

Celebrities: From Teachers to Friends

A Test of Two Hypotheses on the Adaptiveness of Celebrity Gossip

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Abstract In this paper we present two compatible hypotheses to explain interest in celebrity gossip. The Learning Hypothesis explains interest in celebrity gossip as a by-product of an evolved mechanism useful for acquiring fitness-relevant survival information. The Parasocial Hypothesis sees celebrity gossip as a diversion of this mechanism, which leads individuals to misperceive celebrities as people who are part of their social network. Using two preliminary studies, we tested our predictions. In a survey with 838 respondents and in-depth interviews with 103 individuals, we investigated how interest in celebrity gossip was related to several dimensions of the participants' social lives. In support of the Learning Hypothesis, age proved to be a strong predictor of interest in celebrities. In partial support of the Parasocial Hypothesis, media exposure, but not social isolation, was a strong predictor of interest in celebrities. The preliminary results support both theories, indicate that across our life span celebrities move from being teachers to being friends, and open up a list of future research opportunities.

Keywords Evolutionary approaches · Celebrity gossip · Social learning · Parasocial relationships

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Thus, our general definition of gossip is: *New and/or deviant information the traits/behaviors of others where the sender has true/false knowledge about gossip content.*

Strategy Learning Gossip and Reputation Gossip

As suggested above, this definition can also be divided into smaller sub-defin For example, De Backer (2005) distinguishes between strategy learning (SLG) and reputation gossip (RG). Behavioral information can sometimes interesting no matter who it concerns, but the behavioral information may be even more interesting if it is linked to a specific gossipee. When the gossip contains information relevant to the reputation of an individual, the gossip is labeled (Bromley 1993). Replacing the gossipee with another gossipee may change the of RG. For example "My brother is having an affair" is not the same as "My father having an affair." Sometimes, however, behavioral information can be valuable regardless of the identity of the gossipee, in which case it would be SLG. For example, "My brother got killed by a shark when he went swimming with dolphins" transmits the warning message that if you swim with dolphins, you risk getting killed by a shark. This fitness-relevant strategy information is preserved when we replace the gossipee with "my father." The adaptive value of SLG lies in the fact that receivers can vicariously learn from the successes and failures of others. As others (Bandura 1977; Carroll 1999, 2002; Pinker 1995; Scalise Sugiyama 1996; Williams 1966) have already argued, relying solely on one's own experiences to learn about adaptive problems the environment confronts us with can be extremely costly. By attending to information about the experiences of others, these costs can be minimized. Baumeister et al. (2004) have remarked that the value of SLG is independent of the exact identity of the gossipee. Of course, some identity information can be of value, such as the age and sex of the gossipee. Erikson (1959, 1980) proposed that we are faced with different problems across our life span. Problems younger people face, such as ego development or finding love, are not the same as problems older individuals face, such as problems of care and despair. Men and women or younger and older individuals sometimes face different adaptive problems, and SLG relevant for a 12-year-old girl is not necessarily relevant for a 60-year-old man as well.

According to Baumeister et al. (2004), SLG that concerns the exchange of information about social norms helps individuals learn how to behave in an acceptable fashion within their social group. We agree with them but suggest differentiating between social, mating, and survival SLG, each of which was shaped by different selection pressures. Social SLG refers to the kind of gossip that transmits information to individuals about social norms. Mating SLG concerns fitness-relevant information that teaches receivers how to deal with problems of attracting and guarding mates and also includes gossip about parental skills; survival SLG transmits information about life/death strategies: what is a safe place to live, what is safe to eat, and so forth. Whereas SLG is concerned with general information about ways to cope with one's life, RG focuses specifically on the reputations of gossipers and gossipees. The adaptive value of this kind of information rests on the fact that reputation

based on the intimate relation between the gossipers. Since this trust-based gossipers' relationship is lacking for celebrity gossip, which is dispensed through media channels, this form of gossip is less reliable than interpersonal gossip. Mass-mediated celebrity gossip has a reliability problem and as an act leans more toward being rumor.

There are other differences as well. For example, in classic interpersonal gossip, SLG can easily exist without RG being present in the same information. "Mister X was killed by a shark when swimming with dolphins," for example, is pure behavioral information. Replacing Mister X with a celebrity, such as Paris Hilton, changes the information: it gets an extra RG value for those who know (or know of) Paris Hilton. Because most celebrities are by definition well known, extra reputation information is most often present in celebrity gossip. Celebrity gossip is either pure RG or a combination of SLG and RG, but hardly ever solely SLG.

