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## **Celebrity Gossip Consumption As an Affiliation-Based Means of Coping**

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Consumption of celebrity gossip is proposed as a novel means of coping with social exclusion threats. Learning about celebrities' personal lives via gossip articles makes them appear more relatable, enhancing readers' feelings of closeness with them. Thus, consuming celebrity gossip vicariously satisfies the desire for affiliation that increases post threat.

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# Celebrity Gossip Consumption as an Affiliation-Based Means of Coping

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Despite the immense popularity of celebrity gossip magazines and websites, little research exists on people's motivations for consuming celebrity gossip as compared to the substantial literature on interpersonal gossip (e.g., Fine and Rosnow 1978; Martinescu, Jansen, and Nijstad 2014; Wert and Salovey 2004). Gossip, defined as evaluative talk about absent third parties (Eder and Enke 1991; Foster 2004), is considered a good means to obtain private and secret information about persons that may not be accessible via a direct conversation. This is particularly true for celebrity gossip since most people cannot engage in one-on-one conversations with celebrities. While it may seem that people would not consider celebrities a part of their social circle and thus should not be interested in their personal lives, it has been argued that people often develop "parasocial" – one-sided – relationships with celebrities, as a consequence of being repeatedly exposed to them on mass and social media (Horton and Wohl 1956; Labrecque 2014). They become as invested in the celebrities' personal lives as they would be in their friends' (McAndrew and Milenkovic 2002). Could celebrity gossip consumption further this process of parasocial bonding and provide emotional comfort when one needs it? That is the question we address in this research.

Based on De Backer et al. (2007) and McDonnell (2014), we define celebrity gossip as speculative media content about relatively unknown aspects of celebrities' personal lives, presented in an evaluative manner. Since knowledge of intimate details about celebrities' lives could make people feel closer to these celebrities, we conjecture that celebrity gossip consumption may serve as an affiliation-based coping mechanism – especially in response to social exclusion threats.

It is well-known that people seek affiliation, particularly with close others, after social exclusion experiences (Bernstein et al. 2010; Maner et al. 2007; Park and Maner 2009). Thus, to the extent that celebrities are perceived as "friends" (parasocial relationship; Giles 2002; Peng et al. 2015), people may seek affiliation with celebrities too when under an exclusion threat. Through our three experimental studies, we show that learning about the celebrities' personal lives by consuming gossip articles is not only a means to satisfy this affiliation desire but is also a means of subconsciously reinforcing the parasocial bond with them.

In study 1, we investigate the impact of an affiliation-related threat (social exclusion) and two affiliation-unrelated threats (intelligence, personal control) on participants' proclivity for celebrity gossip (vs. non-gossip) articles. Three-hundred-eleven MTurk participants were randomly assigned to one of the three threats or a baseline/no threat condition – all manipulated using an experience recall task (Han, Duhachek, and Rucker 2015). In a second "unrelated study," they were asked to choose between four article titles for reading – two gossip (e.g., "Jennifer Aniston hasn't given up on love after Justin Theroux split") and two non-gossip (e.g., "Bohemian Rhapsody is now the highest-grossing musical biopic") – pretested to be equally interesting, entertaining, etc. This article choice (gossip vs. non-gossip) served as our dependent variable. In line with our theorizing, we found that the preference for celebrity gossip was significantly higher for the participants under the exclusion threat than those under the two affiliation-unrelated threats ( $M_{\text{affiliation-related-threat}}=38.5\%$ ,  $M_{\text{affiliation-unrelated-threats}}=24.7\%$ ;  $\chi^2(1, N=232)=4.749$ ,  $p=0.029$ ), and also

than those in the baseline condition ( $M_{\text{baseline}}=12.7\%$ ). Study 1 thus suggests that celebrity gossip consumption might be an affiliation-related means of coping.

In study 2, we explicitly test the underlying process – specifically whether a desire to affiliate with close others (DACO) mediates the impact of social exclusion on celebrity gossip consumption. The design was similar to study 1 but with additional measures for DACO (e.g., "Right now how much would you like to:" "Hang out with friends?," "Make plans with a significant other?;" Park and Maner 2009) and for escapism (adapted from Duhachek and Oakley 2007) as potential mediators. Again, the proportion of participants choosing a gossip article was significantly higher in the social exclusion condition than in the baseline condition ( $M_{\text{exclusion-threat}}=40.8\%$ ,  $M_{\text{baseline}}=22.9\%$ ;  $\chi^2(1, N=208)=7.71$ ,  $p=0.005$ ). The effect of exclusion on gossip article choice was partially mediated by DACO (coefficient=0.088, SE=0.078, 90% CI=0.003 to 0.268; PROCESS Model 4, Hayes, 2013) but not by escapism (coefficient=0.046, SE=0.055, 90% CI=-0.006 to 0.194), thus ruling the latter out as an alternate process explanation. Studies 1 and 2, therefore, demonstrate that celebrity gossip offers an avenue for affiliation-based coping post certain self-threats and that people can seek emotional comfort in parasocial relationships with celebrities – much like they do in regular interpersonal relationships. We further explore this in study 3.

In study 3, we examine whether consuming celebrity gossip (following social exclusion) actually makes people feel closer to the target celebrity (the subject of the gossip). In other words, we assess how celebrity gossip vicariously fulfills the desire for social affiliation activated after a self-threat. Two-hundred-thirteen undergraduate participants, all primed to experience social exclusion, were randomly assigned to read a gossip article about a popular celebrity (Ariana Grande) or a non-gossip one. They were then asked to indicate their closeness with Ariana on the "Inclusion of Other in the Self" scale (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992). They were also asked about her perceived relatability and authenticity. As expected, we found that those who read the gossip article felt significantly closer to Ariana than those who read the non-gossip article ( $M_{\text{gossip}}=2.45$ ,  $M_{\text{non-gossip}}=2.07$ ;  $F(1, 211)=4.06$ ,  $p=0.045$ ), and also perceived her to be more relatable and authentic than the participants in the non-gossip condition. The effect of gossip consumption on the closeness felt with the celebrity was mediated by perceived relatability but not by perceived authenticity.

Taken together, our studies provide insights into why celebrity gossip consumption is higher following social exclusion threats, and how this consumption vicariously satisfies the desire for social affiliation. This research thus gives further credence to the idea that people engage in one-sided/parasocial relationships with celebrities (Horton and Wohl 1956; Labrecque 2014), which is facilitated via celebrity gossip articles. We also contribute to the literature on compensatory consumption (Mandel et al. 2017) by demonstrating celebrity gossip consumption as a previously unexplored form of coping behavior.

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