Online celebrity bashing : wrecking ball or good for you? Adolescent girls' attitudes toward the media and public bashing of Miley Cyrus and Selena Gomez

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Selena Gomez

Abstract

Journalists and readers of celebrity news regularly bash celebrities online, a behavior that is easily accepted among adolescents. This study investigates whether these attitudes of acceptance differ according to the perpetrator of the bashing (media versus public) and the likeability of the involved celebrity (liked versus disliked). Using a vignette study, we examine adolescent girls' attitudes toward media (journalists') and public (readers') bashing of a generally disliked celebrity (Miley Cyrus) and a generally liked celebrity (Selena Gomez). All participants read an identical negative news story (media bashing) and two related negative reader comments (public bashing). Participants were randomly assigned to read this information about either Miley Cyrus or Selena Gomez. Results of a mixed-design ANOVA showed that the girls had less negative attitudes toward media bashing compared with public bashing. Moreover, they more easily accepted the bashing of a disliked celebrity than the bashing of a liked celebrity.

Introduction

Celebrities regularly become the subject of mean comments online (Johansson, 2008; Claessens & Van den Bulck, 2014). This phenomenon, also referred to as *celebrity bashing*, is a specific form of online aggression, consisting of derogatory/mean comments on celebrities' appearance, work or private life, formulated by journalists or their audiences (both the journalist' audience and the celebrity's audience) in a publicly visible way. Although often dismissed, research on celebrity cyberbullying testimonials indicates that these celebrities do experience negative consequences from these practices, such as depression, alcohol and drug addictions (Ouvrein, Vandebosch & De Backer, 2018). Adolescent girls seem to underestimate the impact of celebrity bashing, as research has found that they generally perceive it as a normal part of being famous (Ouvrein, Vandebosch & De Backer, 2017). Although celebrity bashing typically generates such feelings of acceptance and amusement among readers (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002; Peng, Li, Wang, Mo & Chen, 2015), the type of perpetrator and the likeability of the involved celebrity-victim might intensify or weaken these feelings (Peng et al., 2015). To stop the development of a culture in which adolescents easily accept celebrity aggression, we need more knowledge on the potential role of both the perpetrator (the media versus the public) and the involved celebrity (liked versus disliked) in determining adolescents' attitudes toward celebrity bashing. This study, therefore, investigates adolescent girls' attitudes toward a case of media bashing and one of public bashing of two well-known celebrities in the Western media culture, one generally liked (Selena Gomez) and one generally disliked (Miley Cyrus) among adolescent girls.

Celebrity bashing

Celebrity gossip is an important part of the current entertainment industry (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This is the result of newspapers trying to find an answer to their decreasing popularity at the end of the 19th century (Turner, 2010). Bashing celebrities appeared to be one successful way to increase the level of entertainment, so journalists increasingly participated in this practice (Johansson, 2008). The emergence of online celebrity aggression by the audiences though, is a relatively new phenomenon, boosted by current interactive features of communication technologies (Claessens & Van den Bulck, 2014) and the online presence of celebrities (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In what follows, we differentiate both practices, using the terms *media celebrity bashing* to describe what journalists do, and *public celebrity bashing* to refer to audiences' celebrity bashing. We distinguish celebrity bashing from (negative) critiquing based on the underlying intentions of the behavior, which follows the work of Dalla Pozza and colleagues (2011). Whereas critiquing is generally constructive in motivation, bashing describes behaviors with harmful intent (Dalla Pozza et al., 2011).

Attitudes toward the perpetrator

As frequent users of the Internet, adolescents are regularly exposed to celebrity bashing (Chia & Poo, 2009; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). This repetitive exposure might increase their acceptance of this type of aggression (Ouvrein et al., 2017). Indeed, research finds that adolescents morally justify online celebrity aggression more easily than online aggression toward peers (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015; Ouvrein et al., 2017).

