

# How 'Brangelina' Gave a Couple Its Mystique

Not all celebrity duos get a shared nickname—especially a nickname as powerful as this one.



Andreas Rentz / Reuters

SPENCER KORNHABER | SEP 22, 2016 | CULTURE TEXT SIZE  
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When Angelina Jolie filed for divorce from Brad Pitt on Monday, it ended not only a marriage but also a concept, a brand, and a joint venture that had shaped pop culture for more than a decade. The word “Brangelina,” first coined by *People* magazine, turned two superstars into one super-superstar, a feat that’s been successfully managed only a few previous times in media history.

In the 2015 anthology *First Comes Love: Power Couples, Celebrity Kinship, and Cultural Politics*, Vanessa Díaz, an assistant professor of communications at Cal State Fullerton, wrote a chapter analyzing the term “Brangelina” and the practice of combining celebrity couples’ names into one. Díaz, currently a postdoctoral fellow at UCLA, pointed out that most previous notable portmanteaus were either self-created (Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball’s “Desilu” production company, John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s “Lenono Music”) or used by as a term of derision (Bill and Hillary Clinton as “Billary”). But the “Brangelina” tag arose during an intense period of competition between celebrity tabloids, and it was part of a wave of gimmicky namings that helped feed public fascination with famous couples—but only certain famous couples.

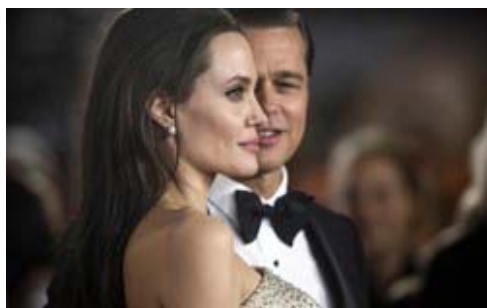
On Monday, I spoke with Díaz, who’s also working on a book about celebrity media. This conversation has been edited.

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**Spencer Kornhaber:** As someone who has studied and written about this couple, what was your initial reaction to the breakup?

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**Vanessa Díaz:** A lot of what I’m noticing is the ways that people are reacting emotionally. There are mainstream media titles like, “R.I.P. Brangelina,” which shows that there is a sadness and a sense of loss for this couple as an entity. It wasn’t Brad and Angelina going on in their lives and having a relationship, it was *Brangelina*, which took on a whole other set of meanings. The end of their relationship is also the end of a lot of the emotional development that people had taken on for them as a couple and as a family.

**Kornhaber:** Does it strike you as different from, more intense than, the reaction to other breakups?

**Díaz:** To me, Brangelina really has to do with the name “Brangelina.” Even in the reporting of the end of this relationship, a lot of the mainstream media can’t let go and say “Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are divorcing”—it’s like, “The End of Brangelina,” “Brangelina files for divorce.” It’s been more than 11 years since that name was first used in *People* magazine: There have been 11 years of the development of a closeness to a couple through this particular lens, this particular marketing technique of combining these names.

It’s also the end of an era in terms of the kinds of celebrity couples that we’re focusing on. Brangelina is one of the last old-fashioned Hollywood couples: It’s one giant movie star and another giant movie star coming together in scandalous circumstances. Brangelina was formed before celebrities were doing their own social media. And now celebrity couples are accessible in a way that they weren’t.

It almost feels like this is the transition from the era of Brangelina to the era of Kimye. Kim and Kanye are talking to their consumers and fans differently, they’re talking to them directly through social media, and Brangelina has a kind of glamor and mystique that the newer couples don’t have because of the access that we have—or the illusion of access that we have.

**Kornhaber:** What’s the story behind celebrity-name portmanteaus?

**Díaz:** Even though there’s a history of combining celebrity couples’ names, none of them stuck and got the same kind of mainstream exposure that Brangelina did. In the 1920s John Gilbert and Greta Garbo were called “Gilbo,” but that was in fan magazines, it wasn’t corporate media coming up with a marketing technique.

The first time “Brangelina” was published was in *People* magazine in the May 9 issue in 2005. I was working as an intern and reporter for *People* at the time, and

I remember the discussion around it and seeing the layout. Celebrity media has always covered the celebrity couple, it's a cornerstone of celebrity reporting. But what if they made the couple a completely different entity, like Brangelina? Then could it reach a new level of celebrity? Which is what it did.

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**“A portmanteau almost has a sexual component: These names are penetrating each other.”**

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Now, Bennifer, which is Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez, had been popular a few years earlier. But that didn't catch on in the same way, and what I would suggest is that it was because there wasn't as much public affection or interest in them. Brangelina started as a relationship with scandal around it, and Angelina Jolie was already an interesting character because of the way she approached parenting and adopting very publicly.

Nicknames are something that we use when we are close to someone. And so when you assign a nickname, it creates a sense of closeness. A portmanteau of names almost has a sexual component: These names are inseparable, they're locked, they're penetrating each other. It's a very intimate thing. And so to be able to talk about a couple with a nickname, I think it's very powerful for the consumer.

**Kornhaber:** You've written that only certain kinds of couple get popular portmanteaus. What kinds of couples are those?

**Díaz:** So, the race and sexuality component to me is very obvious. The magazines approach this practice of combining celebrity couples' names to make the stars relatable to people, and it's illuminating to see who they think people

will relate to. The magazines almost always choose to promote white heterosexual couples. Where are Will and Jada's combined name? Where is Ellen Degeneres and Portia de Rossi's name? The *US Weekly* section, "Stars—They're Just Like Us," always makes me ask, who is "us"? And what about the stars in that section make them like "us"?

