Celebrity Worship Within Affinity Groups: Adopting a Multi-Faceted Perspective

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Substantial evidence suggests that celebrity worship pervades contemporary societies (Hills 2002). Recent research suggests that at least one in three people engage in celebrity worship (Malby, Houran and McCutcheon 2003) and seventy-five percent of young adults report a strong attraction to a celebrity (typically musicians or movie stars) at some point in their lives (Boon and Lomore 2001). A glance at the papers we are most popular magazines adds weight to these observations. Images and stories of celebrities appear on most pages. Their front-covers lure readers with ‘fascinating’ questions such as: “Is Britney’s really marriage over? Are Tom and Nicole back together? Will Calista win her fight with anorexia?”

Despite this situation celebrity worship attracts limited attention in the marketing literature (for exceptions see O’Guinn 2000 and Pimentel and Reynolds’ 2004 excellent research). For a few reasons, the neglect is surprising. First, celebrity worship is arguably a distinctive type of consumer-brand relationship (Fournier 1998) that underpins many long-term buyer-seller relationships. Marketing academics and practitioners stand to benefit from better understanding how these relationships impact market activities (Christopher 2002) such as attending films, watching television shows, and purchasing music CDs and fan memorabilia. Second, researchers are increasingly acknowledging the extent to which consumables (e.g., brands, celebrities) provide galvanizing points for the development of brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Use of the Internet allows such groups to transcend national and geographical boundaries. Consumers report that interacting within these types of global networks adds considerable richness to their lives. Finally, the consumption of others’ performances is highly pervasive in everyday life yet remains a poorly understood activity (Deighton 1992).

We address this situation by examining celebrity worship within an affinity group (Macchiette and Roy 1991), adopting a multi-faceted perspective derived from an extensive review of the psychology, sociology and consumer behaviour literature. Our research site is the Sir Cliff Richard Fan Club situated in Sydney, Australia. Members of this club, numbering approximately eighteen, are characteristically aged fifty years plus. They developed an obsession with Cliff Richard during their teenage years which continues to this day. Cliff Richard is a relatively aged celebrity (64 years old); his career spans forty-five years. He is the largest selling recording artist in the United Kingdom, outselling the Beatles and Elvis. Our research site allows for significant theory validation and extension as well as for modification and extension through rebuttal of extant ideas and the emergence of new themes.

We suggest that celebrity worship within an affinity group be viewed within a framework comprising the following interacting components: 1) pre-adult consumption socialization, 2) self-concept/personality consistency, 3) mild psychopathology, 4) religiosity, 5) affiliation need fulfillment, and 6) high celebrity narcissism. Our study is exploratory rather than confirmatory; hence we do not identify which factors carry greater weight in this context. Contrary to literature our informants appear psychologically well-balanced. They readily distinguished fantasy from reality. They understand that Cliff enacts dramatic (Deighton 1992) (rather than naturalistic) performances. Our participant observation over many months suggests they have high emotional intelligence and the capacity for mature, honest and respectful relationships across many social spheres outside of the fan club. Strong contributing mechanisms to their fandom include intense and highly salient emotional experiences surrounding their first introduction to Cliff Richard in their teenage years; the value-congruency that drives admiration for the celebrity; together with the social support and strong friendship bonds that have developed as a by-product and now act to reinforce fan behaviours. Cliff’s apparent narcissism cements the celebrity-fan relationship.

Additional findings emerged from data analysis. Liking of the cliff in which the celebrity excels (in this case Christian style pop music) likely fuels celebrity worship. Informants also spoke of the ability of Cliff’s music to lift their spirits: “Two years back I was having panic attacks and I was put into a health farm… My husband brought along some Cliff music and it really was a great comfort to me. It helped get me going again.” Informants are clearly cognizant of the emotional benefits which have addictive qualities: “You are always anxious when a new Cliff record is about to come out. I can’t wait to get it and hear it.” Another factor rarely mentioned in the literature is the strong sexual attraction that many informants feel for celebrities, such as Cliff. For example female informants often stated: “He’s really ‘yummy’”, “He wiggles his bum really well. He’s very appealing in every way”, and “We just love to watch him. He could sit on stage eating his dinner and we’d pay to watch him.” This finding contrasts with O’Guinn (2000) who suggested that celebrity fandom was not driven by strong sexual attraction. Similarly, we are less enthusiastic than O’Guinn (2001) with respect to the religious metaphor. While our informants hold great admiration for Cliff Richard, their behaviour does not appear religious in nature. They see Cliff as “human” and are not uncritical of him. Many informants regard their Cliff Richard worship as just one factor of many others that make their lives satisfying; “he is not everything” to them.

REFERENCES