Although many studies have been done on celebrity worship in general (for an overview, see McCutcheon et al. 2002), only a few have focused on an explanation for why we crave gossip about celebrities, and these so far have relied exclusively on a proximate level of explanation (Bird 1992; Hermes 1995). To understand interest in celebrity gossip, we put forward two explanations. One focuses on the presence of SLG and sees celebrity gossip as an adaptive strategy, while the other focuses on the presence of RG and sees celebrity gossip as a recent by-product of interpersonal gossip, without a clear adaptive outcome.

The Adaptive Value of Gossip

Our interest in celebrity gossip can be explained by two different, but complementary hypotheses: the learning hypothesis and the parasocial hypothesis.

The Learning Hypothesis

The learning hypothesis says that celebrity gossip occurs because it teaches us about fitness-relevant strategies. The learning hypothesis focuses on SLG, transmitted through the media, about celebrities as gossipees. Celebrity gossip is a fast and cost-effective way to fill in our knowledge gaps about strategies important to succeed in daily life. The learning hypothesis treats celebrities as "teachers" in our mass-mediated societies. Although the mass media audience may have the feeling that they know these stars, actual encounters with these individuals are (virtually) nonexistent, and in this sense celebrities are strangers and become valuable as gossipees only because celebrities or other subjects of social-learning gossip carry fitness-relevant strategy information.

Celebrities, however, have an advantage over complete strangers as subjects of SLG. Learning mechanisms are shaped by natural selection, and individuals are selective in their copying behavior (Richerson and Boyd 1992). According to Henrich and Gil-White (2001:176), we are most likely to copy higher-status others. It has been argued (Barkow 1976, 1989; Boyd and Richerson 1985; Henrich and Gil-White 2001; Henrich et al. 2001) that mimicking the behavior of higher-status people is an adaptive strategy that might lead to an increase in one's own status.

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these gossip stories transmit mating SLG that teaches the media audience how with problems of break-ups. But most consumers are interested in these stories because they are about Jennifer Aniston, Brad Pitt, or Angelina Jolie. People follow lives of these celebrities, and some even get emotional when hearing about the break-up of celebrity couples. The reason for this is that some individuals may establish a bond with celebrities. As Caughey (1984:33) says: "people characterize unmet figures as if they were intimately involved with them, and in a sense they are." Barkow (1989, 1992) added to this an ultimate explanation. He believes that celebrity gossip is a recent by-product of interpersonal gossip. Our modern minds are adapted to recently emerged environments, such as the media environment. In the modern, mass-mediated environment *mismatches* with the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA), in which our minds were shaped by natural selection. Specifically, photographic/audiovisual stimuli are too recent a phenomenon for Stone-Age minds to be adapted to. When we see an image of a media character (celebrity), our brain processes this information as an encounter with a real person. This happens regularly, as is the case with celebrities who are always in the news. The brain starts accumulating these encounters and makes us (falsely) believe that these people are part of our social networks: "We see them in our bedrooms, we hear their voices when we dine: If this hypothesis is correct, how are we not to perceive them as our kin, our friends, or even our rivals? As a result, we automatically process information about their physical health, about changes in their relative standing above all about their sexual relationships" (Barkow 1992:629–630).

One peculiar thing about the interactions of ordinary individuals with celebrities is that celebrities reveal their private lives to the audience (or have them revealed involuntarily), and this audience responds emotionally toward the celebrities. However, the audience does not share their private lives with celebrities; celebrities do not show strong emotions toward their audience. Interactions in which reciprocity is lacking are called *parasocial* interactions (Horton and Wohl 1956; Rubin et al. 1985; Turner 2004). Celebrities are parasocial, or one-way, members of our social networks. Aniston, Pitt, and Jolie are one-way friends, one-way rivals, or one-way rivals to the individuals who encounter these stars in the media on a regular basis and "believe" them to be part of their social network. This explains why people want to learn about these specific celebrities, and why some will manipulate their reputations using RG.

