and has an enduring history with consumers (Aaker 1996, Pecot *et al.* 2022). It can involve a mixture of factors, including the product itself, visual symbols, values, and its historic and cultural heritage (Hakala *et al.* 2011). If we attempt to compare the death of Elvis Presley with the passing of other iconic music figures such as Michael Jackson, who has been styled as Presley's pop music heir (Doss 1999), the generational perpetuity and ubiquity cannot be found in other celebrities. While some authors argue that Jackson has some similarities such as sightings, impersonators, and many books, the 'Presley-ization' has not occurred on a similar scale (Naylor 2010, p. 251).

Brand heritage research has shown widespread global influence and can impact regions outside of North America. Pecot *et al.* (2023) found that similar positive effects of heritage branding can be found across countries from various regions of the world underscoring its value. These findings suggest an explanation of the global appeal of the Elvis Presley brand and could provide practical implications for practitioners in a cross-cultural context. Interestingly, while the death of Elvis Presley was generally expressed in the US as bereavement and disbelief at the passing of an American icon, internationally it was oftentimes met with a varying degree of irreverence. For example, in Denmark cultural differences in generations were displayed with those that grieved Elvis as a popular 1950s rebel and 1960s pop culture figure, but these opinions were contrasted with those that saw him as representative of crisis and decline (Nygaard 2022).

The brand heritage associated with the Elvis brand long after his death has justly garnered scholarly interest over the years (Marcus 1999, Guralnick 2012a, Rodman 2013). In marketing terms this has been called the 'long tail' of sales and describes how new streams of content have been repackaged and reissued. Products that appeal to a niche



market can rival other more profitable segments if sales continue over a long enough period (Harrison 2016). While Elvis can no longer record new music, technology has enabled new content to be created and distributed. For example, in April of 2007, a duet with Celine Dion was performed with Elvis for his 'If I Can Dream' song and another in September of 2014 with Barbra Streisand singing 'Love Me Tender'. He has also sung with his daughter Lisa Marie posthumously during Elvis Week in 1997 with a duet of 'Don't Cry Daddy'.

The established products for the Elvis brand have a nostalgic and emotional connection with consumers (Janoske McLean and Vibber 2021) and the history and longevity of the brand suggests a type of retrobranding. Retrobrand is a term used to describe how older brands are renewed using nostalgia and appealing to a former era (Brown *et al.* 2003). Retro marketing has become increasingly popular in recent years by linking a brand and the customer at a deeper, emotional level, and is designed to create a positive emotion that is favourable to the brand as well as to remember its message (Gajanova and Zdenka 2020).

Thus, the continued interest in Elvis Presley and his music builds on his iconic status and has resulted in a strong fan base long after his death (Rodman 1996), a phenomenon that we refer to as necro-branding. For example, there are more Elvis fans now than when Elvis was alive, as evidenced by the many Elvis fan clubs around the world, currently a record at 613, which includes over 500,000 people (Guinness Book of World Records). In comparison, other famous musicians have passed that have rivalled Elvis in music sales (for example, The Beatles), and while the likes of John Lennon and George Harrison have been mourned and missed, none have reached the cultural prominence of Elvis Presley (Harrison 2016).

The longevity of a brand requires consistent maintenance, and heritage brands require ongoing development, manipulation, and protection to maintain their endurance (Urde *et al.* 2007). This has certainly been the case with Elvis over several decades with disputes occurring over the use of his name, image, and likeness, and the ensuing management to protect the Elvis brand has resulted in several legal proceedings in his post-mortem career (Wall 2015). In summary, there is ample evidence and motivation for recording rights holders to attempt to create demand for post-mortem products, and therefore the marketing of deceased musicians/celebrities matters.

### 3.2 Necro-branding

The commercial potential and appeal of dead celebrities is commonly referred to as 'necro-marketing' (necro = relating to a corpse or death) or 'delebs' (dead celebrities) and has been examined recently (D'Rozario and Bryant 2013, D'Rozario 2016, Shelton 2016, Penfold-Mounce 2018, Renard and Gretz 2019). According to Wojciechowski and Shelton (2014), necro-marketing is a construct in marketing which uses various communication methods that features situations or objects that are either explicitly or implicitly connected to death in order to elicit an emotional attachment to the product, service, or cause. In simpler terms, necro-marketing represents a field of marketing research that focuses on the marketing of dead people/celebrities.

Using death and tragedy in marketing communications has generally been seen as forbidden (for example, negative consumer reactions to associations with death), but



an interest from an ageing baby-boom generation has seen an increased demand in imagery and experiences from past eras for nostalgic benefits (D'Rozario 2016). Similar celebrity branding has appeared from the same company that owns much of the rights to Elvis: Authentic Brands Group (ABG). ABG manages Marilyn Monroe's image and granted Max Factor the rights to use her image with the sale of their products (License Global 2018).

While this relationship between Monroe and cosmetic brand makes intuitive sense, other campaigns that involved necro-marketing have gone terribly wrong. For example, shoe brand Doc Martens developed a campaign that used Nirvana's deceased lead singer Kurt Cobain in heaven wearing boots, which was very unpopular and was considered poor taste. This underscores the ethical and moral tightrope that surrounds necro-marketing of celebrities, and why the area can be seen as so controversial (Dobscha and Podoshen 2017). Fans, music experts, and other celebrities have debated the ethics surrounding the release of content after the death of musicians or performers (Penfold-Mounce 2018). Boyce and Dove (2022a) extend the controversy over the posthumous necro-marketing debate by discussing rapper and entertainer Anderson.Paak, who in 2021 had a tattoo created on his forearm stating that he does not want any of his music released posthumously.

