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Celebrity Critiquing: HOT or NOT?

Teen Girls' Attitudes on and Responses to the Practice of Negative Celebrity Critiquing

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Celebrity Critiquing: HOT or NOT?

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By conducting focus groups with teen girls, this study aimed to explore female adolescents' responses to and perceptions of increasingly negative, scandal-driven critiquing of celebrities. Four types of celebrity-critiquing cases were selected and discussed. The first research question focused on girls' reactions toward the presented examples. The results indicated that the girls' responses differed depending on the type of case involved. Generally, the teens at first were entertained by the comments about celebrities, but disapproved of cases that seemed to be intended to hurt the celebrity. For all types of cases, however, they were quite judgemental in that they quickly blamed the victim. Although they reported that it is unacceptable to humiliate people online, they were convinced that celebrities should be able to deal with comments, even if they were harsh. The second research question was interested in whether the girls perceived celebrity critiquing as a form of cyberbullying. They said this was not the case, as bullying was considered to be much more extreme. Moreover, some girls mentioned that to be able to label online commenting as cyberbullying, they would need to know the victim in person and see them suffer.

Keywords: celebrity critiquing, cyberbullying, adolescents, journalism

Introduction

'This is just the life of a celebrity; you need to deal with the fact that you get hate'. This quote from a young adolescent, taken from this study, illustrates the primary concern behind the scope of this paper: How do teen girls react to negative messages about celebrities? Celebrity stories have been around since the end of the 19th century (Turner 1999; Esser 1999) and eventually established their place in today's media culture (Driessens 2012). The consumption of this kind of celebrity news grew quickly, including among adolescents (e.g. Chia and Poo 2009), likely fueled by a desire to be entertained (Peng, Li, Wang, Mo and Chen 2015). Although some studies have shown that the tone of celebrity news is mostly neutral to positive (De Backer and Fisher 2012; Van den Bulck, Paulussen and Bels 2015), negative stories increasingly have become commonplace. This rise in negative coverage appears to be both media- and consumer-driven. First of all, an increasingly negative and scandal-inspired tone in celebrity news has been observed among those reporting about the lives of celebrities (Graefer 2014; Podnieks 2009; Williamson 2010). This form of celebrity news has sometimes been called 'celebrity bashing' (Johansson 2006). Johansson introduced this term to describe how 'newspapers are picking on celebrities or displaying them making a fool of themselves' (Johansson 2008, p. 408). More recently, Graefer (2014) explained celebrity bashing as 'the unflattering paparazzi shots of celebrities and the further mocking of them, either through written comments or through image manipulation' (Graefer 2014, p. 109). As is already clear from these descriptions, the negative treatment of celebrities by news media might take different forms, leading some analysts (Holmes, Tumiel-Berhalter, Zayas and Watkins 2008) to only consider the more serious cases as 'bashing' (or 'nonconstructive criticism' and 'badmouthing'). However, given the lack of clear objective criteria to categorise the seriousness of negative online comments, the term 'celebrity critiquing' will be used as a collective term here for all types of negative comments targeted at celebrities.

Second, apart from negative treatment of celebrities by news media, judgemental comments by readers of online celebrity news also have been observed (Thelwall, Sud and Vis 2012; Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014). It is clear that the social media explosion of Web 2.0 has provided forums to allow everyone to play a more active role in the construction of online content, giving rise to a 'prosumer' society (McDougall and Dixon 2009), with plenty of options for celebrity critiquing.

Given the fact that earlier research already found positive correlations between engaging in celebrity cyberbullying and peer cyberbullying among adolescents, the question rises as to whether being exposed to online celebrity critiquing by others (albeit news media or the public) might form a 'risk factor' for both types of behaviours. This article argues that the first step in exploring this potential influence is to examine adolescents' perceptions of online celebrity critiquing by news media and the public, and how these resemble or differ from cyberbullying peers.

This paper starts with an overview of the literature on celebrity news and the development of prosumer activities in this field, leading toward two research questions: 1) How do adolescents react to celebrity critiquing by journalists and the public, and 2) Do they perceive these acts as cyberbullying? We then present the results of a focus-group study, using 76 adolescent girls, that show some patterns in the interpretations by these young girls and their responses to the different acts of negative celebrity critiquing.

