

The Death of Big Tex: A Parasocial Interaction Case Study

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Abstract

October 19, 2012 was the day Big Tex, the 52-foot Texas State Fair icon, died (Aasen, 2012). The news of the statue's burning sent a shock wave across the state of Texas, leading to reactions of phenomenological proportions (Graves, 2012; Villafranca, 2012). The purpose of this study was to analyze these reactions through qualitative interviews with those affected by this tragedy in order to garner a more robust understanding of why people reacted in such far-reaching ways. This study revealed a strong connection to Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial interaction, confirming assumptions that fairgoers maintained a one-sided relationship with Big Tex for many years. Additional post-hoc findings are also discussed, including relationship to Bormann's (1982) symbolic convergence theory, Tajfel's (1982) social identity theory, and the scarcity principle (Cialdini, 2009; Hobofoll, 2001).

Keywords: Big Tex, parasocial interaction, symbolic convergence, social identity, scarcity principle

1.0 Introduction

October 19, 2012, marked the death of Big Tex, the legendary 52-foot cowboy statue at the Texas State Fair in Dallas. For six decades, the talking and waving statue welcomed millions to the largest state fair in the nation (Campoy, 2012; Aasen, 2012). Late on the morning of October 19th, onlookers began to notice smoke and small flames coming from the collar of Big Tex and within 15 minutes he had burned to a mere metal skeletal structure (Aasen). A simple Youtube search illuminates not only the burning of Big Tex, but the funeral procession-like process of removing his remains from the fairgrounds. People lined fair streets with video cameras as workers carted off Big Tex' tarped remains. When one of the workers moved to adjust what looked like a body bag, one upset onlooker exclaimed in a frantic voice "No, leave the canvas on. I don't want to see it" (jumpergirl311, 2012 Youtube video).

Over the course of his life, Big Tex has been the backdrop for many family fair photos and even helped lost patrons find each other they would say something like, "Meet me at Big Tex" (Griffin, 2012; Blow, 2012). His death came as a shock to many people, but none were hit so hard with this news than those in Big Tex' home state of Texas. Without missing a beat, fair officials, including Sue Gooding, Texas State Fair President, and Bill Bragg, the man whose voice projected from the mouth of Big Tex, were saying Big Tex would return and be better than ever. Fair officials have held true to the return of Big Tex as they worked to prepare him for the upcoming 2013 fair season (Kalthoff, 2013).

Taking into account the \$155,000 insurance check and approximately \$45,000 from donors, fair officials will still have to fork out an additional \$800,000 to recreate Big Tex. Big Tex will grow three feet from his previous height of 52 feet to 55 feet and will gain approximately 18,000 pounds (Aasen & Wilonsky, 2013). This increase in size is no surprise for an icon that represents a state with the largest capitol building in the nation (State Preservation Board, 2013).

1.2 Texans React

It could be that everything is literally bigger in Texas (Matson, 2006), including the way Texans emotionally react to the burning of a statue. Within a week of the burning, people were already creating online posts about conspiracy theories to take down Big Tex and a Facebook page was constructed to commemorate the statue (Graves, 2012; Texas State Fair Officials, 2013). The Facebook page is set up as a first-person conversation between Big Tex and his followers, as if he were actually communicating with them via the Facebook page.

Shortly after Big Tex burned, John E. Beckwith, Sr. hosted a memorial service for Big Tex at Beckwith Golden Gate Funeral Home in Dallas. Set to a fair-like scene, people enjoyed popcorn and cotton candy while others danced up and down the isles wearing western garb. According to Villafranca (2012), most of the attendants were enjoying the experience, but there were a few who were sincerely sad about losing Big Tex.

Upon hearing the news of Big Tex' death, twitter feeds began to generate around the Texas icon. One such tweet came from Ali A. Akbar, stating, "Think I just literally shed a tear. Pray for Texas. . ." (Stone, 2012). In addition to the Big Tex Facebook page, a Big Tex Grief Support Group was created on Facebook as a kind of social congregatory place for those who wanted to talk about Big Tex and collectively grieve his loss. Here again, participants are often joking, but there are instances where the jokes are put to the side and genuine grieving is rendered. According to Hamilton (2012), some on this Facebook page for grieving have proclaimed Big Tex to be the symbol of southern hospitality and hometown values as he welcomed fairgoers year after year.

