

The Branded Dynasty Paradox: Theorising the Tensions between Autonomy and Alignment in Family-Centric Celebrity Brands

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper interrogates the emergent phenomenon of the “branded dynasty,” where a family’s surname evolves from a personal identifier into a controlled, commercial brand entity. Focusing on celebrity families like the Beckhams and Kardashian-Jenners, the paper identifies and theorises a core paradox: the inherent tension between the dynasty’s need for narrative alignment to sustain brand equity and the individual member’s pursuit of personal autonomy and identity. Recent discourse surrounding Brooklyn Beckham’s selective engagement with the “Beckham” brand serves as a pivotal illustrative case. Drawing from and integrating literature on celebrity branding, family business, and personal branding, this paper develops a novel conceptual framework mapping the “Dynasty Control vs. Member Autonomy” matrix. It proposes four resultant brand-member states: Integrated Soldier, Contained Rebel, Detached Heir, and Free Agent. The paper contributes to marketing theory by conceptualising the family surname as a contested brand asset, elucidating the governance of shared intangible capital, and outlining strategic and ethical implications for managing dynastic celebrity brands. Propositions for future empirical research are offered.

Keywords: Celebrity Branding, Family Business, Personal Branding, Brand Heritage, Autonomy, Brand Governance, Dynastic Brand, Beckham.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of celebrity has evolved from the cult of the individual star to the strategic cultivation of the celebrity family unit – the “branded dynasty.” Here, the family surname (e.g., Beckham, Kardashian) transcends its genealogical function to become a central, commercialised brand identifier. This brand is leveraged across multiple industries such as fashion, sport, media, beauty creating a powerful, interconnected commercial ecosystem. However, this transformation of private identity into public commodity generates fundamental tensions. The branded dynasty operates as a firm with collective brand equity requiring alignment, consistency, and strategic narrative control (Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber, 2013). Simultaneously, its constituent members are individual actors with their own careers, personal brands, and desires for autonomy (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017).

This paper conceptualises this tension as The Branded Dynasty Paradox. The paradox lies in the competing logic: the dynastic brand’s strength relies on a cohesive, often curated, family story, yet its longevity depends on individual members who may seek to define themselves outside, or in selective opposition to, that very narrative. The recent case of Brooklyn Beckham exemplifies this. As the eldest son, his career moves from photography to cooking and his conscious choice to foreground “Brooklyn” or “Peltz Beckham” while sometimes downplaying “Beckham” illustrate an ongoing negotiation between leveraging dynastic capital and asserting an independent identity (Sawyer, 2023). This negotiation, however, is fraught with untheorized tensions that expose a significant gap in the marketing and branding literature.

Problem Statement

Despite the prevalence and commercial significance of branded dynasties (e.g., Kardashian-Jenners, Beckhams), existing theoretical frameworks remain inadequate to explain their core operational paradox. Literature

on celebrity branding primarily focuses on the individual celebrity as a branded entity (Thomson, 2006), failing to account for the complex, multi-actor governance of a shared familial brand name. Family business studies offer insights into succession and stewardship (Tagiuri & Davis, 1996) but typically examine traditional firms with tangible assets, not families where the *primary product is the family's mediated identity itself*. Meanwhile, research on personal branding (Labrecque et al., 2011) assumes individual agency in brand construction, an assumption shattered for individuals born into a pre-existing, powerful family brand.

This confluence creates a critical theoretical and practical problem: there is no integrated framework to analyse the inherent conflict between the collective imperative of a dynastic brand (which requires narrative alignment, consistency, and control to protect its equity) and the individual agency of its members (who seek personal authenticity, career autonomy, and independent identity construction). This gap leaves scholars and practitioners without the tools to:

1. **Categorize** the different strategic positions members occupy within these dynasties.
2. **Predict** the points of conflict and reputational risk that arise from the autonomy-alignment tension.
3. **Guide** effective governance models for such shared intangible assets.

Consequently, phenomena like Brooklyn Beckham's branded negotiation are often dismissed as mere celebrity gossip rather than understood as symptomatic of a fundamental, under-theorized challenge in contemporary brand management.