Celebrity Critiquing: From Journalists' Practices to Audience Reactions

Celebrity news has become an increasingly important part of daily news offerings (McNamara 2011, Marwick and boyd 2011a, Driessens 2012). This is the result of the

media's growing fascination with entertainment news that started toward the end of the 19th century (Turner 2010; Turner 2014). Consequently, a rising volume of celebrity news can be found in newspapers (McNamara 2011; Marshall 2006), a trend described as 'celebritisation' (McNamara 2011; Marwick and boyd 2011a; Driessens 2012). While this celebritisation process in journalism already has elicited heated debates about news values (Turner 2014; Dubied and Hanitzsch 2014), and fears that the public's attention is being diverted toward easily digested, relaxing celebrity news and away from 'important' news items (Dubied and Hanitzsch 2014), a more recent trend seems to have created even more concerns. This trend entails the growing negative and scandalous tone in reporting celebrity news (e.g., Williamson 2010) and has even been referred to as 'celebrity bashing' (Johansson 2006). However, due to a lack of a consistent definition and clear criteria, the term 'celebrity critiquing' will, in this paper, be used as a collective term to describe all types of negative comments focused on celebrities. This journalistic practice is more strident with 'vulnerable' types of celebrities, such as females (in particular those with a working-class background), the young, the ill, or the addicted (Wiliamson 2010). It also appears to be more common in those countries with a long history of tabloids (Esser 1999).

In regions such as Flanders in Belgium, this trend cannot be seen very often in print media. De Backer and Fisher (2012) indicated that the tone of celebrity news in Flemish tabloids was most often positive. Recently, Van den Bulck et al. (2015) analysed the most-read Flemish newspapers and tabloids, and concluded that celebrities' professional lives are still the primary focus for stories. They further reported that the stories mostly avoid sensational, scandal-driven content, but stay rather neutral. However, when exclusively scrutinising the lead articles in more detail, some hidden tactics for boosting sensationalism, such as citing quotes out of context, surfaced (Van Gorp 2014). However, Van Gorp (2014) concluded that the Flemish publications cannot be categorised as typical 'tabloid press' as it is

known in other countries. Despite the more positive results in that study, reasons for concern about negative celebrity critiquing do arise in Flanders, when taking other kinds of media into account. Celebrity-gossip blogs, a new type of news source online, seem to be especially guilty of celebrity critiquing -- even rising to the level of celebrity bashing (Meyers 2010). PerezHilton.com, an originally U.S.-centric blog run by journalist Perez Hilton, but now attaining a broad, international audience, is regarded as the most illustrative website of this genre (Podnieks 2009). Typical, but less-famous Flemish examples are sterrennieuws.be and starnews.be. These types of blogs show a disproportional interest in the physical appearance of stars (Gorin and Dubied 2011) and criticise female celebrities with international status in particular (Van den Bulck et al. 2015; Gies 2011). Some blogs, for example, focus especially on the aging process of celebrities and whether they're managing this process successfully with plastic surgery (Fairclough 2012). In general, the abnormality of the events or of the celebrity's appearance seems to determine the news value of stories (Gorin and Dubied 2011). Since the public's opinion may be guided by this critical celebrity coverage, these sites are in a powerful position to upgrade or undermine stars' reputations (Podnieks 2009), feeding concerns about this kind of celebrity coverage and the challenges it can pose to the traditional media power structure (Meyers 2010).

Celebrity-critiquing practices are not restricted to journalists and bloggers. Thanks to consumer-interactivity features on news websites (McDougall and Dixon 2009), a considerable amount of today's online magazines and celebrity blogs invite media consumers to become prosumers and provide feedback on articles (Jönsson and Ornebring 2011). Celebrity-gossip blogs, in particular, adopt specific writing strategies to maximise reader response (e.g., Thelwall et al. 2012), offering space for public celebrity critiquing, a variant of media celebrity critiquing, with this form fuelled by the public instead of by journalists. A content analysis of the public's reactions to and interpretations of celebrity news on Flemish,

