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The Effect of CWS on Adolescent Health

In this day and age, everyone is guilty of glorifying celebrities to a certain extent. It is almost impossible to find someone who didn't have a poster of a celebrity stuck on their wall growing up, or someone who hasn't kept up to date with the latest details of the latest Hollywood split. Admiring celebrities often appears to be something untaught, almost scientific in nature, replicating the natural order where animals look up to creatures perceived to be the top of the food chain or the strongest of the pack. However, no one really discusses the implications and impact when this inexhaustible adoration of the fittest, or the most beautiful, or the most talented, or even the richest, goes too far. What happens when a group of young girls mooning over Justin Bieber at a sleepover suddenly transform into a mindless horde of rabid fans chasing the celebrity? all while suffering the psychological condition: Celebrity Worship Syndrome (CWS).

As the celebrity's importance in society increase, so has its influence on the adolescent people. What exactly is the effect of celebrity worship on the generation that engages in celebrity worship the most? A common belief held is that celebrity worship is harmless, with no negative impact on the individual who engages in it. However, in truth it is quite the opposite. Many people don't seem to realize that engaging in celebrity worship is now classified as psychological disorder, with very real psychological repercussions.

I argue that through engaging in the practice of celebrity worship, adolescent individuals are prone to suffering deficiencies in their mental health, which include abnormal adolescent sexual development, and a variety of mental health problems including depression and anxiety.

Through engaging in such behavior, these adolescents involve themselves in a parasocial relationship with famous figures, and it creates a multitude of unhealthy habits that push them to become more antisocial and develop skewed relationship and living habits. The mental health deficiencies can also influence and create further problems regarding the adolescent's physical health with the formation of unhealthy body image principles and a twisted sense of what is beautiful. These newly formed ideas will push adolescents to pursue and imitate celebrities in terms of their body shape, and promote unhealthy practices such as over excessive plastic surgery enhancements, or eating habits that they believe may assist them in pursuing these twisted images of what is considered beautiful in modern society.

Before understanding the impact of CWS, one must understand the background of this newfound psychologic disorder, the roots of this issue, and how patients are evaluated with either the Celebrity Attitudes Scale (C.A.S) or Celebrity Worship Scale (CWS). Through discussing the aforementioned information, it will create greater context for this behavior and help explain that celebrity worship is dangerous activity that must be avoided at all cost due to the devastating effects it will have on both an individual's mental and physical wellbeing.

This topic of celebrity worship will be discussed from a psychological approach. Celebrity Worship Syndrome is a relatively new form of psychological disorder, and one must first gain insight on how adolescents behave and function while diagnosed with this psychological problem. Through discussing the behavior, emotions, and cognitive thinking associated with individuals that exhibit symptoms of CWS, I hope to demonstrate how engaging in celebrity worship is directly correlated to antisocial behavior and deficiencies in the individual's ability to participate in healthy romantic relationships, or just interpersonal relationships in general. Engaging in celebrity worship can also manifest unrealistic, unhealthy

ideas related to body image, self-image, and promote. Most of the information presented were researched through online peer-reviewed journals, mostly in the fields of psychology and sociology that provide information including experiments and case studies done on the subject. Most scholarly sources also discuss the potential roots and the reasoning behind engaging in such behavior, and also the impacts that such behavior has on young adolescent individuals.

Celebrity Worship Syndrome, or CWS, is first used in a study published by Dr. John Maltby and colleagues in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* entitled “*A Clinical Interpretation of Attitudes and Behaviors Associated with Celebrity Worship*”. According to Dr. Maltby, CWS is an obsessive-addictive disorder where an individual becomes overly involved and interested, or in other words completely obsessed, with the details of the personal life of a celebrity (412). The celebrity could be any individual “in the public eye” but research suggests that celebrities usually come from backgrounds in television, film, or pop music. People diagnosed with CWS are involved in a parasocial relationship with either the celebrities themselves, or the different characters they portray or act as, showing that both fictional or real behavior exhibited by the celebrity could be a potential negative influence on the adolescent viewer.