Research Questions

To systematically address the identified theoretical gap concerning the governance of branded dynasties, this conceptual paper is guided by one primary research question and three supporting questions:

Primary Research Question (RQ1): How can the relationship between collective brand governance and individual identity projects within family-centric celebrity brands be conceptualized, and what strategic positions do family members occupy because of this tension?

Supporting Research Questions:

1. **RQ2:** What are the core dimensions that define the interaction between dynastic brand control and member autonomy in celebrity family brands?
2. **RQ3:** How do different positions within the proposed framework manifest in real-world celebrity dynasties, and what are their implications for brand management?
3. **RQ4:** What are the strategic and ethical implications for managing the branded surname as both a family heritage and commercial asset?

These questions provide a structured pathway to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that addresses both the theoretical gap and practical challenges identified in the problem statement.

This conceptual paper aims to: (1) Synthesise literature from celebrity branding, family business, and personal branding to frame the branded dynasty phenomenon; (2) Develop a novel conceptual framework, the “Dynasty Control vs. Member Autonomy Matrix,” to categorise brand-member relationships; (3) Use the Beckham dynasty, with a focus on Brooklyn Beckham’s positioning, as an illustrative case to ground the theoretical discussion; and (4) Propose research propositions and implications for theory and practice.

LITERATURE SYNTHESIS & THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Celebrity Branding: From Individual to Dynasty

Traditional celebrity branding focuses on the individual’s aura, authenticity, and parasocial relationship with the public (Thomson, 2006). The branded dynasty represents a scalar shift. The celebrity is no longer an individual

but a familial network, where brand equity is pooled and co-created. The dynasty's narrative becomes a multi-protagonist story, offering extensions into diverse markets (Kozinets, 2001). However, this collectivisation increases reputational interdependence, where one member's actions significantly impact the shared brand asset.

Family Business Studies: Governance of the Surname-as-Asset

Family business literature examines the interplay between family, ownership, and management (Tagiuri & Davis, 1996). In a branded dynasty, the "family" is the core product, and the "surname" is the primary intangible asset. Issues of succession, stewardship, and in-group/out-group dynamics are paramount. However, unlike traditional firms, "employment" in the dynasty is often a matter of birth, complicating exit options and conflating personal with professional roles. The concept of *socioemotional wealth* the non-financial value a family derives from its firm is crucial; here, it relates to social capital, legacy, and public image (Berrone, Cruz, & Gomez-Mejia, 2012).

Personal Branding: The Quest for Agentic Identity

Personal branding theory posits that individuals construct and market a public identity to achieve professional goals (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). For dynasty members, personal branding is not a tabula rasa exercise. They begin with a powerful, pre-loaded brand their surname which offers immense reach but also constrains their narrative agency. Their personal branding project thus becomes an exercise in *differentiation-within-affiliation*: establishing a unique identity while managing association with the dynastic whole.

Conceptual Framework: The Dynasty Control vs. Member Autonomy Matrix

Integrating these literatures, we propose a two-dimensional matrix (Figure 1). The horizontal axis represents Degree of Dynasty Control, spanning from high (strict narrative/brand governance) to low (laissez-faire approach). The vertical axis represents Member's Pursuit of Autonomy, spanning from low (alignment with dynasty narrative) to high (assertion of independent identity).