In 2000, fair administrators had Big Tex' electrical system updated, making it possible for his neck to turn and hand to move in a wave-like motion. According to Cavazos (2013), these kinetic improvements made people feel as if Big Tex were personally welcoming them to the fair. Furthermore, this movement further affirmed fairgoers' sense of interpersonal relationship with Big Tex. As the 2012 Texas State Fair season kicked off, fair officials posted on the official fair webpage (named after Big Tex – BigTex.com) that they were planning a big surprise birthday party for Big Tex' 60th birthday. Fair officials also proclaimed that even though they were planning this grand party for Big Tex, they "believe he doesn't suspect a thing" (Texas State Fair Public Relations, 2012).

Christi Erpillo, member of a family who has operated a state fair restaurant for over 40 years, stated, "We have lost a friend. We've lost a member of the family . . . He is one of us. We've lost our leader" (Aasen E. , 2012). Lexi Saldivar tweeted that whoever started the fire should receive the death penalty (Mstars Reporter, 2012), while one zealous commenter to an online Dallas Morning News story said, "Why not have Big Tex as Texan of the year. . . he has welcomed people from all over the world to a bright spot called the Greatest State Fair of all state fairs. He brings friends together for photos, and has been a meeting place to gather friends and families for longer than I can remember. In recent years he has called out 'Amber Alerts' and helped lost children find their parents. He may not be real, but Big Tex has done more to help others, Texans or not. . . Even though Big Tex is not real, I feel that his standards are above most Texans . . ." (Blow, 2012, p. 1).

Before we assume that these Texans have lost their marbles, let's take a moment to consider Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial interaction.

1.3 Parasocial Interaction

Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial interaction opened the field of psychology and communication to the idea that spectators develop relationships with mediated personages, or celebrities. The concept that people form relationships across social barriers (i.e. the average person initiating a relationship with a celebrity) is not that interesting. The interesting element of Horton and Wohl's theory was that we develop relationship with strangers on the television screen – people we have never met. For example, after watching several movies starring Julia Roberts, some females may feel a sense of connection and friendship to the celebrity, even though they have never even met.

One of the key components of the theory of parasocial relationships is that on-screen camera work can offer the illusion that a celebrity is physically moving closer to the spectator. Hall (1968) discusses the psychological elements of personal space, relating the connection between proxemics and interpersonal relationship (i.e. the closer someone stands, the closer the perceived interpersonal relationship). The on-screen character, or the persona, lacks any direct knowledge of the spectator, leading to a one-sided relationship. Within a parasocial interaction, Horton and Wohl describe the persona as someone who offers, above all, a continuing relationship.

His appearance is a regular and dependable event, to be counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life. His devotees ‘live with him’ and share the small episodes of his public life – and to some extent even of his private life away from the show. Indeed, their continued association with him acquires a history, and the accumulation of shared past experiences gives additional meaning to the present performance. This bond is symbolized by allusions that lack meaning for the casual observer and appear occult to the outsider. In time, the devotee - the ‘fan’ – comes to believe that he ‘knows’ the persona more intimately and profoundly than others do; that he ‘understands’ his character and appreciates his values and motives. Such an accumulation of knowledge and intensification of loyalty, however, appears to be a kind of growth without development, for the one-sided nature of the connection precludes a progressive and mutual reformulation of its values and aims” (pp. 216-217).

Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) discuss the important role fans play in the creation of a celebrity. They argue that in order for a person to move from average-person to celebrity status, there must be a strong fan-base hoisting this person into the limelight. Therefore it is the responsibility and burden of the audience to create a persona, yet one should not discount the role of the media in developing a person’s celebrity status (Martin et al., 2003). According to Stever (2011), a celebrity spectator can lie anywhere on a spectrum of fandom, from the conservative fan to the celebrity worshipper. McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002) note that most spectators fall within the extreme levels of celebrity worship. Rubin and McHugh (1987) argue that a parasocial interaction interpersonal relationship takes time to develop, but that this time is compounded because the spectator continues to think about the persona even while away from the media outlet (i.e. TV).