Through research, many contributing factors have been found that lead individuals to engage in celebrity worship, or factors that lead them to be diagnosed with CWS. One major cause of CWS is the parasocial relationship being a compensation for the adolescent’s own deficits. In a study performed by Chau-kiu Cheung and Xiao Dong Yue, who together performed a survey of 400 Hong Kong secondary students, they found that the data supported their hypothesis that adolescents tend to adore idol in ways that would compensate for deficits found in the adolescent’s parental resources (42). Determinant factors of seeking celebrities for

compensation include parental absence and the family's low social status, and the study relied heavily on the compensation mechanism. These factors in the adolescent's life pushes them to engage in a parasocial relationship with celebrities to compensate for these deficits, and in doing so endangers them and pushes them to become more susceptible to the negative impact of CWS. The case study "supports the emphasis on family structure and social class as compensation," which leads to practices of worshipping celebrities (Cheung 42).

Celebrity Worship Scale was modelled to measure an individual's degree of celebrity worship, and the level of their psychologic disorder. According to McCutcheon, the celebrity worship scale defines celebrity worship as consisting of three qualitatively different stages, with low worship involving individualistic behaviors such as watching and reading about a celebrity, slightly higher levels the worship takes on a social character, and the highest levels are characterized by the celebrity's successes and failures, over-identification with the celebrity, compulsive behaviors, as well as obsession with details of the celebrity's life. However, there is another model of measurement called the Celebrity Attitudes Scale, which Dr. Sansone states is also divided into three domains. Entertainment-social subscale, intense-personal subscale and the borderline-pathological subscale (40). The entertainment-social stage indicates that "a celebrity is viewed as entertaining and captures the respondent's attention, the intense-personal subscale indicates that the respondent has intense and obsessive attitude toward a celebrity with compulsive elements, and the borderline-pathological subscale indicates that the respondent exhibits pathological attitudes and behaviors as a result of celebrity worship" (41). Both methods are used extensively in the measurement of different individual's level of devotion to celebrities.

Individuals engaged in celebrity worship and diagnosed with CWS often facilitate an unhealthy development in adolescent relationship with other, specifically romantic relationships.

According to Erikson, 94% of youth “indicate that they seek information about romantic love from TV and movies, and that media portrayals of sex and relationships influence adolescents’ attitudes and beliefs (related to sex, gender, relationships, gender roles, and sexual agency).” In the process of doing so, many adolescents begin to develop an attachment to the celebrity, creating what is called a parasocial relationship, which is defined by Erikson as relationships with media figures that are functionally similar to relationships with real people. The content of the media consumed, in association with the parasocial romantic, often have negative outcomes for adolescent viewers as romantic content in the media tend to focus on gender roles, typical heterosexual themes, and romantic themes that reinforce an idealization of romantic relationships over other relationships. Due to the easily absorbed content and the media-worshipping adolescents, these ideas presented have a bigger impact than they may intend. Through parasocial relationships, adolescents learn how to act, what to believe, and what to value and much of what the media presents is a very one-sided view of these matters, causing deficiencies in the adolescent’s development of these very same ideas.

One example is the relationship presented between Ross and Rachel in acclaimed TV series Friends. A beloved couple in the world of television, what this couple exhibits is actually a toxic, negative relationship between two individuals. This relation dances on the line of star-crossed lovers and creepy, and introduces themes of traditional gender roles as well as exhibiting all the traits of an unnatural relationship. Besides the constantly going back and forth between being apart and then together, this relationship shows traits of Rachel being put into a gender role because ‘she is just a waitress’ and is “ditzy” or “spoiled.” However, these traits may not seem unhealthy to young adolescent viewers who may view their relationship as perfect, and through learning and copying their behavior may develop unhealthy relationships on their own. As

Erikson states, adolescent learn how to act, what to believe and what to value through parasocial relationships, and it is very possible that they may exhibit the same behavior present in the relationship between Ross and Rachel. The most astonishing fact is that Ross and Rachel is just one of many unhealthy, toxic relationships presented by the media.