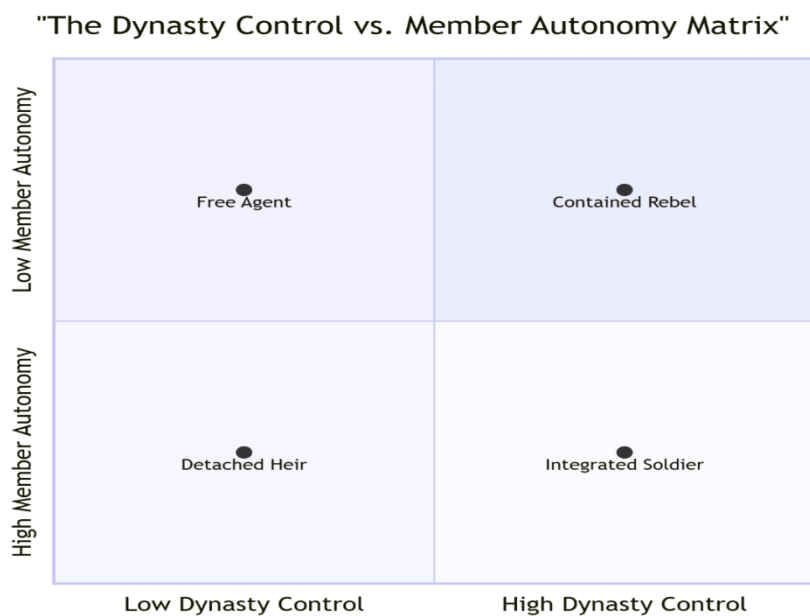


Figure 1: The Dynasty Control vs. Member Autonomy Matrix

This interplay creates four archetypal brand-member states:

1. **Integrated Soldier (High Control, Low Autonomy):** The member fully embodies and promotes the dynastic brand according to its prescribed narrative. They are a loyal brand ambassador. *Example:* Kim Kardashian in the early, unified phases of KUWTK.

2. **Contained Rebel (High Control, High Autonomy):** The member actively seeks a distinct identity, but the dynasty's strong governance attempts to contain or re-frame this rebellion into the broader brand narrative. Public tension is likely. *Example:* Brooklyn Beckham. His culinary venture is his own, but media narratives (and perhaps family PR) persistently frame him as "David and Victoria's son," re-anchoring him in the dynasty.
3. **Detached Heir (Low Control, Low Autonomy):** The member is not actively leveraged by the dynasty's brand strategy and does not pursue a strong public persona. They are a passive beneficiary or a deliberately private figure. *Example:* Harper Beckham, kept largely out of the commercial brand sphere.
4. **Free Agent (Low Control, High Autonomy):** The member successfully builds a public identity and career perceived as largely separate from the dynastic brand. They may use the surname for initial recognition but have transcended its constraints. *Example:* Kylie Jenner. While initially a "Kardashian" affiliate, the launch and dominance of Kylie Cosmetics has made her a standalone billionaire brand, operating with significant autonomy within the broader family ecosystem.

Illustrative Case: The Beckham Dynasty and Brooklyn's Negotiation

The Beckham dynasty, built on David's athletic fame and Victoria's fashion prowess, represents a tightly controlled brand of professionalism, style, and aspirational family life. Brooklyn Beckham, as the first-born, was naturally positioned as a key successor.

His trajectory, however, maps a journey across the matrix. Initially an Integrated Soldier, he featured prominently in family narratives. His move into photography and later cooking marked a strong push for autonomy, moving him into the Contained Rebel quadrant. The media and public discourse consistently "contain" his rebellion by tying his success or failure back to the Beckham name (e.g., critiques of his cookbook dedicated to "Chloe" his wife seen through the lens of his parents' legacy). His use of "Peltz Beckham" signifies a negotiation: acknowledging both his autonomous marital union (Peltz) and the dynastic capital (Beckham). This case vividly illustrates the paradoxical push-pull at the heart of dynastic branding.

Propositions for Future Research

Based on the conceptual framework of "**The Dynasty Control vs. Member Autonomy Matrix**", the following propositions are offered to guide and stimulate future empirical research. These propositions operationalise the theoretical tensions into testable relationships.

P1: The Strength of Dynasty Control as a Function of Commercial Value

The higher the collective brand equity and commercial value of a dynastic brand (e.g., the Beckham family), the more formalised and stringent its narrative control mechanisms will become. This will result in:

- Members wishing to maintain the status quo being pulled towards the Integrated Soldier quadrant.
- Members asserting autonomy facing greater structural and reputational pressure, forcing them into a high-tension Contained Rebel state.
Future Research Example: A quantitative study correlating annual family brand revenue with the degree of centralised control over members' public communications and social media activities.

