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## When Good Celebrities “Go Bad:” Examining Celebrity Worship

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The term “celebrity worship syndrome” has been coined by psychologists to explain the seemingly neurotic, unhealthy, and morbid obsession with fame (Rojeck, 2011). The mere presence of a celebrity can cause fans to experience extreme emotional outbursts that are beyond their control (Hollander, 2010). An obsession with a celebrity may progress into negative or unhealthy qualities in an individual such as over identification with the celebrity or disconnection with the self (McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002). There have been many occurrences where a beloved celebrity went from being a wholesome, inspirational role model, to being perceived negatively. This study will examine the effect of a celebrity “gone bad” on the number of fans following the celebrity on social media websites, record sales, and celebrity endorsed products. The Celebrity Attitude Scale (Maltby, Giles, Barber, & McCutcheon, 2005) will be administered to determine a fans level of worship and will be used to predict whether a high level of worship will correlate with an individual maintaining their emotional and financial support of the celebrity.

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The notion that there are individuals in society who become so enthralled with the lives of celebrities is not unfamiliar to Americans. The term “celebrity worship syndrome” has been coined by psychologists to explain the phenomenon that is seen as a neurotic, unhealthy, even morbid obsession with fame which results in dysfunctional behavior (Rojeck, 2011). One-third of the population has been affected by celebrity worship syndrome, with some individuals more acutely influenced than others (Rojeck, 2011). Hollander (2010) refers to celebrity obsession as the ‘celebrity cult,’ insinuating an intense level of devotion that fans express towards their idols. The fame and mere presence of a celebrity has caused fans to experience extreme emotional outbursts that are beyond their control,

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many of which result in tears or an almost unnatural form of euphoria (Hollander, 2010).

The objects-relations theory proposes that “the desire for relationships is the key motivating force in human behavior” (Comer, 2007, p. 57). When applied to the concept of fame and celebrity worship, this theory suggests that fans may relate to celebrities in order to further develop their personal sense of self and their relationships with others.

People have always admired individuals who have achieved fame and success; however, it is only recently that this sense of celebrity worship has moved to such an extreme level. Dr. Stuart Fischhoff, spokesman for the APA, comments on the increase in celebrity worship, stating “you have a confluence of forces coming together in technology and the media to make it happen and it's worldwide and it's multiplying like lice” (Bouchez, 2006, p. 1). A low level of worship involves only the individual and may consist of watching or reading about the celebrity,

while a higher level of worship takes a more outward and social approach (McCutcheon et al., 2002). At the highest level of celebrity worship the individual experiences compulsive behaviors such as stalking, emotions such as empathy with regard to the successes and failures of their beloved celebrity, and an obsession with the details of their life (McCutcheon et al., 2002). Recent technology and the use of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter may be responsible for increasing the expansion of the current delusional beliefs pertaining to celebrities (McCutcheon et al., 2002).

Celebrity idolization is not all bad—idolization can inspire the gathering together of many individuals from all walks of life. The concept of modeling, developed by Albert Bandura, explains the process by which individuals learn behavior through observing and imitating others in their environment (Comer, 2007). Celebrities, therefore, may be looked up to as models of success by individuals in society. Fans aspire to imitate and form relationships with their favorite celebrities. This is known as a parasocial relationship: a one-sided relationship where one individual is keenly aware of the other, yet the sense of awareness is not reciprocated by the other party, as seen in the relationships between celebrities and fans (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). Derrick, Gabriel, and Tippin (2008) suggest that having a parasocial relationship with a celebrity is beneficial for individuals who suffer from low self-esteem or have difficulty with real interpersonal relationships. One-sided relationships pose very little threat of rejection towards the individuals who lack self-esteem (Derrick et al., 2008). Parasocial relationships can be used by individuals to examine and eventually find their ideal self—something that may be difficult to do in a real relationship (Derrick et al., 2008).

However, celebrity worship also has a dark and negative side. Researchers suggest that the intense emotional obsession with celebrities may progress into over identification or disconnection with the self (McCutcheon et al., 2002). Unfortunately, when celebrities are not positive role models, they become encouragers of bad behavior. For example, the idea that females must be thin in order to be beautiful comes from the media and the celebrities themselves; evidence has been found linking celebrity worship and body image in female adolescents (Maltby, Giles, Barber, & McCutcheon, 2005). The increasing acceptance of cosmetic surgery in women has been linked with celebrity worship (Swami, Taylor, & Carvalho, 2009). Swami et al., (2009) investigated the mental and emotional factors linked to having cosmetic surgery and found a highly significant correlation between the acceptance of cosmetic surgery and an individual's

attitude towards celebrities (Swami et al., 2009). Furthermore, experiencing an intense, personal level of celebrity worship was the strongest predictor in the acceptance of cosmetic surgery (Swami et al., 2009). Various studies report that a greater level of media exposure was found to correlate with a greater desire to have cosmetic surgery (Henderson-King & Brooks, 2009; Sperry, Thompson, Sarwer, & Cash, 2009; Swami et al., 2008). Other negative traits that have been connected to celebrities such as narcissism (Jayson, 2009) and illegal drug use (Shaw, Whitehead, & Giles, 2010) pose a risk for fans of all ages.