Another example from a more recent TV series is Leonard and Penny from the show Big Bang Theory. Also, considered a beloved relationship among many, this couple is an extremely unrealistic and toxic relationship. Two individuals who have nothing in common and are constantly competing for who can make the other partner feel more inadequate is not a relationship to be pursued, imitated, or called “goals”. These traits all indicate an unhealthy relationship that is causing more harm than good for both parties but an attractive woman marrying a fairly average man is a very attractive aspect for many adolescents. Many adolescents may view this relationship as an indicator that appearances are not relevant in a relationship, which is not a harmful idea, however taking advice from these two could be unhelpful. Their constant bickering, lack of common topic or respect, and constantly making each other feel unworthy of the relationship will teach adolescents nothing good. If adolescents choose to mirror the relationship between Leonard and Penny, they could be creating unhealthy relationships and exhibiting behavior that could alienate them from others while at the same time thinking it is completely normal.

It is important to realize the degree of influence media content and celebrity behavior has on an adolescent’s viewers mind. In participating in parasocial relationships with celebrities, individuals have learned to take on the same behavior, the same attitudes, which are often times more harmful than helpful. Through doing so, the adolescent viewers develop a skewed view of romantic relationship, reinforced by gender roles, and typical heterosexual content they believe is

the right way of behavior. This demonstrates that celebrity worship can have an adverse effect on an adolescent's sexual development as they easily absorb the unhealthy and wrong messages presented in the celebrity's behavior as well as the different content in media.

Adolescents diagnosed with CWS can also develop socialization deficiencies and exhibit antisocial behavior and lack of self-identity. Many studies have been performed in the past to determine the relationship between celebrity worship and its effect on the individual's mental health, and a great number of studies have shown that star-struck fans are likely to suffer from symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and social dysfunction. According to Sheridan, these mental health problems are further fueled by "an introverted nature and lack of meaningful relationships among celebrity worshippers," and together push these adolescents to establish their identity through participating in a parasocial relationship with the celebrity figure (560).

Maltby performed a study on 307 UK students, using the subscale on the Entertainment-Social subscale of the Celebrity Attitude Scale. The scores "accounted for unique variance in social dysfunction and depressive symptoms, while scores on the Intense-Personal subscale accounted for unique variance in depression and anxiety scores" (Maltby 419). The scores from the study points towards the fact that adolescents who engage in celebrity worshipping are more likely to suffer from mental health problems such as depression and antisocial behavior. In the same study, individuals that engage in celebrity worship for intense-personal reasons all exhibited symptoms of poorer mental health, which range from depression, anxiety, somatic symptoms, social dysfunction, and often experience above average levels of stress and life dissatisfaction. It suggested that celebrity worshipping behaviors caused disengagement from reality, and failure to acknowledge, let alone deal with, stress events in one's life. These mental health issues often cause individuals who intensively worship celebrities to spend time worshipping celebrities at

the expense of dealing with everyday life. The study informs that “those who engage in celebrity worship are characterized as tense, emotional, and moody, and deal with stress by disengaging both mentally and behaviorally and by living in state of denial” (424).

In another study done by Cheung and Yue in 2003 of 833 Chinese teenagers, the results have shown that adolescents engaged in celebrity worship suffer from “lower self-esteem and lower identity achievement” (Sheridan 560). This study demonstrates that these adolescents seek to establish their own personal identity through engaging in celebrity worship as they seem to lack the elements in their own lives. Through the practice of celebrity worship, adolescents in the study find that association with famous figures give them meaning in life, and help them establish a sense of false self-identity.

Both studies has shown that celebrity worship has a massive impact on the adolescent’s mental health, and is the biggest contributing factor to psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and even antisocial behavior. Through engaging in celebrity worship, individuals are withdrawn from the outside world, neglecting social interaction, normal daily activities and instead focused on someone else’s life, someone that has no connection to the individual whatsoever. Through neglecting their day to day life, these individuals have become more withdrawn, and have shown less flexibility in school studies, relationships with others, and just general dissatisfaction with life. Celebrity worship has provided a means of escape from everyday life for adolescents, a way to escape their problems and fears through participating in a parasocial relationship with the celebrity.