Still, the branding of talent post-mortem has a long history in the entertainment industries. There is a range of commentary in trade publications and news media over the decades from senior industry executives on the subject. For example, on the question of keeping Elvis relevant to new consumers on the 25th anniversary of Elvis' death, Joe DiMuro, senior vice-president of strategic marketing at Elvis' record label RCA/BMG said: "For us, it's about taking a property and figuring out, how do we make him hip, young, and irreverent – into a brand that's relevant to this younger demographic?" (Halbfinger 2002). The challenge from a branding perspective has been how to exploit and grow the brand while exhibiting respect for their legacy. More broadly, there is a challenge to establish a brand that not only survives the death of the celebrity, but also the death of a given celebrity's original audience.

There remains strong evidence that necro-branding has had ongoing success, as seen with other celebrities such as David Bowie (Lindridge and Eagar 2017, Eagar *et al.* 2022), Michael Jackson, Prince, Johnny Cash, and Princess Diana (Boyce and Dove 2022a, Raj and Suresh 2022). Other more recent posthumous album releases by artists' estates such as Juice WRLD exhibit how recently deceased celebrities can begin a new and profitable phase in their music career (Boyce and Dove 2022a). Scholars such as Lee Cooper (2005) have theorised the specific role and function of the tribute disc during life and after the death of the artist, in which a legacy artist becomes an icon. Further studies have shown the immediate positive effect on music sales upon the death of an artist (Renard and Gretz 2019).

Penfold-Mounce suggests that '[d]eath opens up new avenues through which posthumous careers can thrive, even for people whose celebrity status is not rooted in film, television or music' (2018, p. 29). Additional evidence for these lucrative extended careers can be found in Forbes 'Top Earning Dead Celebrities' list, which even several years ago reached an estimated \$800 million annually. Penfold-Mounce (2020) studied this list from 2001–2018 and found that significant earnings were created posthumously, and interestingly, noted that gender inequalities with earnings continue to remain after death.

Elvis is one of the best examples whose varied merchandising activities has generated ‘more than 5000 Elvis-related products’ (Kroft *et al.* 2009) in an unprecedented range of product categories. Coman (2011) notes that the phenomenon can be partially attributed to the role of the media in depicting Elvis in a hagiographic way that transformed him into an object of cult status. According to Marcus (1999), Presley’s extensive brand appeal is seen well beyond his music. It was his human appeal as a celebrity, the rags to riches beginning, incredible fame and success, and his eventual and obvious decline in appearance and health which made him seem more personal to fans. His ongoing celebrity interest was in part due his early death that led to a social movement, where fans wanted to create their own Elvis story after his death and envisioned their own reinvention just as he had done throughout his career (Marcus 1999).

Therefore, brand management firms that utilise deceased celebrities should be authentic and not disparaging while maintaining respect and the personality of the brand. Dubbed ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Maguire and Matthews 2012), these companies manage the dead celebrity as a necro-brand and facilitate economic benefits as a part of the ‘productive dead’ (Penfold-Mounce 2018). Certainly, there is ample evidence of the successful use of dead celebrities in marketing and careful management can allow them to achieve highly valuable and profitable posthumous careers.

In order to understand the wide range of Elvis products from a necro-branding perspective, it is first useful to categorise them according to a marketing ‘product level’ classification system – core, augmented, and ancillary (Kotler and Keller 2016), all of which generate sales income and royalties. As an early rock-and-roll artist, Elvis’ core product was music recordings and live musical performances. With his rise to fame, ancillary products became a substantial part of overall income as merchandising strategies were developed and executed. These included products based on Elvis’ likeness and musical output, but beyond the musical recordings and performances themselves. Finally augmented products were extensions to Elvis’ presence across other media outlets (such as film and television) and other monetised appearances. It should also be noted that Elvis made numerous appearances for charity, which were not explicitly for self-gain, but could be argued to have contributed to his brand presence. The list of core, ancillary, and augmented products is listed below in Table 2.

As seen in Table 2, the success of Elvis Presley’s musical output has procured a substantial range of augmented and ancillary products. There are varied examples of his far-reaching cultural influence through these products. For example, in 1993 the U.S. Postal Service announced that Elvis’ image would be used for a commemorative postage stamp, and it remains the top selling commemorative postage stamp of all

**Table 2.** A necro-branding perspective on Elvis Presley’s product lines.

| Core                   |                            | Augmented       |                          | Ancillary              |                        |
|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| During life            | Post-mortem                | During life     | Post-mortem              | During life            | Post-mortem            |
| Music recordings (new) | Music recordings (legacy)  | Films (new)     | Films (legacy)           | Merchandising products | Merchandising products |
| Live performances      | Impersonator competitions  | TV specials     | Films (re-dramatization) | Licensing of likeness  | Licensing of likeness  |
|                        | Elvis festivals and events | Appearances     | Music licensing          |                        |                        |
|                        | Graceland                  | Music licensing |                          |                        |                        |

time. More recently US retailer Macy's launched an exclusive line of Elvis Presley LEGEND perfumes in 2022, while in 2023 streaming giant Netflix premiered an animated adult series called 'Agent King' that follows Elvis in an alternate history where he faked his own death. Finally, entertainment company Cinedigm has launched a cable TV channel, called 'The Elvis Presley Channel' with archival content, concerts, and exclusive footage.

As can be seen from his career and post-mortem success, Elvis Presley remains a significant musical and cultural phenomenon. His brand has transcended the music industry, and he remains arguably one of the most significant and recognisable figures globally in the entertainment industry. But his cultural presence was not confined to his life. The Elvis brand has continued, even strengthened, decades after his death.

## 4. Data and methods

### 4.1 Approach

The most effective way to understand Elvis Presley as a necro-brand in the current day is to analyse user commentary on social media platforms, together with listener data from music streaming services. Data from these two sources can help us understand the scale and type of interaction of users with the necro-brand on the dominant platforms for music consumption in the current day.