P2: Gendered Dynamics in Name Inheritance and Brand Role Allocation

Female members of a branded dynasty will face significantly higher barriers to achieving Free Agent status compared to male members, due to stronger societal biases linking women to the role of "family legacy keepers." Conversely, the pressure to remain an Integrated Soldier may be disproportionately higher for daughters.

Future Research Example: A comparative discourse analysis of media coverage of the career pursuits of male vs. female heirs (e.g., Brooklyn vs. Harper Beckham; or the framing of Kylie Jenner's autonomy versus Khloé Kardashian's family-centric narrative).

P3: The Impact of Family Lifecycle Stage

The degree of autonomy permitted or demanded by a dynasty member will vary significantly across the family lifecycle stages:

- Foundation Stage (brand establishment): All core members tend to operate as Integrated Soldiers.
- Expansion Stage (brand maturity): Space for Free Agents and Contained Rebels emerges.
- Succession Stage (second-generation transition): Conflict between Contained Rebels and dynasty control is likely to peak.

Future Research Example: A longitudinal, ethnographic case study tracking a single celebrity dynasty over 10-15 years to map members' movements across the matrix quadrants in response to key family and business events.

P4: The Dual Role of Social Media as Mediator and Divider

Social media platforms serve as the primary battleground for this paradox, exerting two opposing forces:

- They empower Contained Rebels to broadcast autonomous narratives directly to their audience (e.g., Brooklyn Beckham promoting his cooking on Instagram).
- Simultaneously, algorithms and user discourse constantly "contain" this rebellion by re-anchoring their content to the dynastic brand (e.g., the pervasive "son of David Beckham" framing in comments and media articles about him).

Future Research Example: A computational analysis of comment sections on Brooklyn Beckham's social media posts to quantify the percentage focusing on his autonomous identity (e.g., "chef", "photographer") versus those explicitly linking him to the Beckham dynasty.

P5: Differential Reputation Management Strategies per Quadrant

Successful dynasties will develop and deploy distinct reputation management strategies tailored to members based on their quadrant:

- Integrated Soldiers: Cohesive, cross-promotional strategies.
- Contained Rebels: Strategies of "controlled containment" allowing limited autonomy while insulating the core brand equity.
- Free Agents: Strategies of "limited acknowledgment" to reap association benefits without incurring direct risk.
- Detached Heirs: Maximum protection strategies and exclusion from commercial narratives.

Future Research Example: A comparative case analysis of how the Kardashian-Jenner family manages the distinct public narratives of Kylie (Free Agent) versus Rob (who has occupied both Contained Rebel and Detached Heir positions).

P6: The Moderating Effect of Cultural and Familial Norms

The manifestation and intensity of this paradox will be moderated by cultural context. Dynasties from collectivist cultural backgrounds (e.g., in Asia) will demonstrate:

- Structurally higher levels of Dynasty Control.
- Stronger socio-familial pressure on members to remain Integrated Soldiers.
- More severe reputational consequences for those who become Contained Rebels.

Future Research Example: A cross-cultural comparative study between a Western celebrity dynasty (e.g., the Beckhams) and an Eastern one (e.g., a Bollywood or Korean entertainment dynasty), analysing differences in governance, member roles, and public discourse.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

This paper has theorised the Branded Dynasty Paradox, presenting a framework to analyse the intrinsic conflict between collective brand governance and individual identity projects. The contribution is threefold: (1) It bridges disparate literatures to formalise the study of celebrity families as business entities; (2) It provides a dynamic model for classifying member-brand relationships; (3) It highlights the surname as a unique, contested form of brand equity with significant socioemotional weight.

For practitioners, the framework advises dynastic brand managers to recognise autonomy-seeking as inevitable, not treasonous. Strategic flexibility, perhaps allowing for sub-brands or “venture” roles for heirs, may mitigate public tension. For members, it outlines the strategic choices in navigating pre-loaded brand identity.

Future research should empirically test the proposed matrix across different dynasties, cultures, and industries. The ethical dimensions particularly regarding children born into these brands, like Harper Beckham also warrant deep exploration. As celebrity continues to familialise, understanding the governance of the branded dynasty becomes increasingly critical.

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