Furthermore, a form of mindreading must take place in order for the spectator to build the one-sided parasocial interaction relationship with the celebrity (Malle & Hodges, 2005). This mindreading allows the spectator to create what is called a mutual awareness, where the spectator senses that he or she is not only aware of the celebrity, but that the celebrity is also aware of the spectator (Goffman, 1983; Perner & Wimmer, 1985). Parasocial interaction relationship is also influenced by the level at which the spectator perceives the celebrity to be addressing him or her. Celebrities can address, or acknowledge, spectators both verbally and nonverbally. A simple gesture of the head toward an audience, wave, or verbal welcome can create a sense of mutual awareness within the spectator (Horton & Strauss, 1957; Cohen, 2001; Malandro, Barker, & Barker, 1989; DeVito, 2001; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2001).

Eyal and Cohen (2006) discovered that when the celebrity in a parasocial relationship goes away (i.e. a TV show is discontinued), spectators experience an emotional reaction. Moreover, spectators experience emotional distress similar to that of when going through a real-life relationship break-up. As one would assume, the deeper the parasocial relationship, the harder the crash when the relationship comes to such an end (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011; Cohen, 2004). Spectators also experience varying levels of grief, reacting in an array of fashions, at the news of celebrity death, whether it be due to nostalgia, attraction, etc. (Evans, Jr. et al., 2010).

1.4 Rationale

It is clear from the literature that the phenomenological reaction of Texans to the news of Big Tex’ burning is reflective of a parasocial interaction relationship. Steve Blow, with the Dallas Morning News, noted that the burning of Big Tex caused a “public meltdown” across Texas (Blow, 2012, p. 1). However, a closer look at the reasons behind these reactions is needed. The overarching purpose of this study was to reveal any link between fairgoers’ reaction to the burning of Big Tex and Horton and Wohl’s (1956) theory of parasocial interaction.

2.0 Methods

A group of 6 trained interviewers solicited interviewees, conducted and transcribed qualitative interviews with study participants, and analyzed the data for thematic responses. Due to the sensitive nature of this study, participants were guaranteed anonymity and no demographic information was recorded in the qualitative data collection process. However, the participant pool was made up of a purposeful, convenient sample of 30 Texas residents who were affected in some way by the burning of Big Tex. The population was widely spread demographically, but no vulnerable populations were interviewed (i.e. children under 18, anyone mentally unable to consent to the interview, pregnant females, or convicted persons).

Participants were initially contacted via the Big Tex Grief Support Group Facebook group for interviews. They were asked to participate in this study and confirmed their consent via return communication. However, the Facebook page offered minimal interview-request returns due to logistical technical challenges.

In addition to the preliminary Facebook-initiated interviews, interviewers began to garner face-to-face, online, and telephone interviews through personal networking. All interviewees selected for interviews were Texas residents affected by the burning of Big Tex. The anonymous nature of the data collection encouraged participants to be more open with their responses. In order to gain a more robust understanding of fairgoer reactions, each participant was asked a series of qualitative questions regarding their connection to Big Tex and corresponding reaction to the news of his death.

Results were transcribed and collected. A group of 12 trained qualitative data analysts analyzed interview notes and documented thematic responses. The thematic responses were then collected and a master document of common responses or themes was created. Significant quotes were also selected to bolster thematic interview responses.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The results of this study showed that Big Tex spectators were emotionally moved by the news of his burning. Big Tex was cited as a landmark, remembered by most attendees of the Texas State Fair – a universally recognized Texas icon. As he offered a warm welcome to fairgoers, he represented what it meant to be a Texan – to stand tall. One fair-going interviewee indicated, Big Tex was a part of Texas folklore; he represented the large size of the state and the larger-than-life attitude of Texans, with his ridiculous belt buckle and cowboy hat. He was a nostalgic figure too, something that kind of connected several generations of Texans to each other, even as time has gone on. He reminded us of a time when life was simple, when he was the most technologically advanced thing around.