Social media platforms such as YouTube (established in 2005) contain many thousands of recorded comments about Elvis that lend themselves to techniques such as lexical and sentiment analysis as a means to understand the key concepts contained in the Elvis necro-brand. It is important to distinguish between 'users' on a platform and 'fans', as the latter term assumes a positive engagement with the artist brand. When using YouTube comments, any dataset will contain a wide variety of users, some of whom are fans and others not. In this way user comments from YouTube will capture the full range of users, those who are positive, negative, and ambivalent about a brand. For this reason, it is useful to conduct sentiment analysis on comment data (in addition to thematic coding) to establish how positively users interact with the Elvis necro-brand on the platform.

The uses and value of YouTube comment analysis are well established in the literature (Thelwall *et al.* 2012, Desai *et al.* 2013, Thelwall 2018, Dubovi and Tabak 2020). Techniques such as sentiment analysis and opinion mining have been used to understand brand position, performance, and strategy, both in the profession and in scholarly research (Smith *et al.* 2012, Micu *et al.* 2017). They have been used to gain insights into user attitudes on topics (Ridhwan and Hargreaves 2021), the accuracy of information contained in videos (Briones *et al.* 2012); and the communication value of videos (Lewis *et al.* 2012).

For the purposes of this study, YouTube can provide three critical perspectives on the Elvis necro-brand in recent years, namely the scale of engagement, the key themes apparent in that engagement, and the overall sentiment expressed towards the necro-brand. These three perspectives lead to deeper insights that might be used to propose a theory around the successful operation of necro-brands, or at the very least locate some foundational concepts from which theory might be built. Further perspectives on the scale of user engagement with Elvis in the current day can be obtained from music streaming services.

Figures on the consumption of Elvis music in the current day are also important to understanding the performance and resilience of the necro-brand. As the largest music streaming platform in existence, Spotify provides an excellent site for investigations of scale and perspectives on the comparative size of his listenership on modern streaming platforms.

4.2 Scale of engagement

Spotify offers public data on monthly listeners for each artist in addition to stream counts for each song on the platform. To gain perspectives on the comparative scale of user engagement with Elvis, we took the listener figures for Elvis and compared them to the figures for 17 of the most popular solo male artists from Elvis’ era (Figure 1) who rose to prominence alongside Elvis in the 1950s.

To quantify the scale of user engagement on YouTube at the highest level, we tabulated the key engagement factors (views, likes, and comments) for the top 5 most commented videos on the platform. To put the view count data in context, we converted view counts to average view rates, by taking the date published and the current total number of views and calculating the average number of views per hour since the video was first posted (Table 3). This allows us to see more clearly the average intensity of viewing activity without the confounding factor of the differing lengths of time the videos have been accumulating views on the platform.

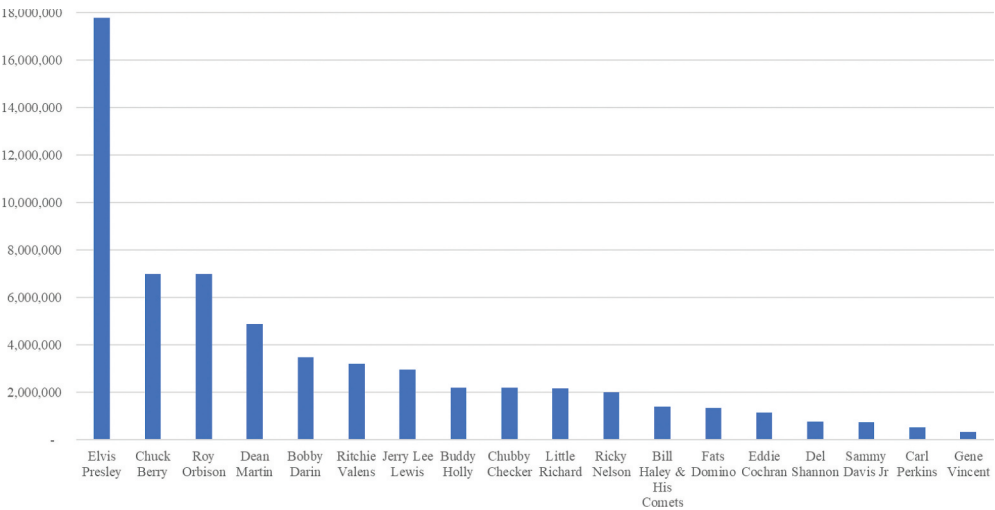


Figure 1. Comparison of monthly spotify listeners with solo male artist contemporaries (June 2023).

4.3 Comment themes

To gather perspectives on the thematic content of user engagement we established a corpus of YouTube comments for thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). We first used the Google search engine for the key phrase ‘Elvis Presley’, which returned results showing more than 8.23 million videos on the platform. Given the size of this data set and

**Table 3.** Top 5 commented videos – user engagement with Elvis Presley.

|   | Channel Name  | Channel Details                               | Channel Location | Video Title  | Video Identifier | Video Length/Date                           | Likes | Comments | Total views | Views per hour |
|---|---------------|---|------------------|--|------------------|---|-------|----------|-------------|----------------|
| 1 | Elvis Presley | Joined 23 Sept 2005. 3.47M subscribers        | United States    | Elvis Presley - Can't Help Falling In Love (Official Audio)        | vGJTaP6a nOU     | Length: 3:00 mins Created: 23 April 2013    | 3.6M  | 126k     | 380M        | 4,338          |
| 2 | y yop         | Joined February 2, 2006                       | Not Available    | Elvis Presley - Jailhouse Rock (Music Video)                       | gj0Rz- uP4Mk     | Length: 2:43 mins Created: 27 December 2007 | 1.9M  | 54k      | 247M        | 1,880          |
| 3 | clareconvy    | 205K subscribers<br>Joined 5 May 2007         | Not Available    | Suspicious Mind – Elvis Presley                                    | SBmAPYk PeYU     | Length: 4:34 Created: 15 August 2007        | 391k  | 25k      | 134M        | 960            |
| 4 | Elvis Presley | Joined 23 Sept 2005. 3.47M subscribers        | United States    | Elvis Presley – My Way (Aloha From Hawaii, Live in Honolulu, 1973) | ixbcvKCl4 Jc     | Length: 3:46 Created: 20 March 2019         | 597k  | 24k      | 91M         | 2,597          |
| 5 | Elvis Presley | Joined 23 September 2005<br>3.45M subscribers | United States    | Elvis Presley - If I Can Dream ('68 Comeback Special)              | u- pP_dCenJ A    | Length: 3:12 mins Created: 16 August 2018   | 419k  | 24k      | 51M         | 1,456          |

