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Authors: ¹Yvette Morey, ¹Lynne Eagle, ¹Gillian Kemp, ¹Simon Jones and ²Julia Verne

Affiliations: ¹Bristol Social Marketing Centre, University of the West of England, ²South West Public Health Observatory

Corresponding Author: Yvette Morey
Bristol Business School
Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane
Bristol BS16 10Y
Telephone +44 32 82317
Fax +44 (0) 117 32 82289
Email Yvette2.morey@uwe.ac.uk

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Abstract

There is a substantive body of work dealing with the impact of the media on a range of high-risk behaviours and health-related issues. While this work highlights the undeniable influence of the media on these behaviours and practices, there is a tendency to identify causal links between ill-defined and unexplored concepts such as ‘media images’ or media ‘role models’ and resulting behaviours, without providing insight into the nature of such images, how they are consumed by audiences, how they figure in social networks and peer groups, or how identification with ‘role models’ effectively translates into a set of behaviours. These questions are complicated by contemporary celebrity culture in which both celebrities and celebrity status have become pervasive features of social life. The paper reports on findings from research which is currently underway and which includes: content and narrative analysis of celebrity magazines, a readership survey to ascertain how content is consumed in celebrity magazines, and interviews and focus groups exploring how celebrity and celebrity role models are meaningful to participants. These are crucial questions for social marketers seeking to target youth audiences through the use of credible sources, such as celebrity role models, in effective health-related interventions.

Introduction

There is a substantive body of work dealing with how the media impacts on a range of high-risk behaviours and health-related issues including tobacco use (Jones & Rossiter, 2008), alcohol and recreational drug use (Stern, 2005); and increased violence and aggression (Villani, 2001). Additionally, a large section of this work focuses on the effects of the media on women in terms of body image dissatisfaction, the perpetuation of normative body ideals which associate thinness with attractiveness (for example, Champion & Furnham, 1999; Bessenoff, 2006; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Slater & Tiggemann, 2006; Ogden & Sherwood, 2008) and the reinforcement of associated behaviours such as cosmetic surgery (Sarwer et al, 2005), and binge-eating and dieting (Andrist, 2003).

While this work rightly draws attention to the influence of a now-global Western media (Cashmore, 2006), it does not provide insight into how this influence translates into actual behaviour and practice. The articles cited above all make very broad references to ‘media images’, ‘media stereotypes’ and ‘media ideals’, and employ quantitative measures to establish a casual relationship between ‘media images’ and body dissatisfaction’ without examining how images are consumed by and meaningful to young women, and how this translates into perceptions and practices – including how they figure in social networks and friendships. A concept that is similarly ill-defined yet often drawn upon to account for the transmission of media images and representations is that of the role model. Gauntlett (2008) observes that while the notion of ‘role models’ is commonplace in public discourse, it is not always clear what this term means. Gauntlett (2008: 1-5) is able to identify and categorise a number of different ways in which people talk about role models (such as “the ‘straightforward success’ role model” and “the ‘triumph over difficult circumstances role model” etc.) however he states that it “remains unclear ... in a psychological sense, how ‘role

modelling' might actually work". Again, a set of questions relating to the processes involved in the choice and emulation of a particular role model or role models remain unanswered. For example, how do role models become meaningful to people? Is this meaning contained in individual qualities such as appearance, possessions, career, or is meaning contained in a broader realm such as having attained celebrity status? Do individuals have only one role model or a number of role models according to different contexts and behaviours? What is the process involved deciding to engage in the kinds of high-risk behaviours that we see celebrities engage in, and why do we choose to engage in some of these behaviours and not others? Young people are most likely to engage in a host of high-risk behaviours (binge-drinking, use of recreational drugs, disordered eating, and risky sun tanning practices including the use of sun beds), but are also notoriously resistant to fear appeals and message framing that focuses on the negative consequences of these behaviours (Hastings & MacFadyen, 2002). The questions outlined above are therefore crucial to social marketers who need to identify what kinds of sources inform young people's behaviours and who young people regard as credible sources of information.