Celebrity worship not only affects the adolescent’s mental health, but can also affect the adolescent’s physical wellbeing. With celebrity worshipping, adolescents begin to imitate and base their ideas of beauty on the appearance and aesthetic presented by the media or the

celebrity. Body image is an idea that is especially heavily emphasized in the media, meaning “that media’s forerunner, celebrities, can also be influential” in creating different idealized images among the adolescent population (Sherman). Gathering from the social cognitive theory, which states that parts of an individual’s knowledge is gathered from observing others through social interactions, or even media influences. It can be inferred from this theory that “individuals are learning the socialized standard of attractiveness portrayed in media by celebrities” (Sherman). As a result, the public perception and standards of beauty are often shaped, or even created by the media and its portrayal of celebrities.

A known practice among adolescent these days is the proliferation of diets and weight loss regimens. As Maltby writes, the increase in “thin females images has been blamed for rises in eating disorders and general body dissatisfaction” among the female population. In an adolescent age where the human body is still in the process of growing, it is not uncommon for females to have an increase and distribution of fat around their hips and thighs. As a result, this natural change in the human body often deny “them the contemporary cultural ideal,” and push them towards unhealthy eating habits such as “slimming and binge eating” (Maltby). The combination of unrealistic body images presented by celebrities in the media push unknowing teenagers to take on unhealthy eating habits, and as a result, cause damage to their own physical health and bodily functions.

A famous example of how celebrity worshipping can negatively influence the adolescent’s opinion of beauty, and later physical health is the Barbie Concept. Barbie is a classic doll made by Mattel that owns a dream house, dream car, dream boyfriend, and a plethora of career opportunities and clothing and accessories. Through social cognition, seeing “Barbie being rewarded with all these great things of her dreams” cause young audiences to compare

themselves and to associate Barbie's great life with becoming "Barbiesque" (Sherman). In other words, since Barbie is tall, has blonde hair, unnatural proportions, perhaps the individual will imitate the same appearance because they believe they could live like Barbie. There are many examples of individuals who have tried to fulfill their dream of becoming Barbie. For example, Pixee Fox, who "had more than four breast augmentations, liposuction, and the removal of six ribs to become a 'real-life Barbie doll,'" or Justin Jedlica, "who had more than 300 procedures on his own, with at least five nose plants, as well as implants in his shoulders, back, cheeks, biceps, and rear end" with a life goal of becoming a real Ken doll (Sherman). Both cases are perfect examples of the consequences of allowing celebrity worship to influence individual's concept of beauty and body image. Due to people's belief that these types of celebrities, whether they are real or fictional, are rewarded so much in their lives, "it's motivating to imitate them, their body shape and weight, in a variety of ways that are sometimes harmful to their health" (Sherman). Though Barbie is technically a toy, they have become a celebrity in their own right due to its widely-publicized image and its reputation as a figure in the media. With adolescents associating the Barbie image with ideas of wealth, beauty, perfect lives, they are led to imitate Barbie which lead to dangerous effects to their physical wellbeing.

With the celebrity being linked to different standards of beauty and their image being worshipped by adolescents, it could lead to catastrophic health problems for the young generation. Worshipping these celebrities and adopting their mannerisms and appearances is wrong, even harmful to the adolescent and it shows how being involved in a parasocial relationship with such a figure could bring on disastrous health effects to the young adolescent.

Even though celebrities have become part of our daily lives, it is important to determine and take control of how much influence a celebrity can have. With the power and influence of

celebrities, there could be ways and methods in which celebrity worship could be turned into a more positive behavior, as celebrities promoting healthy living habits and realistic body images could have a complete different impact, most likely a positive one, on the adolescent generation. However, with the current generation of celebrities, there is still very little positive impact coming from their media presence and in the sense of what content they promote therefore worshipping them is still more harmful than helpful. CWS may be a relatively new psychological disorder but the effect it may have on the sexual development and general mental health on young adolescents is astounding. In addition, the mental health effects can also cause further physical health issues with the promotion of extreme and unhealthy body images that are deemed “beautiful” by celebrities. With very real psychological and physical repercussions, people must realize that worshipping a celebrity is anything but harmless. Through celebrity worship, adolescents could develop unhealthy relationships and exhibit symptoms of antisocial behavior and general poor mental and physical health.

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