the data return quotas of the Google Application Programming Interface (API),<sup>4</sup> we searched within 6-month windows over the timespan 2007–2022 for the most viewed videos in each period. This provided a 15-year window of data across the period of YouTube’s existence from 2005 to the current day, focusing on the most active videos. From this, we generated a sample set of 13,000 YouTube videos that comprised the most viewed videos in each 6-month period. We collected the relevant YouTube video identifiers through the Google API Explorer on the Google Cloud Platform, and used Python to extract comments to form a corpus of data for analysis. The resulting raw dataset contained over one million comments and 38.6 million words in over 25 languages. Duplicate comments were removed.

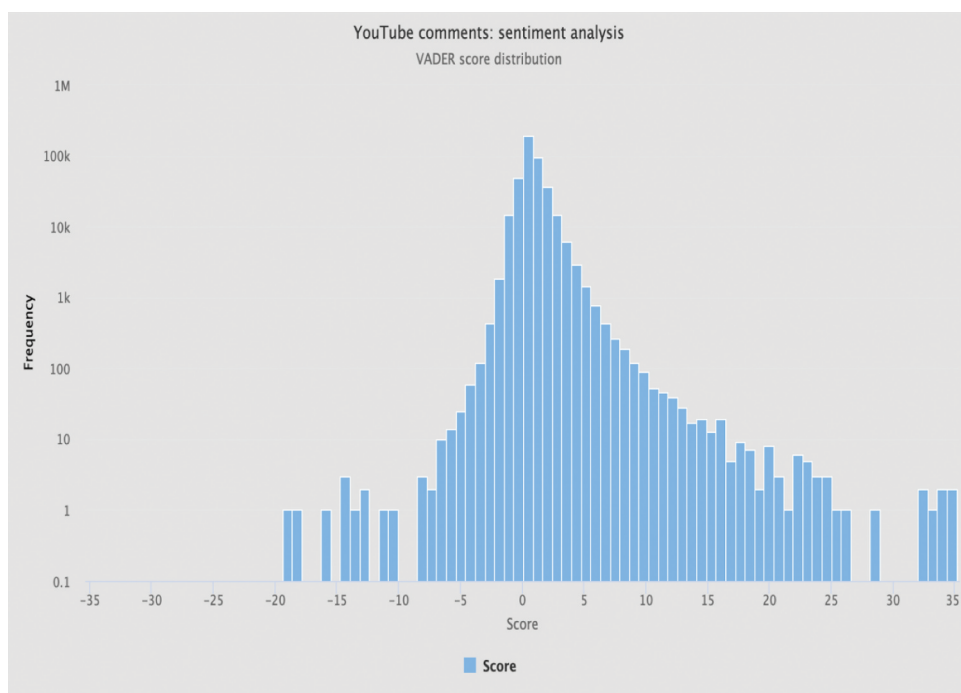
To gain insights into the themes contained in this corpus, a word cloud and word frequency analysis were performed across all 38.6 million words in the data set. Word tag clouds (Oosterman and Cockburn 2010) are a common means of visualising text-based content in large data sets, using a weighted list principle to render words visually whereby font size is proportional to word occurrence. The production of a full corpus level word tag cloud was useful in revealing the nature of the discourse, the recurring themes, and comment affect. To simplify the analysis, the word cloud was performed on English language comments only, which further analysis shows comprise 60% of all comments. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to perform this analysis. Stop words were assigned to eliminate words with no useful meaning and words of three characters or more were counted. The 1,000 most used words were collated into a table and non-English words were eliminated before visualising the table as a word-cloud containing the top 100 words by frequency (Figure 2).

#### 4.4 Comment sentiment

Sentiment analysis was then performed on the YouTube comments set using VADER (Valency Aware Dictionary Reasoning) analysis (Hutto and Gilbert 2014), a module contained in the Natural Language Tool Kit (NLTK) platform. VADER is a lexicon-based scoring system where individual sentence components are analysed for valent words (scoring strings) and a combined score is registered for each comment from the sum of positively and negatively scored strings across the comment. This tool is popular for sentiment analysis on social media content at scale because it has the capacity to recognise the use of emoticons, which are highly prevalent in social media data sets, including in our data set on Elvis. Whilst it is an excellent tool for this application, it is limited to analysis in the English language. Accordingly, the data set used for this stage was limited to all comments in English. Rapidminer was used to perform the analysis using the VADER algorithm. Results are displayed via a histogram with scores above zero trending to positive sentiment, and scores below trending to negative. The scores were divided into 70 bands containing the distribution of scores within each whole number, ranging from –35 to +35. Given the size of the data set, a logarithmic scale was used for the Y-axis (number/frequency of comments in each band) (Figure 3).







**Figure 3.** Sentiment analysis of YouTube English language comments ( $n = 412,025$ ).

of Spotify's user base displays a somewhat expected pattern, given the platform's wide-ranging music catalogue and focus on newer music releases.