U.S., and British celebrity news sites found that readers are well aware of how this media sector stretches the truth at times and the underlying tactics that these journalists use to shape celebrity images (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014). Concerning the news focus of the reader, it seemed that, contrary to the sites' focus, which was mostly concentrated on the professional aspect of celebrities' live, readers are more interested in superficial details, such as the stars' physical appearance (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014). Furthermore, the Flemish media consumers seem quite confident in expressing their opinions about famous people in a rather straightforward manner, fitting our idea of negative celebrity critiquing. Even when the journalist sticks with a neutral writing style, the reader comments can still be characterised by a rather judgemental tone, especially when the intended celebrity is an international one (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014). As the reader-fueled discussion gets longer, the intensity of critiquing in the comments also gradually increases, resulting in a negativity spiral (Chmiel et al. 2011). In one study on YouTube discussions, for instance, the videos that generated the most comments also scored the highest on negativity ratings (Thelwall et al. 2012). Despite the great encouragement to participate and the interactivity features of blogs, the volume of viewers who actually enter comments is rather small. The audience analysis by Meyers (2010) indicated that roughly 68 percent of a blog's visitors never react online. The question remains how the observed critiquing of others may influence the attitudes of those who do not respond on the website.

Despite the low active-participation rates, different studies indicated that the interest in celebrity news is considerably high, especially among younger viewers (Podnieks 2009; Cross and Littler 2010). One study reported a total average rate of 16.72 hours per week dedicated to celebrity-related news consumption per person (Chia and Poo 2009). These authors listed TV and magazines as the most popular sources (Chia and Poo 2009), but others have mentioned the Internet as an important resource for teens' entertainment consumption as well

(Althaus and Tewksbury 2000). Moreover, actual celebrity news-consumption behaviour may even be stronger than what has been captured in research because Johansson (2015) noticed a potential bias in results because of social desirability. When asked about their own consumption of celebrity news, participants in her study described it as infrequent and sporadic behaviour, usually limited to consumption when visiting friends or when they're at the hairdresser (Johansson 2015). The high consumption rates of celebrity news among adolescents, together with the increasing trend in celebrity critiquing, elicit the question of how this may influence adolescents' attitudes on cyberbullying and their own online behaviours. The second part of this paper will therefore focus on the relation between celebrity critiquing and cyberbullying.

From Negative Celebrity Critiquing to Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is commonly defined as 'an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time, against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself' (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell and Tippett 2008). Cyberbullying is a common practice among adolescents. Approximately 20 percent to 40 percent of teens are confronted with different types of online aggression (Tokunaga 2010). Cyberbullying victimisation is associated with different negative behavioural consequences, including mental health issues such as emotional distress, depression, anxiety, self-harming behaviour, and suicide (e.g., Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder and Lattanner 2014; Hinduja and Patchin 2007). Much of the existing research has been dedicated to the identification of different traits and phenomena that can be associated with cyberbullying. Scholars already have gained substantial insights into the role of personality characteristics, such as empathy (e.g., Schultze-Krumbholz and Scheithauer 2013) and the need for popularity (e.g., Festl and Quandt 2013), which may serve as predispositions for

involvement in cyberbullying. However, some of the phenomena related to cyberbullying also may be situated at the cultural level. More concretely, it has been suggested that regular exposure to negative celebrity news may correspond to some forms of antisocial behaviour among certain adolescents. In line with this proposition is a study by den Hamer, Konijn, and Keijer (2014). In their survey research, the authors found support for a model indicating that feelings of anger and frustration might lead to anti-social media consumption (e.g. risky behaviour, substance use, gossiping), which in turn determines cyberbullying behaviour. This supports the notion that a correlation may exist between consuming negative-toned celebrity news and cyberbullying. Thus, amid a complex web of other factors underlying cyberbullying behaviour, the consumption of celebrity news may play an important role.

