

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Celebrity Worship, Social Media Use, and Mental Health

Adoració a celebritats, ús de mitjans socials i salut mental

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, social media use has become increasingly popular including its use by celebrities. Related to this, research has indicated that a minority of individuals may develop a psychological dependence on celebrities that can lead to obsessions and diminished functioning. Although research has also shown that worshipping celebrities can have positive consequences, research has also shown that there is an association between the pathological aspects of celebrity worship and poor mental health such as high anxiety, increased depression, high stress levels and poor body image. Moreover, there appears to be evidence that pathological celebrity worship has increased over the past two decades and one of the primary reasons for this may be increased social media use by both celebrities and their fans.

Keywords

celebrity worship; celebrity obsession; social media; mental health; addiction

Resum

En les últimes dues dècades, l'ús de les xarxes socials s'ha tornat cada vegada més popular, incloent-hi el seu ús per part de celebritats. En relació amb això, la investigació ha indicat que una minoria d'individus pot desenvolupar una dependència psicològica de les celebritats que pot portar a obsessions i a un funcionament disminuït. Tot i que la investigació també ha mostrat que l'adoració a les celebritats pot tenir conseqüències positives, també s'ha demostrat que hi ha una associació entre els aspectes patològics de l'adoració a les celebritats i la mala salut mental, com alta ansietat, augment de la depressió, alts nivells d'estrès, i una mala imatge corporal. A més, sembla haver-hi evidència que l'adoració patològica a les celebritats ha augmentat en les últimes dues dècades i una de les principals raons d'això pot ser l'augment de l'ús de les xarxes socials tant per part de les celebritats com dels seus seguidors.

Paraules clau

adoració a celebritats; obsessió per celebritats; mitjans de comunicació social; salut mental; addicció

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1. Introduction

Social media use has become increasingly popular. One of the most interesting developments is the use of social media by celebrities. Increasing numbers of celebrities cultivate their fanbase through social media platforms such as Instagram (sharing their personal photos and videos, promoting their latest activities, etc.). Related to this, research over the past two decades has indicated that a minority of individuals may develop a psychological dependence on celebrities (Chia & Poo 2009) through parasocial (one-sided) relationships (Giles, 2000) that can lead to obsessions and diminished functioning (Maltby *et al.* 2003). Such obsessional behaviour may be facilitated (and possibly on the increase) through celebrities' increased use of social media.

Research has also shown that worshipping celebrities can have positive consequences. People who worship celebrities for entertainment and social reasons have been found to be more optimistic, outgoing, and happy (Maltby *et al.* 2004). However, those who worship celebrities for personal reasons have been found to be more obsessive, more depressed, more anxious, more solitary, more impulsive, more anti-social, and more troublesome (Maltby *et al.* 2004).

A growing research base has examined the relationship between celebrity worship and many different factors such as demographic variables (e.g., Zsila *et al.* 2021; Swami *et al.* 2011), parental relationships (e.g., Cheung & Yue 2012; Scharf & Levy 2015), peer relationships (e.g., Engle & Kasser 2005; Greenwood & Long 2011), self-esteem (e.g., North *et al.* 2007; Reeves *et al.* 2012), personality traits (e.g., McCutcheon *et al.* 2021; Maltby *et al.* 2011), mental health (e.g., Reyes *et al.* 2016; Maltby & Day 2017; Sheridan *et al.* 2007), self-harm (Zsila *et al.* 2020), psychoactive substance use (Zsila *et al.* 2020) and obsessive/compulsive behaviours (e.g., McCutcheon *et al.* 2016; Maltby *et al.* 2006; Zsila *et al.* 2018).

2. Celebrity Worship Syndrome

Extreme celebrity fanship has been termed by some scholars as "celebrity worship syndrome" (CWS; Sanjaya & Rahmasari 2023). CWS has been described as an obsessive-addictive disorder where an individual becomes overly involved and interested (i.e., completely obsessed) with the details of the personal life of a celebrity (Swaminathan 2020). It is commonly believed that the first use of the term "celebrity worship syndrome" was in a UK newspaper article by the journalist James Chapman who was reporting on a study by Maltby *et al.* (2003). Any person who is "in the public eye" can be the object of a person's obsession (e.g., authors, politicians, journalists), but research and criminal prosecutions suggest they are more likely to be someone from the world of television, film and/or pop music (Boon & Lomore 2001; Sheridan *et al.* 2007).

In relation to personality traits, CWS has been particularly associated with neuroticism (McCutcheon *et al.* 2021; McCutcheon & Lowinger 2011; Maltby *et al.* 2011; Swami *et al.* 2011), a factor that may lead individuals to use social media as a coping mechanism.

This may also be a foundation for the development of CWS, manifested through parasocial interactions (Bowden-Green *et al.* 2021; Song *et al.* 2014; Zsila *et al.* 2018). Relatedly, some individuals may seek to fulfil a “need for belong” through parasocial relationships with celebrities (Aw & Labrecque 2020; Malik *et al.* 2021; Gleason *et al.* 2017). In fact, a recent study suggested that the need to belong moderated the relationship between celebrity attachment and parasocial interaction (Aw & Labrecque 2020).

3. Celebrity Worship as an Addiction

To explain celebrity worship, McCutcheon *et al.* (2002) developed the Absorption Addiction Model (AAM). The AAM posits that some people seek validation through the admiration of celebrities and can manifest as a behavioural addiction. This can result in excessive and potentially delusional behaviours that sustain a one-sided parasocial relationship. The AAM is conceptualized as having three levels (McCutcheon *et al.*, 2002). These are on a continuum and named (i) entertainment-social (ES), (ii) intense-personal (IP), and (iii) borderline pathological (BP). More specifically:

- Level 1: The entertainment-social dimension relates to attitudes where individuals are attracted to a celebrity because of their perceived ability to entertain and to become a social focus of conversation with likeminded others.
- Level 2: The intense-personal dimension relates to individuals that have intense and compulsive feelings about a celebrity.
- Level 3: The borderline-pathological dimension relates to individuals who display uncontrollable (and sometimes illegal) behaviours and fantasies relating to a celebrity.

