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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Theories and Processes
Definitions of gossip

Foster (2004) and Gelman (2004) have offered clear definitions of gossip which can be broken down into sub-defining concepts. Foster (2004) defines gossip as "a type of disclosure based on function (i.e., the potential functional roles of gossip)". Gelman (2004) has argued, however, that the functional roles of gossip can include the disclosure of news, probably not as a way to distinguish gossip from other forms of communication, but as a way to disseminate information for which there is no other way to classify as rumor. In both definitions, gossip is a property of the content of the message and the same information is not considered as gossip if it is shared in an inappropriate context. Consider a society where wearing pants is not considered as normal, where curiosity (Taylor 1996) and we would restrict the category "New" (Taylor 1996) to just the information that has been identified as people who would act in a pattern (self-deviant behavior is displayed, norm-deviant habits would be exhibited, etc.).
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-defs. For example, De Backer (2005) distinguishes between strategy learning (SLG) and reputation gossip (RG). Behavioral information can sometimes be 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 RG (Bromley 1993). Replacing the gossipee with another gossipee may change the nature of RG. For example “My brother is having an affair” is not the same as “My father is having an affair.” Sometimes, however, behavioral information can be very interesting regardless of the identity of the gossipee, in which case it would be SLG. “My brother got killed by a shark when he went swimming with dolphins” is 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 gossipee with “my father.” The adaptive value of SLG lies in the fact that we 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 experience is not the best way to learn about adaptive problems the environments confront us with can be very 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 information can be of value, such as the age and sex of the gossipee. Erikson (1959, 198 proposed that we are faced with different problems across our life span: problems younger people face, such as ego development or finding love, are 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 problems, and SLG is relevant for a 12-year-old girl is not necessarily relevant to 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 by different selection pressures. Social SLG refers to the kind of gossip that teaches receivers how to deal with problems of attracting and guarding 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 continue one's life, RG focuses specifically on the reputations of gossipers and gossipee adaptative 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.
these gossip stories transmit mating SLG that teaches the media audience how with problems of break-ups. But most consumers are interested in these stori because they are about Jennifer Aniston, Brad Pitt, or Angelina Jolie. People foll lives of these celebrities, and some even get emotional when hearing about the br 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 the Barkow (1989, 1992) added to this an ultimate explanation. He believes that ce gossip is a recent by-product of interpersonal gossip. Our modern minds a adapted to recently emerged environments, such as the media environmen modern, mass-mediated environment mismatches with the environment of evo ary adaptedness (EEA), in which our minds were shaped by natural sel Specifically, photographic/audiovisual stimuli are too recent a phenomenon! Stone-Age minds to be adapted to. When we see an image of a media chara celebrity), our brain processes this information as an encounter with a real per this happens regularly, as is the case with celebrities who are always in the ne brain starts accumulating these encounters and makes us (falsely) believe tha people are part of our social networks: “We see them in our bedrooms, we het voices when we dine: If this hypothesis is correct, how are we not to perceive th our kin, our friends, or even our rivals? As a result, we automatically information about their physical health, about changes in their relative standin above all about their sexual relationships” (Barkow 1992:629–630).

One peculiar thing about the interactions of ordinary individuals with cele is that celebrities reveal their private lives to the audience (or have them re involuntarily), and this audience responds emotionally toward the celel However, the audience does not share their private lives with celebritie celebrities do not show strong emotions toward their audience. Interactions in reciprocity is lacking are called parasocial interactions (Horton and Wohl Rubin et al. 1985; Turner 2004). Celebrities are parasocial, or one-way, memt our social networks. Aniston, Pitt, and Jolie are one-way friends, one-way l one-way rivals to the individuals who encounter these stars in the media on a r 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 w manipulate their reputations using RG.

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

An anonymous questionnaire was distributed to 1,000 Flemish (Belgian) residents 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<sub>age</sub>=34.9±13.6 years for men, M<sub>age</sub>=34.2±15.9 years for women (t<sub>634</sub>=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 character age 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 the 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.” The variable ranged from 1 (“having no celebrity gossip interest”) to 7 (“having very high celebrity gossip interest”).