On the basis of previous studies and Marshall's (2006) suggestion that celebrity scandals have the potential to reformulate values, it can be proposed that regular exposure to negative celebrity critiquing practices may influence some adolescents' attitudes concerning the moral acceptability of such critiquing, especially in the context of online media, which provide ample opportunities to (re-)act. Adolescents may be inspired to use these new journalistic norms themselves as guidelines to participate in negative behaviour online toward celebrities (Meloy, Sheridan and Hoffmann 2008). Different theories seem to suggest that such an influence is plausible. One theoretical basis can be found in Bandura's social learning theory (e.g., den Hamer et al. 2014). This theory explains how exposure to a particular behaviour can trigger learning practices through observation and vicarious learning processes (Bandura 2001), meaning that when adolescents observe the practice of media and/or public celebrity critiquing, they may perceive, or learn, that bashing people online is acceptable behaviour. Prestige-bias theory may add to this that celebrities' influence can be strong by virtue of their status and prestige as stars (Henrich and Gil-White 2001). However, journalists, peers, and others who criticise celebrities also can become very influential, according to this

theory, if their actions attract the attention of others, leading to prestige. It is important to acknowledge, however, that not all teens might react in the same way toward celebrity-critiquing cases. As mentioned before, other factors such as personality differences, adolescents' online activities, and mediation by their parents also can shape adolescents' attitudes on critiquing others and their own online behaviour (e.g. Pabian, De Backer and Vandebosch 2015; Mesch 2009).

Since existing research indicates a correlation between cyberbullying celebrities and cyberbullying peers (Pyżalski 2012), it also seems plausible that some teens may translate these humiliating practices toward celebrities into a personal context, affecting their social interactions with peers. This act of transformation then can be considered an example of the 'halo effect', a concept used in marketing research (e.g., Rajput and Dhillon 2013). The term explains how a general judgement can be guided by the attitudes toward particular parts of the product/situation (Thorndike 1920), meaning that adolescents' attitudes on supporting negative celebrity critiquing online may be transformed to their judgements on how to behave online toward people in general. Then again, whether people actually begin to engage in negative behaviour also may be guided by other factors, including their attitudes on and their perceptions of the possible consequences and seriousness of such behaviour (cfr. Prototype Willingness Model). Different celebrities perceive and express their experiences with negative celebrity critiquing as a form of cyberbullying. If teens also recognise celebrity critiquing as a form of online aggression, or even cyberbullying, they may be more conscious of the negative consequences of this behaviour and less inclined to imitate these 'bad' examples. Therefore, the second part of this study will determine adolescents' perceptions of cyberbullying in comparison with their judgements about negative celebrity-critiquing.

The Study

The goal of this study is to develop a better understanding of young teens' attitudes on and reactions to negative celebrity-critiquing practices. Furthermore, this study will analyse young girls' perceptions of cases of negative celebrity critiquing in comparison with their ideas on cyberbullying.

> RQ1: How do adolescent girls respond (moral acceptance, inclination to imitation) to different acts of negative celebrity critiquing?
>
> RQ2: Do adolescent girls consider negative celebrity critiquing to be a form of cyberbullying?

Methodology

Since the existing research on adolescents' attitudes on and reactions to the practice of celebrity critiquing is still rather limited, we opted to use focus groups. This method offers the opportunity to discover some general trends that may indicate areas in which future research on this topic can be conducted. Furthermore, this type of group interviewing allows for a deeper interpretation of group norms and the collective significance assigned to this celebrity news by teens (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson 2001).

The focus groups consisted of eighth- and ninth-grade girls who were recruited through direct contact with their schools. Before participation, the adolescents and their parents received an informed consent form explaining the broad lines of the study and their rights. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Social and Humanities research at the university of Antwerp. On the basis of previous research indicating that celebrity-gossip blogs are predominantly read by women (Meyers 2010) and the fact that indirect aggression

(such as 'gossiping', 'spreading false rumours', etc.), the behaviour in which this study is interested, is the most frequently observed form of cyberbullying among girls (e.g., Rivers and Smith 1994; Owens, Shute and Slee 2000), we decided to focus our study on females. A total of 76 girls participated in the study. Most of them were 13 years old, and approximately 10 of them were one or two years older. The research took place at three different schools and lasted for approximately 50 minutes (one lesson hour). The conversations were held in Dutch. The girls were instructed to form groups by themselves. As expected, friends grouped together, which facilitated the conversation (Finch and Lewis 2003). The talking was quite dynamic and informal, and afterward, several participants spontaneously informed us that they enjoyed taking part in the study.