There have been numerous occurrences when a “good” celebrity role model has “gone bad.” For example, Miley Cyrus started out her career as an adorable and innocent young girl, and now she smokes marijuana on stage in front of scores of young people, and dances in a vulgar fashion on a married man while wearing a barely-there outfit. Miley Cyrus is in a position of power—her fame allows her to influence so many people, adolescents in particular.

Justin Bieber started out as a chubby-cheeked boy who sang about love. The young singer has since then been caught smoking marijuana, consuming alcohol even though he is underage, as well as a host of other offenses that took place both in the United States and abroad. Perhaps one of the most insensitive, self-entitled offenses on Justin Bieber's list occurred in the Netherlands while visiting the Anne Frank museum—Bieber's entry in the guestbook read “Truly inspiring to be able to come here. Anne was a great girl. Hopefully she would have been a belieber” (Anne Frank House). Bieber's narcissism was displayed as he took a tragic and historical event and turned it into publicity.

While the risk of celebrity worship is evident for all ages, certain individuals are more affected than others. Psychologists and researchers have examined the psychology behind celebrity worship in order to understand why certain individuals are affected more than others. The Celebrity Attitude Scale, originally developed by McCutcheon et al., (2002) and later revised into a 23-item version by Maltby et al., (2005), was developed for the purpose of facilitating research on celebrity worship. There are various forms of celebrity worship which may be associated with both the personality and characteristics of the affected individuals, as well as any mental health problems that these individuals may have (North, Sheridan, Maltby, & Gillett, 2007). Poor psychological well-being is one of the factors that are associated with individuals who become obsessed with celebrities (Maltby, McCutcheon, Ashe, & Houran, 2001). The obsession that

fans experience towards celebrities was researched using the absorption-addiction model (Maltby et al., 2001). This model predicts that an interest in celebrities will spark during adolescence or a period in life where an individual is seeking guidance. The peak of interest represents the “absorption” aspect of this model. Absorption, or fascination, may turn into addiction if an individual experiences a negative event which would drive them to become immersed in the fantasy-like world of celebrities, rather than focusing on their own reality. McCutcheon et al., (2002) state that attaining a level of psychological absorption is an effortless, almost subconscious focus of attention resulting in a heightened sense of reality with regard to the celebrity. As a result of this heightened sense of reality, celebrity worshippers believe that a relationship or connection actually exists between them and their idol (McCutcheon et al., 2002).

Although individuals around the celebrity worshippers can see the adverse effects, the fans themselves do not notice the negative effects of their own adoration. Research suggests that 60% of teenagers admitted that their attitudes and values were influenced by their celebrity idols (Bennett, 2002). There have been many occurrences where a beloved celebrity went from being a wholesome, inspirational role model, to one that is completely negative. This study will examine how this negative change will affect the fans, specifically, whether individuals lose respect for their celebrity, or the individuals chose to ignore the negative behaviors. Social media, celebrity fan pages, and celebrity marketing sales will be examined closely in order to ascertain if a celebrity’s bad behavior negatively effects their fan base—whether the fans stop “following” or economically investing in the celebrity.

In summary, I propose a longitudinal study which aims to determine the effect of a celebrity “gone bad” on

1. Fans following the celebrity on social media websites
2. Record sales
3. Celebrity endorsed products

## **PROPOSED METHOD**

### *Participants*

Approximately 750 fans between the ages of 12-18 will make up the participants of this study. Participants will be randomly selected from a celebrity’s Facebook “followers” and Twitter “followers.” Participants will be contacted via email or private message through those two sources. Given the likelihood that a majority of the

participants may be under the age of 18, they will be asked in the initial email to, if interested, provide an accurate email address and phone number through which their parents may be reached. Parents will then be emailed a consent form (see Appendix A). An incentive of \$10.00 a year will be given to each of the participants for completing the surveys.

### *Procedure*

The researcher looked up the winners of the 2013 Teen Choice Awards (Teen Choice, 2013) and selected celebrities who, at present, have a good reputation— have not done anything that society can deem “bad”— and have a large fan base. The selected celebrities are:

- Demi Lovato. Teen Choice Awards:
  - Choice Female Artist
  - Choice Style Icon
  - Choice TV Personality-Female, THE X FACTOR
  - Choice Single: Female Artist "Heart Attack"
- One Direction. Teen Choice Awards:
  - Choice Music Group
  - Choice Single: Group "Live While We're Young"
  - Choice Love Song "Little Things"
  - Choice Summer Tour "Take Me Home Tour"
- Taylor Swift. Teen Choice Awards:
  - Choice Female Country Artist
  - Choice Country Song "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together"
- Selena Gomez. Teen Choice Awards:
  - Choice Female Hottie
  - Choice Break-Up Song "Come and Get It"
  - Choice Summer Music Star: Female
- Kristen Stewart. Teen Choice Awards:
  - Choice Movie Actress: Sci-Fi/Fantasy: "The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2"
  - Choice Movie Actress: Romance: "The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 2"
  - Choice Movie: Liplock Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart, "The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn - Part 2"