In the second part of the questionnaire we asked the respondents about 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. Variables we used were “reading gossip magazines,” “reading newspapers,” “watching television series,” “watching movies at home,” “watching movie theater,” 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
exposed to media in which celebrities are presented or talked about will also be
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
significant predictor of interest in celebrity gossip ($\beta_{\text{relocation}}=0.07$, $p$
Similarly, there was no significant relationship between interest in gossip and

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unstandardized coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized coefficients $\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of respondents</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relocation</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media exposure variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gossip magazines</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographies</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television series</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie at home</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie at theater</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television news</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of friends</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real-life friendship satisfaction</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people living with</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

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

Results

The results of our second in-depth study indicate that younger people indeed
biggest consumers of celebrity gossip. When asked how often they read or
about celebrities, the adolescents gave responses like “Daily!” or “Real
kidding, daily!” When asked whom they gossiped about, adolescents men
names such as David Beckham, Orlando Bloom, Johnny Depp, Christina Ag
Anna Kournikova, Roberto Carlos, Angelina Jolie, Cameron Diaz, Jennifer |,
Brad Pitt, and so on. It was striking that none of them named any Belgian celeb
especially since all respondents were Belgian. When asked about the reason fi
they replied that Belgian stars are “stupid,” they are “dull, foolish and canno
They like American celebrities because these are known by larger audiences a
therefore considered more prestigious. When asked why they gossiped celeb
celebrities, adolescents reported that they admire the glitter and glare
international stars: “Yes, seriously, like on ‘Crib’s’ [television program] they
their houses, with pool and four cars ... [to which all other adolescent
screaming, “Yes, yes!”]. But yeah, you can only dream of ever having this
you?” (Male adolescent). Girls reported talking a lot about how celebrities dr
they could copy their style: “You know what I like best? When they [magazines] judge dressing styles, like “Oh my god, stars wear this and the
other girls giggle and agree] (Female adolescent). Overall the results from
adolescent interviewees indicate that they talk most about the behaviors of cele
from which they can learn something. Celebrities are “teachers” from whom
learn how to dress, how to impress, from whom they learn what is right and w
wrong to do in a society. These answers indicate that for young adolescents
learning hypothesis best explains their celebrity gossip interest. Some respo
interviewed adolescents were also in line with the parasocial hypot
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 hundred
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 connectex
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 particj
frequently and specifically mentioned the opportunity to know how to dress an
as motivations for paying attention to celebrity gossip. As people age, the lead
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 pr
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: lea
learning hypothesis and the parasocial hypothesis. The first explains the inte
all in strategy learning gossip about celebrities, because we can vicariously lea
enhance our fitness from the trials and errors of others. This hypothesis pred
higher interest in celebrity gossip from less-experienced individuals. The para
hypothesis anticipates additional interest in reputation gossip about celebrities :
those who establish parasocial bonds with celebrities. This hypothesis predicts :
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 qua-
social life.

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

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

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

As a last suggestion for future studies, we would like to mention the 
parasocial hypothesis predicts changes in celebrity gossip interest for women
their menstrual cycle. If it is true that individuals are attracted to celebrity 
because they regard these people as one-way members of their social network,
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 increases when they reach peak fertility during their cycle (Regan 1996) 
that women engage more in social activities during their high fertility ( 
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) po
mates during the most fertile point in their menstrual cycles.

In general we conclude that this field of research has been highly neglect-
for those whose interests lie primarily with celebrity gossip the res


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Abstract

The West evolved in a world where marriage, whether consensual or not, was the norm. Such situations provide a basis for the evolution of marital monogamy. The norm in preindustrial societies was that marriage was between one man and one woman. This norm is still in force in many societies today (Sahlins 1968; Foster 1975; Fox 1982; Engel and Finkel 1996; and many other studies). Monogamy and polygamy have been described as two ends of a spectrum of marriage types (Bohlin 1977). Monogamy became the norm because it is associated with increased fertility (Bohlin 1977; Espindle and Espindle 1988; and many other studies).

Keywords

Inbreeding

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