These three levels can be assessed using the 23-item Celebrity Attitudes Scale (CAS; McCutcheon *et al.* 2002). The ES factor is assessed with ten items (e.g., “My friends and I like to discuss what my favourite celebrity has done”), the IP factor with nine items (e.g., “I have frequent thoughts about my favourite celebrity, even when I don’t want to”), and the BP factor with four items (e.g., “I often feel compelled to learn the habits of my favourite celebrity”). It is the third factor that is considered to be the most problematic.

Research has indicated that individuals in Levels 2 and 3 demonstrate increased psychopathological symptoms, narcissistic tendencies, cognitive inflexibility, and poor coping strategies (Ashe *et al.* 2005; Maltby *et al.* 2003, 2004; Martin *et al.* 2003). Moreover, there appears to be evidence that pathological celebrity worship has increased over the past two decades. McCutcheon and Aruguete (2021) examined scores on the CAS from 35 studies from 2001 to 2021. In the earliest five studies, the mean percentage of those scoring as pathological celebrity worshippers was 6.34% whereas the mean percentage in the five most recent studies was 26.61%. Among the primary reasons for this increase could be the rise of social media, and the increasing use of it by celebrities to connect with their fans (i.e., celebrities can now interact – if they want – hour by hour with their fan base) and the increase in general media coverage surrounding celebrity and celebrity lives (including a large increase in reality TV starring celebrities and an increase in the number of celebrity gossip magazines) (Binding 2016).

Among adults, the research has shown that there is an association between the pathological aspects of celebrity worship and poor mental health such as high anxiety, increased depression, high stress levels, and increased illness (Sansone & Sansone 2014). Among teenage females there is a relationship between intense-personal celebrity

worship and body image (i.e., teenage girls who identify with celebrities have much poorer body image compared to other groups) (Maltby *et al.* 2005). More recent research has shown that following celebrities on social media is associated with poor mental health, including body image dissatisfaction and drive for thinness (Ho *et al.* 2016). Moreover, celebrity-obsessed individuals often suffer high levels of dissociation and fantasy-proneness (Maltby *et al.* 2006).

Zsila *et al.* (2018) examined the relationship of between celebrity worship and compulsive behaviours (problematic internet use, maladaptive daydreaming, desire for fame). It was found that a high level of celebrity worship was associated with problematic internet use, maladaptive daydreaming, and desire for fame. Females were more likely than males to be obsessed with celebrities. The same team carried out a study examining the relationships between celebrity worship, self-harming behaviours, and psychoactive substance use (Zsila *et al.* 2020). It was reported that a high level of celebrity worship was significantly associated with (i) intentional self-injury and suicide attempts and (ii) illicit drug use.

4. Celebrity Obsession: A Personal View

My own view is that celebrity infatuation is generally not something to particularly worry about because anecdotal evidence suggests they tend to be intense but relatively short-lived admiration for the person. However, celebrity obsessions can be of a lot more concern. At the simplest level, a celebrity obsession is when someone constantly thinks about a particular celebrity in a way that most people would describe as abnormal. This can be to the point where the obsession conflicts with most other things in the individual's life including job or education (depending upon age), other relationships, and other hobbies.

A person's whole life can revolve around the celebrity and such individuals can end up spending way beyond their disposable income by buying their merchandise (CDs, DVDs, books, perfumes, clothing lines, etc.) and/or seeing them live on stage (singing, acting, etc.). There is no single explanation as to why someone might develop a celebrity obsession, but many appear to start with a sexual attraction to the celebrity in question and have fantasies of what they would do if they met their object of desire.

In relation to problematic behaviour and negative impacts on mental health, it can depend on both the time and money spent on celebrity fanship activities. For one person, an obsession (at least in the short-term) can be fine, but for another it can be very problematic. If a fan works in a low paid job and they're following their hero around the country, watching them night after night on tour and buying merchandise, they do not have the disposable income to do it. Others can financially afford to do that but may not be able to afford the time.

5. Conclusion

Social media appears to be one of the clear influences that has affected how preoccupied individuals have become with the lives of celebrities. The rise of the mass media (including social media) is directly related to the increase in parasocial relationships with famous people. Individuals feel as if they know the celebrity, even though they may have never met them. They know the intricacies of their whole lives. They read about them

in magazines, see their posts on social media, watch documentaries about them. Consequently, some individuals can develop emotional relationships with celebrities who they have never met personally. Social media is one part of a bigger jigsaw but is a key piece.

Celebrities now have a direct relationship with their fans that they never had before. Therefore, when they put things out on their social media platforms, fans who are particularly susceptible or vulnerable, have parasocial relationships and think the celebrity is communicating directly with them. The rise of social media has perpetuated the celebrity culture in terms of people 'following' other people, habitually wanting to know everything that they're doing, in their lives.

As aforementioned, those experiencing pathological celebrity worship tend to have worse mental health. Such individuals are more likely to be anxious, depressed, to have high stress levels, and increased bouts of illness. More specific research has shown that following celebrities on social media is associated with poor mental health, including body image dissatisfaction and drive for thinness. Therefore, the sharp increase in celebrity worship observed over the past 20 years is likely to be related to increased access to information about celebrities on social media, which is associated with indicators of poor mental health.

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