At the time of this snapshot, Elvis was recording over 17 million monthly listeners. This is 2½ times the number of his nearest competitor and many more times the number of peers in the same category (solo male contemporary). These figures are evidence of significant necro-brand dominance. Whilst the scale of this differential is startling, further insights can be gained when we consider these figures in context of the Spotify user base demographics and current artists. On the surface, it is tempting to see the number of listeners for Elvis as modest in comparison to major current artists on the platform (The Weeknd by Taylor Swift), but it is important to recognise that the user base of Spotify is primarily younger. Of the 500 million users on the platform, 62% of listeners are aged between 18 and 34. The uptake of streaming platforms by users over the age of 35 is lower. In addition, the platform is slightly skewed towards male listeners, with 58% of all listeners on the platform being male (Sukhanova 2023).

This suggests either that Elvis has captured an extremely large segment of the over-35 listeners, or he is getting significant traction with younger listeners, which suggests the efficacy of necro-branding on younger audiences. It should also be noted that the necro-branding effort associated with Elvis is far more significant and active in current markets than that of his peers. For example, there is a strong range of current Elvis-related promotional assets including *Graceland*, the 2022 Elvis movie, merchandise, active social media channels with video and audio content, and countless documentaries. It is likely that this significant marketing effort maintains strong audiences for Elvis and potentially

attracts new, younger listeners. If we turn our attention to stream count and like data on the five most commented videos on YouTube (Table 3), we see similarly impressive figures.

For the top 5 videos, we have extracted relevant engagement data including likes, total views, and average views per hour over the lifespan of the video. This provides a perspective on the nature and extent of public engagement with the Elvis necro-brand on a video platform launched in 2005, some 28 years after the death of Elvis. The top video 'Can't Help Falling in Love' shows an average of 4,338 views per hour since the video was first published 18 years ago for a song that was recorded six decades ago. As one of Elvis' best known love songs, and as further comment analysis evidence will suggest, it has become embedded into the fabric of everyday life and is frequently used ceremonially in weddings and in the exchange of affection between couples. Thematic analysis shows that love and affective concepts are key in the discourse around Elvis on the YouTube platform.

## 5.2 Thematic analysis

Moving to the content of the comments, the following figure shows a word cloud of comments from the dataset in English. It displays the top 100 most frequently occurring words, with font size proportional to word frequency.

This word cloud is a very clear high-level visualisation of comment content that shows intense levels of affect and strong religious themes. Further, this word frequency analysis serves as a useful dataset from which one might extract higher level themes. The significance of this clustering process is that it gives us insights into the primary thematic pillars and concepts contained in the Elvis necro-brand. It is clear that the combination of intense affect and religious themes could lead to the establishment of a necro-brand that positions Elvis as a deity that transcends time and humanity.

The following table shows the clustering of keywords from the word frequency analysis shown in Figure 2. Using an inductive approach to thematic coding (Braun and Clarke 2006), machine counted word frequency provides a subset of high-frequency keywords concepts for further distillation. Keywords are subsequently human coded into a higher-level theme (dimension), for which a description is offered which elaborates on the core qualities of that dimension. Table 4 should be read from right to left, with keywords suggesting broader descriptive concepts that can be further reduced to high-level necro-brand dimensions. The objective here is to identify a top level set of themes and concepts that are core to the Elvis necro-brand.

A significant number of keywords with high frequency relate to religious themes (King, God, Jesus, bless, believe, gospel). These arise from various proclamations of Elvis as a God-like figure, his revered status as a deity, and from his association with gospel music. This forms our first dimension. A second dimension relates to his musical talent (wonderful, talent, awesome, amazing, great, greatest, favourite, best, better, rock, new, original, sound, different). Looking at the words in the context of comments, they not only express wonder at his abilities, but how his music was seen as pioneering, particularly in the early years. A third dimension can be formed around American Culture, referenced in the

**Table 4.** Thematic clustering of YouTube comments.

| Dimension                          | Description   | Keywords   |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Religion                           | Spiritual meaning, omnipotence, faith, importance in fans lives   | King, God, Jesus, bless, believe, gospel   |
| Musical Talent                     | The obvious differentiation of his musical abilities, unique style and stage presence, ability to integrate musical genres, personal charisma   | Wonderful, talent, awesome, amazing, concert, beautiful, great, greatest, performance, songs, show, favorite, best, better, rock, new, original, sound, different, voice, movie, fan, special, first |
| American Culture                   | Time of his arrival on the music scene, racial segregation and the blending of black, gospel and country music. Breaking down societal and generational barriers  | Black, white, Beatles, era   |
| Ceremonial & Ritualistic Elements  | Appeal of music at important life events e.g. weddings, funerals, Christmas, etc. Underscores the importance of his influence to fans.  | Died, Christmas, show  |
| Affect, Capturing (love, Feelings) | Emotional connection with performer and the meaning of that for consumers for healing, hope, happiness and nostalgia.   | Love, loved, sad, beautiful, miss, sorry, feel, kind, bad, loved, hope, heart, help, wanted, wish, true, thank   |
| Mystical aura/ Eternal presence    | Longevity of the brand, crossing of generations, boundaries and geographic locations, wide appeal. Graceland as a tourist attraction, a place of historic importance, and a place of worship for hardcore fans. | Forever, special, time, old, years, always, anyone, everyone, remember, still, never, alive, end, today, years   |
| Family/ Personal Qualities         | Distinctive individual nature and character of Elvis that establishes a dynasty-style heritage brand. Positioning as America's Royal Family.  | Priscilla, Lisa, Dad, friend, family   |

context of race (black, white) and Elvis' force as an agent of change in cultural values and in the context of the traditional competition between the UK and USA in the battle for cultural dominance (Beatles era).