As is the case for the exchange of RG about people who really are in our social network, the exchange of RG about celebrities creates feelings of unity. In the modern world, celebrity gossip is used in an interpersonal setting (Benwell 2001; Riegel 2001). Individuals gossiping about celebrities feel connected to each other. In our modern societies, the interpersonal bases of our daily gossip conversations may be fading, and feelings of unity with our neighbors are disappearing. This happens because we are gossiping across the fence, maintaining the social bonds with the people surrounding us. This does not occur in big cities where one hardly ever meets one's neighbors (Putnam 1998a,b). In this context celebrity gossip can be of great value in creating feelings of unity among estranged individuals. Social isolation and individualization have become a common experience in many Western societies, leading to increased feelings of loneliness that influence one's self-perception (see work of Putnam

Methodology

An anonymous questionnaire was distributed to 1,000 Flemish (Belgian) respondents with the help of 100 graduate students from Ghent University. We used a purposive sampling method to recruit participants. Each interviewer was responsible for distributing 10 questionnaires during the 2003 two-week Christmas holidays. They were asked to use quotas to come to an equal male/female and age distribution. All of our Belgian respondents volunteered to take part in this research, and they were not rewarded for participation. From the returned questionnaires, 838 were completed and included in this study. Of these, 397 were filled out by men and 441 by women. Ages ranged from 10 to 82 and did not differ between the sexes (unpaired Independent Samples *t*-test for Equality of Means): $M_{\text{age}}=34.9\pm13.6$ years for women, $M_{\text{age}}=34.2\pm15.9$ years for men ($t_{834}=-0.64$, $p=0.52$).

All respondents were presented with 31 stories about media characters. They were presented only written information. Names and ages of all characters were mentioned in each story. To maximize opportunities to alternate sex and age of characters being gossiped about, we used two versions of the survey. Each version contained the same exact stories, but we changed the characters being gossiped about. Each survey contained 42 characters (some stories involved two characters) and in total we used 84 celebrity characters. These were all well-known Belgian international celebrities of different age groups. Sexes were equally represented (42 male and 42 female), and the histogram in Fig. 1 shows that there is a slight overrepresentation of characters between 20 and 30 years of age, and characters between 50 and 65, and some overrepresentation of characters age 35–40. We tested for normality of this distribution and concluded that the ages of the characters used followed a normal distribution (Kolmogorov–Smirnov $p>0.1$), ranging from age 18 to age 76, with an average of 35.81 (SD=10.64).

All stories were collected from very recent gossip magazines or the Internet, some of the stories were invented or changed a little to present “new” information. All stories contained SLG and RG information about one or two well-known celebrities. For all stories, we asked the respondents “How interested are you in this story?” and they answered using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 7 (“very much”). With this question we measured the respondents’ interest in each separate celebrity gossip story. For each respondent we then averaged all of their separate scores and recoded this in a new variable: “celebrity gossip interest.” This variable ranged from 1 (“having no celebrity gossip interest”) to 7 (“having a high celebrity gossip interest”).

In the second part of the questionnaire we asked the respondents about their media use. To measure media exposure we made use of a list of variables that indicate exposure to media in which news about celebrities is likely to be found. The variables we used were “reading gossip magazines,” “reading newspapers,” “watching television series,” “watching movies at home,” “watching movie theaters,” and “watching the news.” The respondents had to indicate how often they engaged in each of these activities. Here we used 1–9 Likert scales ranging from 1 (“never”) to 9 (“very often, more than once a day”).

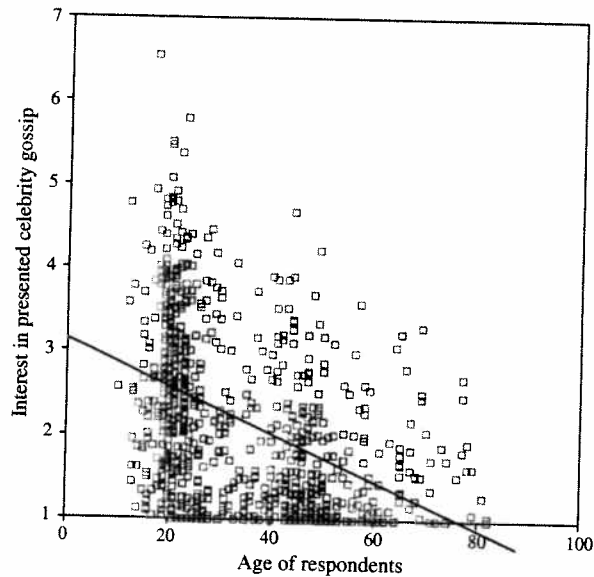
In the third and last series of questions we asked the respondents some personal

Table 1 The effect of age, media exposure, and relocation on celebrity gossip interest