The researcher will aim to recruit approximately 150 fans for each celebrity. All recruited participants will be given the 23-item version of the Celebrity Attitude Scale (Maltby et al., 2005) (see Appendix B). This scale is used to assess the level of worship that an individual feels towards their favorite celebrity. For each statement on the Celebrity Attitude Scale participants will provide one of the five response options. Responses range from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree;” a higher score on the Celebrity Attitude Scale will correlate with a higher level of worship (McCutcheon, Aruguete, Scott, & VonWaldner, 2004). Each participant will be scored; participants whose markings fall in the top quartile and the bottom quartile will be given an additional survey every year for the next five years. In doing so, it will become evident whether the participants view of the celebrity will remain the same or change after the celebrity engages in a negative event.

Auxiliary analyses will be conducted to track marketing sales and sales of products endorsed by Demi Lovato, One Direction, Taylor Swift, Selena Gomez, and Kristen Stewart. Sales indicate the economic investment of fans. The Billboardbiz (2013) website charts the economic success and popularity of the celebrity’s latest music, and the BoxOffice (2013) provides statistical information regarding the economic success of films; both websites will be used to gather the marketing data. The raw marketing data will provide an objective measure of the celebrities’ status.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

*Limitations*

There are some limitations in this study. First, this is a longitudinal study, and as such, it will take time to collect and analyze data; researchers cannot be sure when the next occurrence of a celebrity “gone bad” will happen. Additionally, information that is gathered from Twitter and Facebook is self-reported, which may lead to inaccurate information.

*Significance*

This study will enhance the understanding of researchers and the general public on the effects of celebrity worship on young, impressionable adolescents. As they grow up, adolescents look to these celebrities as role models, mimicking their style, their opinions, and buying their products. Adolescence can be a difficult time in which individuals struggle to understand and discover

who they are in the world. One would hope that given their delicate and fragile states they would be surrounded by positive messages and examples of good behavior, most especially from those they hold in such high esteem.

This important research will examine exactly what happens when the celebrities become bad examples. It is vitally important to be aware of and ensure that the easily influenced adolescents, who are the future of America, differentiate between the positive and negative messages that their beloved celebrities are sending.

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**Appendix B**  
Celebrity Attitude Scale (23-item)

Maltby, J., Giles, D. C., Barber, L., & McCutcheon, L. E. (2005).

Please respond to each item with a number from 1-5; 1= "strongly disagree" and 5= "strongly agree"

1. If I were to meet my favorite celebrity in person, he/she would already somehow know that I am his/her biggest fan \_\_\_\_
2. I share with my favorite celebrity a special bond that cannot be described in words
3. I am obsessed by details of my favorite celebrity's life \_\_\_\_
4. My friends and I like to discuss what my favorite celebrity has done \_\_\_\_
5. When something good happens to my favorite celebrity I feel like it happened to me \_\_\_\_
6. One of the main reasons I maintain an interest in my favorite celebrity is that doing so gives me a temporary escape from life's problems \_\_\_\_
7. I have pictures and/or souvenirs of my favorite celebrity which I always keep in exactly the same place \_\_\_\_
8. The successes of my favorite celebrity are my successes also \_\_\_\_
9. I enjoy watching, reading, or listening to my favorite celebrity because it means a good time \_\_\_\_
10. I consider my favorite celebrity to be my soul mate \_\_\_\_
11. I have frequent thoughts about my favorite celebrity, even when I don't want to \_\_\_\_
12. When my favorite celebrity dies (or died) I will feel (or I felt) like dying too \_\_\_\_
13. I love to talk with others who admire my favorite celebrity \_\_\_\_
14. When something bad happens to my favorite celebrity I feel like it happened to me \_\_\_\_
15. Learning the life story of my favorite celebrity is a lot of fun \_\_\_\_
16. I often feel compelled to learn the personal habits of my favorite celebrity \_\_\_\_
17. If I was lucky enough to meet my favorite celebrity, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favor, I would probably do it \_\_\_\_
18. It is enjoyable just to be with others who like my favorite celebrity \_\_\_\_
19. When my favorite celebrity fails or loses at something I feel like a failure myself \_\_\_\_
20. If someone gave me several thousand dollars to do with as I please, I would consider spending it on a personal possession (like a napkin or paper plate) once used by my favorite celebrity \_\_\_\_
21. I like watching and hearing about my favorite celebrity when I am in a large group of people \_\_\_\_
22. Keeping up with news about my favorite celebrity is an entertaining pastime. \_\_\_\_
23. News about my favorite celebrity is a pleasant break from a harsh world. \_\_\_\_

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**APPENDIX A**  
Consent Form

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree that my child, \_\_\_\_\_, may participant in this research. I understand and agree with the procedure.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Parent/Guardian Signature