Many comments refer to ceremonial and ritualistic uses of Elvis' music, particularly in the context of funerals, weddings, and formal events (Christmas) and this can be seen as a fourth dimension. Related to this are numerous keywords that express strong emotional affect (love, loved, sad, beautiful, miss, sorry, feel, kind, bad, loved, hope, heart, help, wanted, wish), which is our fifth dimension. While music commonly has strong affective dimensions, the prevalence of these keywords and themes particularly strong in this corpus of evidence. The sixth dimension relates to Elvis' mystical aura and eternal qualities that transcend time and space (forever, special, time, old, years, always, anyone, everyone, remember, still, never, alive, end, today, years). Many of these comments convey a sense of Elvis as a figure who is not bound by mortal qualities. It is possible this is driven by the social imaginary of what might have become of Elvis, had he survived. The imagined, eternal Elvis in many ways can be seen to be more attractive to fans than the inevitable reality of an ageing Elvis. The final dimension represents references to family, both Elvis' family and the family members of users. The comments show a very high prevalence of references to individuals in the context of their close personal relationships with others and establish Elvis' family as a dynasty-style heritage brand.

Looking at the dimensions of the Elvis necro-brand at summative level, we see powerful affective relationships, together with a view of Elvis as a mystical figure or religious deity who is knitted into the fabric of everyday family life. These concepts assist the resilience of the Elvis necro-brand by allowing it to escape the period of time in which Elvis originated, situating Elvis as a spiritual presence who transcends time and space.

### 5.3 Sentiment analysis

The last dimension for analysis is sentiment. The comments dataset contains comments that cannot be assumed to be from fans, but instead from YouTube users who may express comments that range from positive, through neutral, to negative. The following histogram presents the results of the VADER sentiment analysis scoring on the full dataset of English language comments. The X axis shows comment frequency using a logarithmic scale. The Y axis is segmented into 70 columns, representing comment frequency within whole number divisions of the scoring scale from -35 to +35.

Under a VADER analysis, component scores are first derived at word level (sad, loss, grief) before a combined comment score is generated from an aggregate of component (word) scores. We can observe that the aggregate scores overwhelmingly trend towards the positive.

When one looks more closely into the negatively scored comments, it is apparent that the algorithm is picking up on text strings concerning the death of loved ones, feelings of loss associated with family, or the absence of Elvis. Looking further, it is clear from this subset of negatively scored comments that many of the original Elvis fans from the 1950s to 60s are now dying and their children and grandchildren are commenting on the platform in relation to the use of Elvis' music in funeral services or invoking Elvis in recollections of deceased family members. The prevalence of references to Elvis around loss or grief makes the predominantly positive sentiment distribution more significant and explains some distributions into the negative score zone.

Public sentiment towards dead celebrities has been growing in acceptance mainly due to more organised business initiatives, such as the efforts of families, estates or business enterprises that see the potential revenue streams of royalties and licencing (D'Rozario and Yang 2019, 2020). Thus, for celebrities (or other high-profile individuals), a new level of productivity and value emerges from their unfortunate demise (Penfold-Mounce and Smith 2020).

The increased value that can occur after the death of a celebrity is in large part due to the existing and potentially new consumer fan base that facilitates that value. In the case of a deceased celebrity, what now occurs is a one-way transaction, or a one-sided relationship dubbed 'parasocial interaction' (Horton and Richard Wohl 1956). Fans still wish to have some level of interaction and will attempt to find ways of satisfying their needs and wants through some form of contact and continue the relationship (Aw and Labrecque 2020). Gil-Egui *et al.* (2017) studied Facebook memorial pages and compared findings with previous studies, they showed that these online outlets allowed fans to illicit some form of 'contact' with dead celebrities to continue their relationship. This will eventually aid in the continuation or growth of fandom, and in turn the celebrities fame.

Similarly, Bingaman (2022) in a study of fans of NBA basketball player Kobe Bryant, found that once the emotional shock of losing the celebrity had waned, other stronger emotional responses, such as love, actually increased. Riddell (2024) investigated the experience of fans after the deaths of Johnny Cash and John Lennon, suggesting that fans acted 'religiously' in their response. This was due to the perceived relationship they had created with the celebrity, and they see and define themselves as one with them.

The continued commercial success of sex symbol and movie actress Marilyn Monroe in 1962 proves she remains an iconic brand (Rollyson 2005). Her brand has shown strong

durability in terms of earnings and is now licenced to the same management group that owns the bulk of the Elvis brand, Authentic Brands Group (ABG). Monroe often made the top 10 list of earners in the Dead Celebrities List from 2001 to 2008 (Penfold-Mounce and Smith 2020).

These examples suggest that positive public opinion and sentiment for dead celebrities can increase after death. Findings in our research suggest similar themes. For example, strong emotional dimensions are evident with fans, such as affect/love and the desire for an ongoing relationship or (eternal) presence of Elvis Presley. Religiosity or an almost spiritual feeling for fans is particularly strong and of course, an immense appreciation of his talent.

## 6. Necro-branding theory development

The analysis of these data around Elvis provides a clear view into the principal dynamics of his continuing popularity amongst the public. From systematic content analysis, the data show clear patterns and themes that can be used to inform a proposed theoretical framework which may explain the nature of personal connections to the Elvis necro-brand and the strategies used by the various entities to posthumously market his intellectual properties. The content analysis of user comments shows six key themes which demonstrate the broad nature of our discussion about Elvis. Each of these dimensions show distinct aspects of Elvis' legacy, but combine to form his iconic status and his identity as an integrated necro-brand asset. An understanding of people's connections to Elvis is essential to the formulation and execution of effective marketing strategy and fan community management.