However, bystanders' reactions and interpretations of online aggression are not always straightforward but differ according to who performed the aggression. One focus group study in which adolescent girls discussed examples of media and public celebrity bashing found that girls generally accepted journalistic attacks on celebrities, as it is "a journalist's job," whereas for the audience they had less acceptable attitudes (Ouvrein et al., 2017).

These more lenient attitudes toward media bashing, compared with public bashing, may be the result of the important functions celebrity gossip fulfills. Readers use celebrity gossip to stay up-to-date and to discuss with each other what is morally acceptable in a society (Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2014). Other studies point to the multifaceted use of (negative) celebrity news for information, reputation management, friendships, social bonding and entertainment (De Backer, Nelissen, Vyncke, Braeckman & McAndrew, 2007; Chia & Poo, 2009). According to De Backer and colleagues (2007) especially younger people were attracted to celebrity gossip because they wanted to achieve fame themselves. Doing what the celebrity does can then become a strategy to emulate their behavior (De Backer et al., 2007). Nowadays, however, doing what the journalist does can also lead to similar successful outcomes, since several celebrity bloggers have become celebrities themselves (e.g., Perez Hilton; Senft, 2008). Interestingly, these celebrity practitioners position themselves closer to the celebrities they blog about than to their own fans (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Doing so, they acclaim their own celebrity position. This, in the end, also makes them celebrities that younger audiences may want to mimic to achieve a higher status themselves (De Backer et al., 2007). If this is true, then **(H1)** adolescent girls will have higher attitudes of acceptance of media celebrity bashing compared to public celebrity bashing.

Attitudes toward the victim

Not just the perpetrator but also the victim of the online aggression has an influence on how bystanders judge the incident. Bystanders more easily disapprove of aggression toward victims with whom they are friends, which in turn also increases their chances to intervene (Thornberg, Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, Jungert & Vanegas, 2012; DeSmet, Bastiaensens, Van Cleemput, Poels, Vandebosch & De Bourdeaudhuij, 2012). Online aggression toward a disliked victim, on the other hand, increases levels of moral disengagement (Obermann, 2011), which in turn reduces motivations to support (Thornberg et al., 2012). Research even

finds that for bullying (Thornberg et al., 2012) and gossiping (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002), the involvement of disliked others as victims generates fun and amusement. Celebrity studies observe similar patterns, whereby *schadenfreude* refers to the amusement of reading about celebrities' misfortunes (Cross & Littler, 2010).

Disposition theory further explains that the level of (dis)approval toward involved characters predicts users' entertainment (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Audiences thus have more fun when their favorite characters enjoy good outcomes and their disliked characters face bad outcomes (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). The key mechanism of this theory relies on justice processes: good people deserve good things and bad people deserve misfortune (Raney, 2004). Disposition theory has been supported for different media contexts, such as news programming and entertainment (Raney, 2004). Given that media and public celebrity bashing can be considered a combination of these two media types (news, but often with a sensational tone), it seems plausible that disposition theory will also guide our results. We therefore expect that **(H2)** adolescent girls will have more favorable attitudes toward celebrity bashing of a disliked celebrity compared to the bashing of a liked celebrity.

Methodology

Sample

A total of 399 girls with an average age of 14.09 ($SD = .41$) years old participated in the study. Almost all participants (94.8%) self-identified as having Belgian nationality. We decided to focus our study on girls for two reasons: (1) previous research indicates that girls have a higher celebrity news consumption, both online (Meyers, 2010) and offline (McDonnell, 2015), which makes them more likely to be exposed to celebrity bashing, and (2) indirect forms of aggression, (e.g., gossiping and spreading rumors), which are most common in the context of celebrity aggression, are forms of cyberbullying that are typically

observed among girls (Rivers & Smith, 1994). Participants were recruited through direct contact with their schools.

