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Keanu Reeves, *John Wick*, and the myths and tensions between star brands and franchise properties

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Keanu Reeves' role in the John Wick franchise, studying the tensions that lie between studio-managed intellectual property networks and star brand. A valuable star vehicle, John Wick embedded Reeves' star persona within its filmic fabric, reinvigorating his star status beyond the digital memes that characterised him as the twenty-first century unfolded. John Wick was swiftly franchised, becoming an important media property in its own right, in dialogue with but also separate from Reeves' own stardom as it expanded into a transmedia multiverse. The franchise therefore reflects wider intersections and negotiations between celebrity, star power, business strategy, and licensed properties in contemporary media industries. This article traces the production and reception around the three released John Wick films, along with their marketing and paratextual materials and multiplatform adaptations, which increasingly deviate from using Reeves as a central star figure. It investigates the value of stardom within Hollywood franchise texts, focusing on the transformative effect of John Wick on Reeves' image and brand, the different ways in which stars stand as authenticating figures in franchise cultures, and how Reeves' own star status is simultaneously challenged and affirmed by the franchise that has come to define his later screen career.

KEYWORDS

Keanu reeves; John Wick; Lionsgate; transmedia franchising; Hollywood; star branding

The surprise success of the 2014 film *John Wick* (dir. Chad Stahelski) heralded a resurgence in the screen career of Keanu Reeves. As other articles in this issue have explored, Reeves had found himself in a cultural comeback since the early 2010s as the focus of memes, gossip and other digitally circulated celebrity discourse. However, it was not until *John Wick* – an action film anchored around Reeves' presence as the eponymous character out for revenge after mobsters kill his dog and steal his car shortly after his wife's death – that this attention translated once more to his onscreen work and bolstered his status as a bona fide, culturally resonant film star. Somewhat of an anomaly in contemporary Hollywood genre production through its position as an original property amidst a sea of remakes, reboots and adaptations, *John Wick* was shaped into a coherent vehicle for Reeves, and significantly exceeded industry and audience expectations. Cited as reinvigorating the contemporary action film and Reeves' career, the relatively low-budget

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