Our semi-structured group interviews were organised on the basis of concrete cases of negative celebrity critiquing, in a sense that they consisted of a 'vulnerable' celebrity (all cases involved female celebrities) confronted with online comments by the media, by the public, or by other celebrities, mostly concerning taboo topics (e.g., abuse, female ambition, physical appearance), which again seemed to reinforce their 'weaker' position. The four distinct cases were explained and discussed in the groups. The first example was a case of public celebrity critiquing characterised by a celebrity who gets online comments from a reader. The case focuses on Jindra, a girl known from a Flemish TV talent show, 'K3 zoekt K3', who was confronted with a series of critiques (e.g. 'Jindra proved once more how arrogant she is', 'Jindra is such a bitch, you can change her as much as you want, she will always be ugly') after she requested a change to her hairstyle. The second example was a news article focusing on a celebrity-critiquing testimonial involving rising British music star Cher Lloyd, who became famous during a previous season of 'X Factor UK', and her reaction to several hateful messages posted online after she accepted fans as her friends on social media (e.g., 'Are you talking about Cher?! She is a talentless chav and was arrogant during

the entire show! That's not bullying; it's stating the facts!'). The third case consisted of a celebrity fight on Twitter between Rihanna and a U.S. TV host who cited Rihanna's 'ugliness' as the reason for problems she had with her former boyfriend, who abused her. Both celebrities went back and forth with mean and hurtful tweets, which makes this a case of negative celebrity critiquing among celebrities themselves. The last case consisted of an example of media critiquing. The study's staff selected a regular feature in the popular Flemish teen magazine *Joepie* that's dedicated to making fun of celebrities by publishing embarrassing pictures of them with accompanying text, such as when a celebrity is photographed at a costume party, a popular tactic in gossip magazines worldwide. The debate over these four different types of cases -- negative public comments, a celebrity testimonial about the experience of receiving online comments, a negative-critiquing case among celebrities, and an example of media celebrity critiquing -- allowed us to learn how these young girls' judgements may differ based on the celebrity involved, as well as the type of negative critiquing with which the star is confronted. After judging the moral acceptability and the implications of these messages for the celebrity (covering RQ 1), the girls were instructed to think about how these critiquing cases are related to cyberbullying (covering RQ 2).

The interviews were transcribed, then coded, using Nvivo. After the transcription of the interviews, the first step of the analysis was the coding process. The very detailed codes were then clustered into one broader category, which then again was grouped into a broader category, and so on, resulting in a tree structure.

Results and Discussion

Teen Girls' Attitudes and Behavioural Responses Toward Negative Celebrity Critiquing

Consistent with previous studies, our participants were well aware of the distorted media reporting and underlying tactics that have contributed not only to the scandalous celebrity media landscape (Meyers 2010; Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014), but also to the increasingly critical opinions expressed by online readers. Nevertheless, the girls generally indicated that they enjoyed reading the comments on celebrities' fashion styles or when a publication pokes fun at them, especially when there was a humorous, playful tone in the reporting. In line with these preferences and with previous research (Peng et al. 2015; Hermes 2006), it can be concluded that entertainment and involvement in celebrities' lives were prominent reasons for consuming celebrity news. Nevertheless, some girls reported being bored by the disproportionate attention to socialites such as the Kardashians and Paris Hilton, who, in previous focus groups, was described as the prototype of a shallow star (Johansson 2015). Media coverage of such reality TV stars, together with the various offerings of reality TV programs that give ordinary people a 'shot of fame', seemed to feed the idea that everyone can attain celebrity status these days (Rojek 2001; Gies 2011).

> 'Nowadays, those people who work for it stay behind and those who do nothing are the most famous' (Focus Group 8).

After talking about their interest in celebrity news, the girls evaluated the presented stories of celebrities becoming the victim of negative online comments. Most of the girls found the media-critiquing example, which consisted of a section in a popular teen magazine focusing on making fun of celebrities by using embarrassing photos and text, to be the most entertaining. Furthermore, almost all of them acknowledged journalists' right to put celebrities in embarrassing situations like this, as they considered their intentions to be humorous and harmless. Some girls added that if the intention were to hurt people, these kinds of comments would not be entertaining anymore.

'I think this is not meant to make fun of people; it's just meant to entertain people and to show that not everything needs to be taken too serious. You just need to laugh with some things' (Focus Group 10).