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	<i>t</i>
	B	SE	β	
(Constant)	0.14	0.39		5.5
Age of respondents	0.03	0	-0.47	-9.2
Relocation	0.01	0	0.07	1.5
<i>Media exposure variables</i>				
Gossip magazines	0.08	0.02	0.14	3.9
Biographies	0.05	0.03	0.06	1.8
Television series	0.08	0.02	0.19	5.3
Movie at home	0.04	0.02	0.06	1.7
Movie at theater	0	0.04	0	0.0
Newspapers	0.04	0.02	0.07	1.9
Television news	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.3
<i>Control variables</i>				
Number of friends	0.01	0.01	-0.02	-0.7
Real-life friendship satisfaction	0.03	0.04	-0.03	-0.9
Number of people living with	0.02	0.02	-0.03	-0.8

Dependent variable: celebrity gossip interest (scoring from 1 to 7).

exposed to media in which celebrities are presented or talked about will also the strongest interest in celebrity gossip. However, the prediction of the partial hypothesis that people who have recently moved to a new location will be interested in celebrity gossip was not supported, as the relocation variable was not a significant predictor of interest in celebrity gossip ($\beta_{\text{relocation}}=0.07$, $p>0.05$). Similarly, there was no significant relationship between interest in gossip and



Methodology

Nine professional interviewers interviewed 103 participants who were distributed among 14 focus groups composed of people of similar ages. We recruited adolescents (younger than 18), 32 young adults (age 18–30), 23 adults (age 31–45), 17 middle-aged adults (age 46–60), and 15 elderly people living in a home for the elderly (all more than 65 years old). For each age group we set up a focus group with only male participants, only female participants, and, if possible, an extra group with mixed-sex participants. The focus group size varied from 5 to 10 participants; most groups reached an ideal average size of 6–8 participants (Morgan and Smith 1998).

All three adolescent focus groups were interviewed at the same high school. Elderly respondents were interviewed at two homes for the elderly. To recruit other respondents we used snowball sampling, in combination with distribution in public places. We always insured that respondents interacted with an interviewer they did not know. To reduce bias and make the procedures as standardized as possible, all interviewers used a semi-structured questionnaire with a fixed set of topics to discuss.

Results

The results of our second in-depth study indicate that younger people indeed are the biggest consumers of celebrity gossip. When asked how often they read or listen to about celebrities, the adolescents gave responses like “Daily!” or “Realizing I’m kidding, daily!” When asked whom they gossiped about, adolescents mentioned names such as David Beckham, Orlando Bloom, Johnny Depp, Christina Aguilera, Anna Kournikova, Roberto Carlos, Angelina Jolie, Cameron Diaz, Jennifer Lopez, Brad Pitt, and so on. It was striking that none of them named any Belgian celebrities, especially since all respondents were Belgian. When asked about the reason for their interest, they replied that Belgian stars are “stupid,” they are “dull, foolish and cannot act.” They like American celebrities because these are known by larger audiences and are therefore considered more prestigious. When asked *why* they gossiped about celebrities, adolescents reported that they admire the glitter and glamour of international stars: “Yes, seriously, like on ‘Cribs’ [television program] they show their houses, with pool and four cars ... [to which all other adolescents were screaming, “Yes, yes!”]. But yeah, you can only dream of ever having this house!” (Male adolescent). Girls reported talking a lot about how celebrities dress and how they could copy their style: “You know what I like best? When they [celebrities in magazines] judge dressing styles, like ‘Oh my god, stars wear this and that,’ other girls giggle and agree” (Female adolescent). Overall the results from the adolescent interviewees indicate that they talk most about the behaviors of celebrities from which they can learn something. Celebrities are “teachers” from whom they learn how to dress, how to impress, from whom they learn what is right and what is wrong to do in a society. These answers indicate that for young adolescents the social learning hypothesis best explains their celebrity gossip interest. Some responses from interviewed adolescents were also in line with the parasocial hypothesis.

upstairs in your room, you are alone" (Elderly woman), and "It is not only [home for the elderly], remember this! Whenever you go outside, you are a yourself. If you are waiting for the bus for instance We live in a very eg society. Everyone for himself. I used to have many social contacts; with hundre people from everywhere" (Elderly man). Their real-life social contacts with about whom they once gossiped get replaced by celebrities as parasocial m acquaintances. Celebrities console, give friendship satisfaction, and interper gossip about those parasocial friends has the extra benefit of tightening up the real-life social contacts they still have.