We have taken the results of the above analyses and propose that they may serve as a useful departure for a possible conceptual framework that describes the operation of the Elvis necro-brand over time. In this model, we can take these dimensional themes and position them as 'antecedents'. Figure 4 presents the proposed framework to explain the user co-created Elvis necro-brand with fandom, impersonation, merchandise, and events as sub-components. The determining factors emerging from the analysis of the YouTube comments have been clustered into six variables: religion, musical talent, American culture, ceremonial and ritualistic elements, affect capturing, and mystical aura/the eternal.

Our moderators attempt to include variables – or context – that may affect the relationship with the Elvis Presley brand. These include the Time Era, as Elvis had a long career that evolved over decades and experienced highs and lows depending on the time period. Similarly, we find generational differences, particularly in the 1950s when Elvis represented a rebellious representation to the status quo. He appealed to younger generations and played a role in the shifting cultural attitudes from the 1950s, to the 1960s, and finally through the 1970s. Geographical location may also have an influence as those in the United States faced different cultural realities from those in other countries, such as racial segregation and tension or censorship. Finally, Media, Music, Movies, Television and YouTube (or online dissemination of his music) represent how the Elvis brand was distributed to consumers, suggesting his broad exposure to the general public and worldwide consumption of his music, movies, and television appearances can influence the Elvis brand.

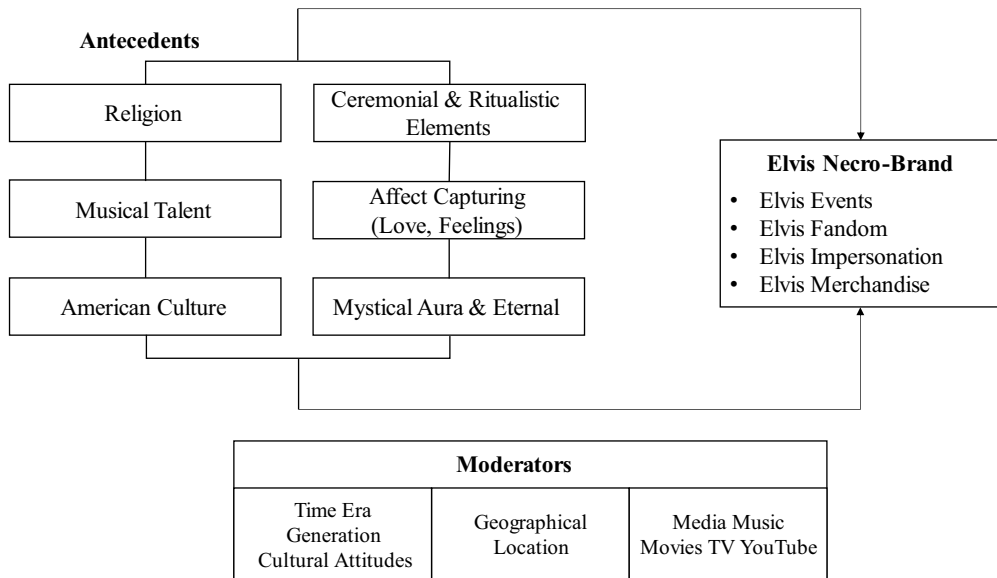


Figure 4. Framework visualising necro-branding theory for Elvis.

While the antecedents in this model have been derived from empirical analysis of the datasets that inform this research, similarities can still be found in studies from researchers in other disciplines. For example, Wall (2015) attempts to conceptualise the posthumous intellectual properties and saleable assets of the estate of Elvis Presley from a legal perspective.

## 7. Discussion and conclusions

The emerging concept of necro-branding, whereby an individual's 'brand' becomes more valuable in death than in life, holds serious promise, not only from a theoretical point of view, but also from a practical perspective. Theoretically speaking, our study has important implications for relationship marketing (Christopher *et al.* 2013) and branding more widely (Clifton 2009). Although Elvis was an individual, the success he has demonstrated in necro-brand development could be replicated by organisations seeking to mimic that success for other deceased celebrities. Organizational brands cannot 'die' literally, but they can 'die' metaphorically, for example, when they experience an existential crisis or are merged or acquired. In such cases, they must re-build themselves and the Elvis narrative presented here can be edifying. Our results suggest an almost mythological approach to re-birth or resurrection, which deifies the brand, thereby rendering it immortal. Practically speaking, our study also has important implications for the management of self-image or impressions (Goffman 2002). The results are important not just to celebrities, but also non-celebrities as well. Specifically, the presentation of self in everyday life is predicated on a successful performance that defines the situation. In the case of Elvis, that performance, if sufficiently convincing in life, can continue after death. From this perspective, the offspring of celebrities have a vested interest in understanding what makes necro-branding successful and our paper enables a systemisation of that process. Previously Elvis has been used as case to identify the hallmarks of a celebrity: *'Elvis Presley's construction of an iconic persona through ... a recognizable voice*

and singing style, the display of the body in live performance, the narration of biography and the display of personality in interviews, as well as his appearances in numerous films'. (Hansen 2019, p. 502). We extend the understanding of celebrity hallmarks, again in the case of Elvis, employing a user centred methodological approach to explain the Elvis brand from a user co-created necro-marketing perspective. We chose to examine his brand from the perspective of the consumer through thousands of YouTube videos and consumer comments with insights formed via sentiment and lexical analysis. The resulting word cloud allowed us to identify seven distinct themes and concept clusters (dimensions) that were used to propose a framework to explain the Elvis necro-brand.

These are:

- (1) Religion: Spiritual meaning, omnipotence, faith, importance in fans lives.
- (2) Musical Talent: Differentiation of his musical abilities, unique style and stage presence, ability to integrate musical genres, personal charisma.
- (3) American Culture: Time of his arrival on the music scene, racial segregation and the blending of black, gospel and country music. Breaking down societal and generational barriers.
- (4) Ceremonial & Ritualistic Elements: Appeal of music at important life events e.g. weddings, funerals, Christmas, etc. Underscores the importance of his influence to fans.
- (5) Affect (love, feelings): The emotional connection with the performer, the meaning of that for consumers, such as healing, hope, happiness and nostalgia. Elvis as a vehicle to communicate emotion and facilitate human relations.
- (6) Mystical Aura/the Eternal Presence: Defined as longevity of the brand, crossing of generations, boundaries and geographic locations, wide appeal.