'If the picture would be accompanied with a very negative text, or it does not have a humorous intention, it would be teasing or bullying, but if it's really funny and it's made to be funny, I would not make a problem of it' (Focus Group 10).

The importance ascribed to underlying intentions also was highlighted when the teens discussed the public critiquing case. During the interviews, the moderator read some negative tweets (cfr. the tweets about Jindra) aloud and asked for the girls' opinion on these statements. Although their first reaction was again to laugh with the comments, several of them realised quickly that this reaction was not appropriate and switched their opinions, noting that these tweets were not entertaining. Despite the girls' disapproval of these negative tweets, they were remarkably fast in judging and blaming the celebrity for the critical online comments. In the case of Cher Lloyd, a young singing star overwhelmed by critical online reader comments after she accepted some fans as her friends online, the girls concluded that she was partly responsible for her own suffering.

'It's a bit her own fault. If she didn't sing or if she didn't admit or accept those people online, nothing would have happened' (Focus Group 11).

In the case of Jindra, the girl who endured negative reader comments about her behaviour on TV, several girls condemned her as arrogant and blamed her for the online hate. These results dovetail with earlier studies pointing to judgemental attitudes of media consumers toward celebrities (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014). Furthermore, the girls were convinced that celebrities should be able to deal with these comments because being famous was, according to the respondents, inevitably associated with 'hate messages'. Indeed, one girl did not feel much sympathy for Cher Lloyd's experiences and instead referred to the

huge number of other children who get bullied, but never gain the opportunity to tell their story.

> '[…] There're so many people being hated. This example is mainly an attempt to seek attention. If a famous person places such a pathetic text on social media where she describes how she cried herself to sleep, it might be crude, but I don't feel sorry for them, but if something like this happens to someone at school, I do feel sorry for that person, but this is just the life of a celebrity. You need to deal with the fact that you get hate' (Focus Group 12).

> 'Yes, that is true, but no one deserves to be bullied, that's it. But of course, you get hate; every celebrity gets hate' (Focus Group 11).

Although the literature suggests celebrities endure serious mental consequences from repeatedly receiving critiques (e.g. Rojek 2001), according to the adolescents, the impact on the stars in the represented cases would be minimal because celebrities get mean messages so often that, after a while, they got used to this. The girls also distinguished between famous stars and less-famous ones, who still might not be accustomed to receiving mean messages. Moreover, the girls doubted the celebrities' willingness and capacity to read everything written about them. Following the reasoning of one girl, cyberbullying a celebrity was impossible because of this unattainable position they were in.

> 'But if you're a celebrity, such as Justin Bieber, he's too famous. I don't think it hurts him anymore. He also has some loveable people around him. Jindra doesn't have that much fans yet; that's why I think it might hurt her' (Focus Group 6).

> 'But I don't think that celebrities look up all those things people say about them and cry themselves to sleep' (Focus Group 8).

Although the girls blamed the celebrity and expected them to easily deal with these comments, most girls shared the viewpoint that denigrating and abusing people online is unnecessary and mean. If you do not like someone, it's better not to post that opinion, they

said. Placing hate online would only result in an escalation of the problem, or what some of the teens called 'drama'. Supporting Meyers' findings (2010), only a small minority of our respondents commented regularly on online celebrity stories. Despite journalists' right to embarrass celebrities now and then, the general advice for the audience, however, was to stay away from that spiral of negative critiquing.

> 'That's just his opinion. In my view, if you don't like something, you don't need to react to it or make it even worse, but just ignore it. Just don't write about something if you don't like it' (Focus Group 11).

However, the teens used the digital web to express their opinions about celebrities in other ways, such as by 'liking' celebrity fan pages or news articles, and sometimes sharing a reaction. These sporadic reactions are mostly formulated in a positive way, which confirms earlier findings (Van den Bulck et al. 2015). The participants seemed to be worried about the possible influence of these online practices on the creation and maintenance of their own online images. When they witness others regularly sharing untruthful (celebrity) information, or so-called 'toilet-reading' (Johansson 2015), online, they might lose sympathy. The spreading of such celebrity information during a private conversation was considered to be an alternative.

> '[…] There were a lot of people who asked me why I shared that stuff; it doesn't interest them, they said, so I quit sharing everything because you know that there're a lot of people who don't want to see that. I do like to know those things, but when everyone criticises you, that's not funny' (Focus Group 10).