Vignettes to measure attitudes toward celebrity bashing

In order to test our hypotheses, we used a vignette methodology. This methodology is well-suited "to help unpack individuals' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes to a wide range of social issues" (Hughes, 1998, p. 384) and thus seems applicable to measure attitudes toward celebrity bashing. In order to increase the ecological and face validity, vignettes were developed based on a focus group study among girls of the same age, during which they discussed examples of celebrities being attacked online (Ouvrein et al., 2017). Depending on the girls' opinions on which examples were celebrity bashing cases and which ones were not, we developed vignettes consisting of two cases of celebrity bashing, one media bashing case and one public bashing case that were accompanied by a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Girls were randomly assigned to read an identical negative news story (media bashing case) and two related negative reader comments (public bashing case) about Miley Cyrus or Selena Gomez.

These celebrities were chosen based on the aforementioned focus group study. During these discussions, we learned that Selena Gomez can be considered as a generally liked celebrity among adolescent girls from our sampling frame, whereas Miley Cyrus is generally disliked (see also Vares & Jackson, 2015). This was also supported by the data from a short individual survey, administered right before the group discussions. In this survey, the girls were asked to list their top three favorite and least-favorite celebrities. Selena Gomez and Ariana Grande were mentioned most often as liked celebrities, but as Ariana Grande was also present among the disliked celebrities, we chose to work with Selena Gomez. Miley Cyrus was mentioned most often in the list of disliked celebrities.

The story was presented as if it was written by a journalist and contained several references to the celebrity as being stupid and naïve, making this an example of media celebrity bashing. This story was followed by two fictitious Twitter comments that are prototypical examples of public celebrity bashing. Consistent with research indicating that public comments of belgian readers are often more judgmental and negative than the original article (Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2014), the reader comments in the cases also contained more explicit words in order to make it as realistic as possible (see Figure 1). About half of the participants ($n = 203$; 50.8%) were randomly assigned to the Miley Cyrus case. Participants were instructed to read the news story and reader comments carefully. After these cases, questions were presented to measure participants' attitudes toward the media and the public bashing case.

Measurements

In order to check the likeability of the involved celebrities before reading the cases, we measured participants' *attitudes toward Selena Gomez and Miley Cyrus.* Participants indicated how much they liked these celebrities on a scale from 1 (*disliking*) to 10 (*liking*). Liking was described as liking the personality of the character, regardless of his/her singing/acting performances, because people can dislike celebrities but still like their music or acting performances (Vares & Jackson, 2015).

Attitudes toward the media bashing case and toward the public bashing case were measured right after the participants had read the story and the comments, using a semantic differential seven-point scale consisting of five items (unpleasant–nice, boring–exciting, cowardly–brave, not funny–funny, grown-up–childish). This scale was based on a semantic differential scale used to measure attitudes toward cyberbullying (Heirman & Walrave, 2012), a behavior that is similar to celebrity bashing. Participants completed this scale once for the media bashing case and once for the public bashing case. The last item, grown-up–

childish was reverse-coded. Mean scores of the five items were calculated for attitude toward

the media bashing case (α = .829) and the public bashing case (α = .878). A low score referred

to negative attitudes, whereas a high score indicated positive attitudes toward celebrity

bashing. The average score for media bashing was 2.87 (*SD*= 1.23) and for public bashing

2.19 (*SD*= 1.24).

Results

Descriptive statistics and manipulation check

Statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS Version 24.0. Welch's t-test indicated

significantly higher scores for the likeability of Selena Gomez compared to Miley Cyrus, $t(4,$

$18.8) = 37.05$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.12$; $M_{Selena} = 7.21$, $SD = 2.05$; $M_{Miley} = 4.74$, $SD = 2.35$, which

confirms the assumption of our study. Overall, the mean scores for attitudes toward media

and public celebrity bashing were below average ($M_{media\ bashing} = 2.87$, $SD = 1.23$; $M_{public\ bashing}$

$= 2.19$, $SD = 1.24$) on a scale from 1 (*unacceptable behavior*) to 7 (*acceptable behavior*).