Texans have a special place in their hearts for Big Tex as they remember visiting him year after year, from when they were children. As older Texans would take grandchildren to see Big Tex, they were reminded of the simple times of their childhood. One interviewee stated, “Big Tex kind of reminded me of my childhood and, in a weird way he made me feel connected to the past . . .”. This same interviewee commented that the burning of Big Tex symbolized a loss of the “old” Texas, and that even though Big Tex is to be rebuilt, the “connections with the past” are still lost. Participants thought all Texans should have taken time to visit the statue on a regular basis, as one would do with a friend. Big Tex was known for bringing people together for photographs, and has served as a meeting place for family and friends who would sometimes simply stand and gaze up at him - both children and adults.

One interview participant expressed regret in never taking his/her family to visit Big Tex. Participants consistently expressed sadness, stating they were upset and that Big Tex would be missed, as one participant declared, “I felt really sad, as if I had lost a good friend”. Numerous interviewees also asserted that October 19 was a devastating day for Texas. Some Texans joined the Facebook pages related to Big Tex to receive daily updates on the story, which kept him in their minds. One interviewee noted his/her surprise in his/her own reaction, stating, “I was surprisingly upset when he burned. In fact, I don’t think I realized I had any sentimental attachment to him until I heard that he burned. It made me really sad . . .”. Explaining his/her reaction to the news of Big Tex burning, one participant stated,

I feel that I felt and reacted this way because Big Tex had always been such a fun part of taking our family to the State Fair of Texas, especially when my children were little they would wave and talk to him; then with our granddaughters, we continued the tradition of taking them to see Big Tex and taking pictures and he was always there and we knew how delighted they would be by talking to him.

It is clear from the results of this qualitative study that Big Tex represented a form of persona for many Texans. The manner in which fairgoers formed a one-sided interpersonal relationship with Big Tex points to Horton and Wohl’s (1956) theory of parasocial interaction. Borrowing language from that ground-breaking study on parasocial interaction, this study concludes that Big Tex offered a “continuing relationship” (216). Big Tex’ appearance was a “regular and dependable event” as fairgoers looked forward to seeing him year after year – he could “be counted on” and “planned for” (216). These characteristics are essential in order for a parasocial interaction to take place, and these characteristics are present when the participants considered Big Tex.

Participant comments suggesting they share a past with Big Tex are also reflective of a parasocial interaction relationship. Spectators remember spending time with Big Tex as a child, and now that they are much older, enjoy bringing grandchildren to meet and hang out with Big Tex every year.

Horton and Wohl (1956) state that a spectator learns to “appreciate” the “values and motives” of a persona (p. 216). The spectators of this study have a clear appreciation for the way Big Tex personified the Texas image, tall and proud. For some, Big Tex even represented a better way of life, a remembrance of how things use to be, when life was more simple.

Authors such as Malle and Hodges (2005), Goffman (1983), and Perner and Wimmer (1985) have expanded upon Horton and Wohl’s (1956) theory of parasocial interaction. One of their major findings is that a form of mindreading must take place in a parasocial interaction relationship due to its one-sided nature. The mouth of Big Tex would move while a human voice projected welcoming statements. This communication aimed toward the spectator allowed him or her to build and/or strengthen a relationship with Big Tex while connecting potential meaning to his words, an example of mindreading. Furthermore, Big Tex would turn his head and wave at fairgoers, creating a sense that the persona was aware of the spectator, thus increasing the parasocial interaction (Horton & Strauss, 1957; Cohen, 2001; Malandro, Barker, & Barker, 1989; DeVito, 2001; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2001).

This deeper parasocial interaction interpersonal relationship led to a hard emotional crash when some heard of the burning of Big Tex. “I felt really sad, as if I had lost a good friend”, stated one interviewee. The concern about seeing what was under the Big Tex body bag (jumpergirl311, 2012 Youtube video), to the Big Tex memorial service (Villafranca, 2012) and Facebook pages (Graves, 2012; Texas State Fair Officials, 2013), spectators expressed a higher-than-expected level of grief regarding their loss of a statue. These findings confirm Eyal and Cohen’s (2006) discovery that spectators experience an emotional reaction at the loss of a persona, especially a character such as Big Tex who was strongly tied to Texas nostalgia (Evans, Jr. et al, 2010).