> 'You can say online something like "Did you already know this and blabla", but I'd prefer to say those things face-to-face or to send a link via SMS, but not sharing it on my Facebook, because who's interested in that?' (Focus Group 10)

For our first research question, it can be concluded that the girls' interpretations and evaluations of the stories of celebrities being confronted with critical comments

differ according to the type of critiquing cases they evaluated. For the media critiquing case, the girls found this example to be entertaining, and almost all of them approved of journalists' right to embarrass celebrities in this manner. When discussing the negative tweets by the audience and the celebrity fight case, they generally judged these forms of celebrity critiquing to be unacceptable behaviour. In all cases, however, the celebrities were blamed for their own suffering, and should be able to deal with it.

Negative Celebrity Critiquing vs. Cyberbullying through Teen Girls' Eyes

Given the fact that negative celebrity critiquing also refers to repetitive, hurtful (online) comments by journalists, bloggers, or the public at large about (especially the 'vulnerable') celebrities, there seems to be a clear overlap with (indirect forms of) cyberbullying (Smith et al. 2008). The main distinguishing feature appears to be the target of the behaviour, namely a celebrity vs. a non-celebrity person (usually a 'peer'). However, we were interested in how adolescent girls judge and compare these two behaviours themselves.

According to our participants, none of the celebrity-critiquing examples fits into the category of bullying, it was 'just an expression of your opinion' and 'everyone has the right to express this opinion', whereas bullying referred to more extreme behaviours. In two groups, the girls also referred to the 'distance' element, and more specifically to the fact that they don't know the celebrity's character and his or her reactions to the comments, when explaining why these examples should not be categorised as cyberbullying.

> 'That's not bullying; it's just expressing your opinion, but in the wrong way. I mean, it's wrong to put that on the Internet' (Focus Group 3).

> 'But we don't know Jindra. If this would have been someone from our school, someone that we really know, then it might have been cyberbullying, if we could see that she really suffered from it' (Focus Group 6).

As indicated earlier, many girls also questioned whether these negative celebrity-critiquing practices would have a negative impact on the celebrities themselves. And even if they did, it was regarded as something celebrities should be able to deal with because it was considered a normal part of being famous. This seems to point to some dehumanisation effect, a psychological process that can further enhance aggressiveness (Bandura and Underwood 1975). However, it appeared that attitudes shifted when ordinary people were confronted with critical online comments. Specifically, when a friend of these girls would be confronted with negative-critiquing, their reactions showed some differences. The respondents said it would be unacceptable if their friends were treated like the stars in the critiquing examples. Instead of watching from the sidelines and blaming the victim, the girls said they would defend their friends. Several also said they would comfort their friends and help them prevent such comments in the future. These results confirm earlier findings concerning the different subjects of gossip: People are generally more amused by negative gossip about celebrities and by positive gossip about friends or themselves (Peng et al. 2015). Furthermore, this also follows the idea that adolescents must know the victim personally to be able to recognise the severity of the situation and show empathy for that person.

'I think we would react harder against the bully' (Focus Group 6).

'But I would also say why, I would give my opinion and tell her that she doesn't have to behave like that; I would do that' (Focus Group 14).

If these participants themselves would be confronted with those kinds of online comments, such as the negative comments aimed at Jindra or Cher, they said they would be angry and hurt. Consistent with the scenarios involving most of the celebrities in this situation (Lewis and Martinez 2008), most girls agreed that the best option in this case would be to ignore the comments. However, depending on who was the sender of the critical messages (someone they know vs. a stranger), they might respond differently.

'It depends on who it is; if it would be my best friend, it would be more hurtful than if it would be a stranger. If it would be someone I don't know, it wouldn't bother me what that person is saying' (Focus Group 8).

However, when the girls were confronted with a scenario like the media-critiquing one, in which the teen magazine published embarrassing pictures of celebrities, most girls said they would interpret this as funny and harmless. Here again, they pointed to the importance of the intention.

In conclusion, it seemed that the teen girls clearly distinguished between the examples of negative celebrity critiquing and cyberbullying. Despite their disapproval of the comments, they considered bullying to be much more extreme behaviour than this.