Finally, the use of unsatisfactorily explored concepts such as 'media images' and 'role models' is further complicated by the emergence of a particular kind of celebrity culture that has become a predominant feature of contemporary Western society. Cashmore (2006) argues that current celebrity culture started to develop during the late 1980s in conjunction with developments in satellite technology (so that Western media became a global media), developments in photographic technology such as the zoom lens (which allowed unprecedented access into the personal lives and foibles of celebrities), and the creation of new celebrity-focussed media formats such as *MTV* and *People* magazine. Several decades later this media has radically expanded and matured. Currently the highest circulation figures

for magazines read by young women aged 18 – 24 are achieved by several weekly titles which focus exclusively on celebrity content (Audit Bureau of Circulation). While a stock feature of these magazines is the celebrity caught off-guard (smoking, drinking, taking drugs, being over or under-weight, having an ‘orange’ tan etc.) and hence susceptible to the same problems as us, these magazines also highlight and reproduce celebrities and celebrity culture as something for ordinary people to aspire to. Similarly, reality television shows like *Big Brother*, *The X-Factor*, and *Britain’s Got Talent*, teach us all how to become celebrities in our own right. A recent survey by public relations agency Taylor Herring reveals that the “top three career aspirations for 5 – 10yr olds in Britain are sports star, pop star and actor, compared with teacher, banker and doctor 25 years ago” (Brockes, 2010). This aspiration to fame and celebrity status is achievable for only a very small percentage of people, and Cashmore (2006) argues that in the absence of actually becoming celebrities ourselves we aspire to the second best thing – consuming, living and behaving like celebrities. Contemporary manifestations of celebrity complicate questions regarding the media’s impact on behaviour and how role models featured in the media figure in this. As social marketers our examination of these areas needs to delve much deeper than identifying causal links between ‘media images’ or ‘role models’ and body ideals. Firstly, we need to explore how the audiences we are trying to reach both engage with, and are affected by, celebrity culture as a wider ideology of aspiration in a Western context. Secondly, we need to explore the range of existing celebrities that young people identify with or see as credible sources of information and how this identification translates into different high-risk behaviours and practices.

Methodology

In addition to outlining some of the relevant literature around celebrity culture and celebrity role models, the paper will report on empirical findings from research, currently underway, into the ways in which celebrity culture influences the high-risk behaviours and health-related practices of young people. The first part of the study involves a content and narrative analysis of advertising and editorial content from 4 weekly magazines aimed at teenagers and young women over a period of 26 weeks (March – August 2010). The magazines – *heat*, *Closer*, *OK!* and *New!* – share a focus on celebrity news and gossip and have the largest circulation figures for magazines targeting young women aged 18 – 24 who tend to be most at risk from suboptimum behaviours due to strong prevailing social norms (Broadstock et al, 1992; Lowe et al, 2000). This study aims to expand upon the ways in which concepts such as ‘role models’ and ‘celebrities’ have been employed in similar studies elsewhere (Dixon et al, 2007; Fabrianesi, Jones & Reid, 2008) by examining celebrity magazines in order to identify the range of contexts in which celebrities occur, and the kinds of narratives that accompany textual and visual depictions of celebrities.

The second part of the study will involve quantitative and qualitative research with students from the University of the West of England. A readership survey will be conducted in order to ascertain how participants look at and consume celebrity content in magazines, while in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus groups will explore whether and how the notion of celebrity is meaningful to participants. This part of the study also aims to identify which celebrities our participants identify with and view as credible sources of information.

Initial Findings

An initial examination of the celebrity magazines outlined above reveals that celebrities are routinely shown to be engaging in a range of high-risk behaviours, and furthermore that while some of these behaviours may be depicted as shameful or embarrassing, the surrounding content nevertheless depicts the same celebrities, and often the same behaviours, as aspirational. For example in a “Tanning Disasters Special”, *heat* magazine (Issue 579, 29 May – 4 June, 2010) takes celebrities such as Sarah Harding, Geri Halliwell and David Furnish to task for getting sunburnt, while Katie Price, Jodie March and Amy Winehouse are criticised for having unnatural skin colours due to the use of fake tanning products. However the feature concludes with a “How To Fake It Properly” section in which a tanning expert shows a celebrity from popular soap opera *Hollyoaks* how to achieve a proper ‘glow’ by using a commercial fake tan brand, thereby reinforcing the desirability of achieving a tanned appearance. Organisations such as Cancer Research UK, who are concerned with rising skin cancer rates amongst young people in the UK, have stated a concern that many young women who are financially cut-off from holidaying in sunny destinations abroad, and who can’t afford expensive self-tan products, may opt for the cheaper option of using sunbeds which pose a substantial skin cancer risk (Thompson et al, 2010). An important question is whether young people engage in risky tanning practices because they aspire to a celebrity lifestyle that is out of reach, or because they seek to emulate certain celebrities (such as Katie Price) who endorse and engage in poor sun protection behaviour? Here the reference to celebrity tanning in *heat* magazine is just one example of a high-risk behaviour; however the research findings will have implications for a much wider range of behaviours.

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