3.2 Post-Hoc Findings

Alongside affirming the presence of parasocial interaction within the Big Tex incident reactions, this study revealed additional post-hoc findings. The secondary finding most related to parasocial interaction was linked to Bormann’s (1982) symbolic convergence theory. Symbolic convergence theory poses that a group of people set out to create meaning together. This group shares a reality via what Bormann calls a fantasy chain. This reality may be different from the reality of surrounding groups, but is nonetheless valuable and shared among the immediate group members. Texans are known for their state pride (Cartier, 2008; Curtis, 2011) and Big Tex is a part of this state image – he represented what it meant to be a Texan – “larger-than-life”, said one study interviewee, “Big Tex was a part of Texas folklore”.

The second post-hoc discovery connects with symbolic convergence theory. Tajfel’s (1982) social identity theory discusses the significant roles of ingroups and outgroups in the way people behave. We connect to our personal cultures, both large and small (subcultures), and in so doing, we find ourselves dressing alike, acting similar, listening to same music genres, etc. We feel a strong sense of connection to our ingroup and can feel a strong sense of disconnection with those not in our ingroup (i.e. those in our outgroup). The current study reveals a confirmed sense of state pride in Texas, a state with a unique state identity (Cartier, 2008; Curtis, 2011). The state experienced a shared loss in the burning of Big Tex, but what is significant about the reaction of Texans related to social identity theory is that the affects of this incident seem isolated to Texans. Texas newspapers were bombarded with stories regarding Big Tex, but it is nearly impossible to locate a news story regarding Big Tex originating in Oklahoma, a neighboring state. In this case, Texas is a clear representation of the ingroup, and Oklahoma represents the outgroup.

Lastly, the results of this study reveal a strong emotional reaction to the burning of Big Tex that can be explained, in part, by the scarcity principle (Cialdini, 2009). When something we have is threatened or taken away, we experience a psychological reaction that creates within us a stronger desire to have the item/person than ever before (Hobofoll, 2001). For example, if the U.S. government threatens to remove a right of the people, no matter the right, Americans become very passionate about that right, even if it involves something typically of nonimportance to them. One interviewee noted, “I was surprisingly upset when he burned. In fact, I don’t think I realized I had any sentimental attachment to him until I heard that he burned. It made me really sad . . .”. Steve Blow, with the Dallas Morning News, stated that the burning of Big Tex caused a “public meltdown” across Texas, stating “. . . until we saw him go up in flames, who knew we loved that gawky old cowpoke so much?” (Blow, 2012, p. 1). It seems that though people were appreciative of Big Tex, it took a consuming fire to bring out the deep-seated desires to see him alive and well.

In conclusion, it is evident from this study that Texas State Fairgoers were involved in a parasocial interaction relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956) with Big Tex and it was this relationship that, in part, led to a high level of grief-reaction at the news of his burning. This study utilized qualitative interviews to flesh out reasoning behind the bold, yet saddened reactions to the death of Big Tex, the 52-foot iconic statue. From the comments of Big Tex fans, spectator interaction with Big Tex over a period of time created a strong parasocial interaction relationship. It also seems, from the findings, that Texans shared a fantasy theme (Bormann, 1982) revolving around the Texas-exclusive (Tajfel, 1982) image that includes Big Tex. Finally, the loss of Big Tex created within Texans a strong reaction related to the scarcity principle (Cialdini, 2009; Hobofoll, 2001).

3.3 Study Weakness

There was a large number of people trained to conduct the qualitative interviews and analysis. Each of the assistants displayed high competence in their work, but having multiple people collect and analyze data can lead to varying perceptions of reality. However, the interview data was validated by the fact that the data was compiled collectively, allowing for a more uniform analysis process.

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