Conclusion

By conducting focus groups with teen girls, this study aimed to gain more insights on adolescent girls' attitudes on and reactions to four different types of negative celebrity-critiquing examples: a negative public comment, a celebrity testimonial about a confrontation with negative comments, a negative critiquing case among celebrities and an example of media celebrity critiquing.

Our first research question focused on young girls' responses to the different celebrity-critiquing scenarios. The first reaction by most of the girls was to laugh at the comments, which seemed to indicate some form of 'schadenfreude', whereby people enjoy reading about celebrities' misfortunes because it gives them a better feeling about themselves (Cross and Littler 2010). However, most of the girls also indicated that reading comments aimed at hurting celebrities was not enjoyable, and some of them called it unacceptable online behaviour. Despite the girls' disapproval of the online-commenting examples with Cher and Jindra, they still adopted a judgemental tone while discussing the examples and blamed the

celebrities for the online hate – an attitude also seen in cyberbullies (Pornari and Wood 2010). This dovetails with earlier research on celebrity critiquing behaviour, indicating that Flemish media users are often not kind toward celebrities (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2014). Also, the girls' behavioural responses seem to confirm earlier studies on online behaviour toward celebrities (Meyers 2010), as most girls reported that they would not engage in this type of behaviour themselves. Most of the girls even consciously avoided posting negative comments about a celebrity story online because they were well aware of the problems this could generate.

Our second research question asked the girls to compare the acts of celebrity critiquing with what they considered to be cyberbullying. These girls said none of the discussed cases should be interpreted as examples of cyberbullying, and that the comments were rather an expression of personal opinions. Since some of the girls also used the term 'drama' to refer to the flow of negative comments celebrities encounter, this finding seems comparable with earlier research revealing that different scenarios considered to be examples of bullying to adults were 'just drama' for adolescents (Marwick and Boyd 2011b). The authors explained teens' preference for the term 'drama' as a way to distance themselves from negative practices. Future research might benefit from a clear definition of celebrity critiquing to ensure that researchers and adolescents are interpreting this phenomenon in the same way. Nevertheless, the girls also pointed to the importance of the attitude toward the victim, which follows earlier studies in the context of bullying (e.g., Pozzoli and Gini 2010). The more positive the attitude toward the victim (if it was a friend of theirs), the more empathy the girls had for that person and the more likely they were to label the actions as 'cyberbullying'.

It is clear from these results that the girls consider 'celebrity critiquing' to be normal, especially when practiced by journalists. Their arguments resemble the moral disengagement

strategies that are found in (cyber)bullying (Perren and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger 2012): cognitive restructuring (e.g., by euphemistic labelling -- 'it's just an opinion'), obscuring or minimising their own role in causing harm ('I would not critique a celebrity, myself'), disregarding or distorting the impact of harmful behaviour ('celebrities will never read this'), and blaming and dehumanising the victim ('it's their own fault', 'celebrities should be able to deal with this'). However, when similar forms of critiquing were aimed at (non-celebrity) people whom they know personally, their attitudes differed greatly (some would even call these acts 'cyberbullying' then). The same holds for their reactions. These results seem to indicate that adolescents use different standards for different people (celebrities vs. non-celebrities), and that the 'normalisation' of online critiquing might be limited to a specific group (namely 'celebrities') and not generalised to include other categories of people (peers). Testing the suggested (absence of an) effects from exposure to online celebrity critiquing on cyberbullying behaviour toward peers and the underlying explanatory mechanisms is a challenge for future research. This requires using appropriate quantitative methods to determine causality, such as an experimental design or a panel study. Other (qualitative) studies might build on the shortcomings of this study. For instance, our focus groups were only conducted with a sample of Flemish teen girls. Therefore, our conclusions cannot be ascribed to all adolescents. It might be interesting for future research to replicate this study among a sample of teen boys and compare the results. Secondly, four specific celebrity stories were used during the group discussions, implicating that our participants' interpretations and reactions cannot be generalised to all celebrity critiquing situations. As our results already indicated, the girls' responses are dependent on the critiquing type, the source, and the celebrity involved. Future research might therefore also look at how other cases of celebrity critiquing (such as those focusing on male vs. female celebrities) might be perceived.

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