After names like Brangelina were popularized, magazines started to try to get other names to catch on, like "TomKat." It sort of popularized the practice, so everyday people started to combining their own name for fun and combining other celebrities names into couple names. This allowed for the practice to spread beyond the couples the magazines chose to market. So if you look at nontraditional media or blogs or social media, there are lots of uses of combined names for couples of color. Like with Jay Z and Beyoncé: Lots of social media [users] use the name Bey Z or Jayoncé to give the kind of validity and intimacy to these couples who are excluded in this way in mainstream media.

"Kimye" is the only combined name that's been used in mainstream press that contains the name of an African American person. The only one. So when you talk about diversity problems in Hollywood, it starts with who the media chooses to manufacture into celebrities, and those celebrities are predominately white, heterosexual, very normative.

**Kornhaber:** People often say celebrities embody values or ideas within a culture. What did Brangelina embody?

**Díaz:** Brangelina started out as, "Is this just going to be a whirlwind fling, is he just cheating on his wife?" And then it was like, "No, he's going to adopt her kids, they're going to adopt kids together, and they're going to start a family." They were doing all these things not in the typical order that people would think planning a family would go, but to the public they were already Brangelina—they were already combined.

I think there was a relatability in the changing nature of family and couples' lives.

People aren't necessarily getting married as young as they used to. Or getting married at all. Or having children. Or they're having children in an unconventional way. I think while them getting married was not that significant because they were already together as a couple, their divorce is almost more significant culturally. We can say, "Hey, that happened to me, that's how this culture is, and unfortunately marriage doesn't last as long as people might want it to or think it will."

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## **“It almost feels like this is the transition from the era of Brangelina to the era of Kimye.”**

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The other side of how they represent U.S. culture is a longing for extravagance, live-in-the-moment jetsetting, travel to exotic locations, and cultivating this really unique family that's always display all the time. Brangelina was this thing that felt so amazing and unattainable, and now we go back to a place where we know they're relatable, they're normal people who got a divorce.

**Kornhaber:** What have you made of the coverage of the divorce? The tabloids have mentioned infidelity, her being too controlling, him abusing drugs—these are all familiar breakup tropes.

**Díaz:** In a moment like this what comes to mind is [the video of Beyoncé and Jay Z in the elevator](#). Because there's this desire to be able to really understand what's going on behind these closed doors. The video that we saw was a window in, without an explanation, and it left people crazy. They're such a private couple and now we see a little glimpse—what's going on?

With the divorce of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, it's a little window into this

extravagant, seemingly perfect life they've had. If we say, "Oh well, they were just having a hard time and they're not going to do it anymore," that's an easy explanation that no one is willing to take. So perhaps some of these tabloid explanations are true, perhaps none of them are true. The reality is that the desire to know is going to drive people to read the articles. We do have attachments to these people. It's real.

If it were Kimye, we would have the breakup documented—whether it was staged 100 percent or a mixture of staged, scripted, and real. That's what we as a public have come to expect in many ways. So when you can't deliver that, it's crazy-making at this point, especially for people who've really developed a sense of closeness to you.

It's also important to talk about the social-media component of the coverage and not just the tabloid coverage. Because you see sadness and the mourning in mainstream media and in social media, but the other thing I think has been really interesting in social media coverage have been the memes of Jennifer Aniston laughing or saying "I told you so." It's not just Jennifer Aniston laughing, it's everyone laughing, because relationships can fail and now you're like every other couple. It's this mixture: "I wanted to have what they had, now it's totally blown up and I'm going to laugh at it."

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## **“People started to use the word as an adjective.”**

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**Kornhaber:** How did parenthood play a role in their fame?

**Díaz:** There's a movement in California to stop paparazzi from photographing celebrity children: California SB 606, which bans photographing a child because of the profession of their parent. This sort of controlling the images of celebrity



children has become a more prominent thing as celebrity children have become more valued and featured in magazines, so stars can receive the benefit more directly. Brangelina famously did this with the way in which they sold the pictures of their twins and their first-born Shiloh. They reportedly donated the money to charity, but it was still monetizing the children.

That kind of agency was the beginning of the shift where celebrities started taking control of their own images in different ways. The way that Brad and Angelina worked with paparazzi, for example: In my research, I have footage of them in New Orleans where they have their bodyguard out in front to make sure there's nobody blocking the shot, and they very generously allow the photographers to get as many uninterrupted shots of the family walking down the street as they want. They know: "We're public figures, our children are too, we're gonna protect ourselves in certain ways, but we are going to give the public what that requires. And then we're going to take the benefits of that by having a bidding war over images of our twins, and we will get paid \$14 million."

**Kornhaber:** What would you expect for Brad and Angelina now that they're no longer Brangelina? Will they remain defined by having been in this relationship?

**Díaz:** Brangelina, and all of the meanings of Brangelina, will live on beyond their marriage because it started before their marriage and it means much more than two of them as a couple. People started to use the word as an adjective; I remember doing an interview with a celebrity who described something as "Brangelina." I don't remember exactly what the context was but I knew exactly what they meant: To be Brangelina is to be extravagant, beautiful, sexy, romantic, exotic, adventurous, all these things the word has come to mean. I think that will continue.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**SPENCER KORNHABER** is a staff writer at The Atlantic covering pop culture and music.

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