Discussion

Our in-depth interviews with 103 Flemish Belgians indicate that:

- Younger people consume the most celebrity gossip, especially about internat stars. Adolescents seem to be attracted to it because they want to learn hc achieve prestige.
- Young adults have the least interest in celebrity gossip. Their interest is in Belgian and international stars and stems more from a feeling of connectec to the gossipees.
- Elderly people have an increased celebrity gossip interest compared younger adults, but they care primarily about Belgian celebrities. Their cele (gossip) interest clearly stems from parasocial bonds they establish with n characters, to fill up their real-life social network niches.

These results confirm that the learning hypothesis offers the best explanatio why younger individuals are attracted to celebrity gossip, as our particip frequently and specifically mentioned the opportunity to know how to dress an as motivations for paying attention to celebrity gossip. As people age, the lea function of celebrity gossip appears to become less important as the paras function of celebrity gossip appears to increase, especially among the elderly.

General Discussion

A number of previous researchers have proposed that following the live celebrities can provide useful information for living one's life as well as prc surrogate friendships and mutual acquaintances with others in highly mo individualistic societies (Bird 1992; Caughey 1984; Hermes 1995; Johnson 2 Levin and Kimmel 1977; Locke 1998a,b). In line with this previous thinking proposed two explanations for why so many people like celebrity gossip: learning hypothesis and the parasocial hypothesis. The first explains the intere all in strategy learning gossip about celebrities, because we can vicariously lea enhance our fitness from the trials and errors of others. This hypothesis predi higher interest in celebrity gossip from less-experienced individuals. The paras hypothesis anticipates additional interest in reputation gossip about celebrities ; those who establish parasocial bonds with celebrities. This hvnothesis predicts r

family member/other person in the past week?" and "How many times did a family member/other person visit you in the past week?" Such questions are easier to respond to, and they might provide a better indication of the quality of social life.

Finally, in this study we did not focus on other factors that would be interesting to incorporate in future studies. For instance, we did not focus on *sex differences* in celebrity gossip interest, but sex differences in celebrity gossip interest have been studied before. Some (Bird 1992; Hermes 1995; Hess and Hagen 2006) have argued that women have a greater interest in celebrities, while others have argued (Levin and McCutcheon et al. 2002) that men's celebrity gossip interest exceeds women's. Bird (1992) and Hermes (1995) interviewed readers of gossip magazines designed for women and found that men's main motivation was to learn about celebrities and that women are more interested in establishing parasocial bonds with celebrities. However, the surface of this potentially fruitful line of research has barely been scratched.

Also, as has been suggested by Kanazawa (2004), the interest in celebrity gossip as a function of establishing one-way social bonds with these individuals might be explained by our parasocial hypothesis, which might be dependent on *general intelligence*. It would be interesting for future research to test whether general intelligence correlates with celebrity gossip interest, and whether it correlates most strongly with those individuals whose motivation to consume celebrity gossip is driven by a desire to create one-way relationships with celebrities.

It might be interesting to investigate certain personality traits further in the context of celebrity-gossip-interest research. Studies of the spread of interpersonal gossip have shown that anxiety plays an important role in the sharing of gossip. Anthony's (1973) study showed that more-anxious people report increased interest in gossip, and Rosnow and Fine (1976) have added to this that anxious people are more eager to spread gossip around as well. If celebrity gossip serves the same functions as interpersonal gossip, similar effects might be expected. Also, personality factors, such as extroversion versus introversion, can be expected to influence celebrity gossip interest. Overall it would be useful for future research to link celebrity gossip interest to some personality measurement scales such as the Big Five, or scales that measure anxiety levels.

As a last suggestion for future studies, we would like to mention that the parasocial hypothesis predicts changes in celebrity gossip interest for women during their menstrual cycle. If it is true that individuals are attracted to celebrities because they regard these people as one-way members of their social network, it can be assumed that both men's and women's celebrity gossip interest is driven by desires for potential mates. Menstrual cycle studies have shown that women's desire for potential mates increases when they reach peak fertility during their cycle (Regan 1996) and that women engage more in social activities during their high fertility period (Grammer et al. 1997). In line with these studies, women can be expected to show increased interest in celebrity gossip, as a means of meeting (one-way) potential mates during the most fertile point in their menstrual cycles.

In general we conclude that this field of research has been highly neglected. For those whose interests lie primarily with celebrity gossip, the research

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