Based on these categories emerging in the case of Elvis Presley, we have introduced the concept of necro-branding and define it as:

*The process whereby a necro-celebrity is positioned to the public by direct stakeholders (such as the estate) and indirect stakeholders (such as the fanbase) to differentiate the dead star from competitors (dead or alive). Necro-branding is based on the celebrity's talent, cultural positioning, ceremonial and ritualistic elements, and affect elicitation based on love, a mystical aura, and an eternal presence.*

There was an additional thematic cluster that should be noted and will require further analysis. This cluster refers to the personal qualities of Elvis himself, such as his immediate family, his distinctive individual nature and character that has established a dynasty-style heritage brand. These six antecedents have been derived from our data and most suggest a personal connection that consumers have with Elvis, and these factors contribute to the strong emotions people have for the brand. Meyers has established that the openly constructed nature of celebrity personae evident, created and kept alive in public places such as YouTube comments analysed in our study 'allows the audience to derive pleasure from the ability to construct and reconstruct the star image from a variety of texts in complex and often contradictory ways' (Meyers 2009, p. 894).

Whilst the primary scholarly contribution of the present study is to the literatures on relationship marketing broadly (Christopher *et al.* 2013), and to personal branding more



specifically (e.g. Khedher 2014), our research also has important implications for the wider study of celebrities, a field of research that crosses disciplinary boundaries within the humanities and social sciences. The results presented here speak directly to the phenomenon of the posthumous consumption of stardom and fame, topics that are well represented in *Celebrity Studies* (e.g. Boyce and Dove 2022b). From this point of view, there are very likely sociological implications of our research that have not been drawn out because they are not central to our focus. Having said that, future research should expand on the normative value of the Elvis Presley roadmap to fame discussed here in relation to celebrities alive today and wishing for 'life after death'.

The study of celebrities should include a thorough analysis of business and industry as the context is inseparable from the celebrity themselves (Turner 2010). The case for this has never been stronger than with Elvis Presley. Our intention was to introduce our new framework to explain the user co-created Elvis necro-brand, knowing that the current study has limitations. We would like to be transparent that the data provided by Spotify and YouTube did not allow us for certain key aspects of marketing analysis, including questions of differences between user segments (according to age, gender, social class, fans/non-fans, etc.). To overcome this problem, we introduced sentiment analysis of user comments to understand user sentiment towards the necro-brand on the platform. This could be further tested in future research which might propose workable methods to separate fans from general platform users. The limitations of this study could also be overcome by involving other types of material in later analyses such as other music platforms (Amazon Music, Apple Music, YouTube Music) and entertainment media (Netflix, Walt Disney Company, Warner Media LLC, NBCUniversal Media).

The proposed new framework has the potential to develop theory that will ultimately contribute to the literature on brand management (longevity of brands), necro-marketing, and heritage marketing, where we have now added necro-branding. In the future, a qualitative lens should be added to further establish validity to our findings with in-depth interviews being conducted with music industry practitioners and fans alike. Future research could also explore the application of our new framework and check for consistency to other brand co-creation theoretical frameworks and the branding literature in general on iconic brands. Lastly, follow-up research should explore the direction of causality, in other words, to what extent people's reaction to Elvis' work are influenced by the brand, to what degree the converse effect, and to what degree there is a combination of such effects (the most likely scenario). The ultimate proof of success for a necro-brand will be the survival of the death of the audience for the subject.

In conclusion, following Meyers (2010), p. 320) who described a shift from 'star' to 'celebrity' marked by progressing from 'fame grounded in talent' to 'fame as a product of media industry', we argue Elvis is the prime example to progress eventually to a 'necro-celebrity' – a new term we would herewith like to introduce into the literature – as a 'publicity machine' with global reach, admired by fan communities, and with that necro-brand, generates revenues through merchandise far beyond death.

## Dedication

The first author would like to dedicate this article to his Father, Godi Baumann, who took him to Graceland, and Elvis.

## Notes

1. Bruce Springsteen Praises Elvis in Keynote Address (2012): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvxSkcr0MIA>.
2. Technically, this is true, but also for debate. The use of his voice in recordings with other artists (JXL 'A Little Less Conversation 2002') is classified as 'new music', so in some ways Elvis is still producing new performances and material. A necro-celebrity like Elvis can be 'reincarnated' through Artificial Intelligence, or AI. It is a philosophical question whether a dead person can actually still contribute *per se*, or whether such a constellation is simply 'old wine in a new bottle'. At the end of the day, it is also a legal/ethical matter beyond the scope of this paper (Intellectual Property law, copyright, rights to sound and image, etc.).
3. The RIAA defines one sale as 150 on demand streams per track or 1500 on-demand streams per album (RIAA n.d.)
4. Projects that use the YouTube Data API have a default quota allocation of 10,000 units per day. Using the *search.list* method in Google YouTube Data API, it returns a collection of search results that match the query parameters specified in the API request. A call to this method has a quota cost of 100 units and returns 50 video IDs. Hence, we are able to download data for a maximum of 5,000 videos per day.  
See details here: [https://developers.google.com/youtube/v3/determine\\_quota\\_cost](https://developers.google.com/youtube/v3/determine_quota_cost).

## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to warmly acknowledge the kind guidance by Dr Erin A Meyers at Oakland University in her role as Editor of *Celebrity Studies*. Two reviewers have provided constructive feedback on the evolving piece on Elvis Presley and our introduction of necro-branding, and we are fortunate to have had their wisdom shared so freely.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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