This was also supported by a *t*-test against the fixed value of 4, $t_{media\ bashing}(380) = -17.97$, $p <$

$.001$, $d = .919$; $t_{public\ bashing}(381) = -28.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.46$

Procedure and results

Given that attitudes toward the bashing cases (media and public) were measured

within participants, and that the involved celebrity (Miley Cyrus versus Selena Gomez) was

measured between participants, a mixed-design 2x2 ANOVA was necessary to compare both

effects (Field, 2013). Pre-processing of our data indicated that the Levene's tests for both

attitudes toward the media bashing case, $F(1,377) = 5.12$, $p = .024$, and attitudes toward the

public bashing case, $F(1,377) = 8.40$, $p = .004$, were significant, violating the assumption of

homogeneity of variances. No non-parametric alternatives are available for a mixed ANOVA

(Brightwell & Dransfield, 2013), so to correct for this violation, reciprocal transformations of

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the data were performed (Brightwell & Dransfield, 2013), which was successful in improving the homogeneity of variances (Field, 2013).

Results of the mixed-design ANOVA with reciprocal transformations indicated a significant main effect of bashing, $F(1,377) = 182.96$, $p < .001$, $np^2 = .32$, meaning that irrespective of the involved celebrity, there is a significant difference in the attitudes toward media versus public celebrity bashing. Secondly, a significant main effect of celebrity, $F(1,377) = 4.50$, $p = .035$, $np^2 = .01$, was found, indicating that irrespective of the type of bashing, the attitudes toward bashing for Miley Cyrus versus Selena Gomez were significantly different. The interaction effect was not significant. In order to interpret these main effects, data should be back-transformed by using the reciprocal transformation procedure noted above in reverse (Brightwell & Dransfield, 2013). For bashing, it was found that attitudes for media bashing were significantly more positive than attitudes for public bashing ($M_{media} = .87$, $SD = .06$, $M_{public} = .74$, $SD = .07$). Concerning the main effect of celebrity, results indicated that the attitudes toward bashing were more positive in the group that read the Miley Cyrus case ($M_{bashing, Miley} = .77$, $SD = .06$, $M_{bashing, Selena,} = .75$, $SD = .05$) (see Table 1).

Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that most of the girls have rather negative attitudes toward celebrity bashing. However, these attitudes vary according to the type of perpetrator and celebrity-victim involved. Firstly, adolescent girls have less negative attitudes toward media celebrity bashing compared to public bashing, which confirms H1. The fact that journalists and other media/celebrity practitioners acclaim a celebrity status themselves by gossiping about (other) celebrities (Senft, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2011) can explain this effect. Given the higher general acceptance of celebrity practioners' bashing practices, future research on the potential impact of their online posts is necessary.

Secondly, we found that adolescent girls have less negative attitudes toward both types of bashing if a disliked celebrity is involved, which confirms H2 and is in line with earlier studies on online aggression toward peers (Thornberg et al., 2012; DeSmet et al., 2012). Research from Vares and Jackson (2015) already indicated that insulting Miley Cyrus was easily justified among adolescents; the present study adds to their findings that these lenient attitudes are influenced by the attitudes of (dis)likeability toward the involved celebrity. Moreover, our findings support disposition theory, indicating that people experience more enjoyment when good things happen to their favorite celebrities and bad things happen to their disliked celebrities (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). These effects might be strengthened by the development of positive and negative parasocial relationships with the involved celebrity (Hartmann, Stuke & Daschmann, 2008). A parasocial relationship can be defined as a celebrity-fan relationship in which the "ordinary" person knows much about the celebrity, but the celebrity knows nothing about that person (Hartmann et al., 2008). Research among adults indicates that, whereas a positive parasocial relationship with a liked celebrity is characterized with strong feelings of empathy, a negative parasocial relationship generates feelings of antipathy and disgust and wishes for bad outcomes to befall a disliked celebrity (Hartmann et al., 2008). In contrast, younger children (6-7 years old) seem to react differently toward disliked media characters and rather avoid the exposure or even stop following them (Jennings & Alper, 2016). Future research should further investigate how adolescents deal with negative parasocial relationships.

Some limitations and suggestions for future research must be recognized. Firstly, in order to maximize the ecological validity of the study, our cases were constructed as realistically as possible. The vignette for media celebrity bashing consisted of a news article, whereas the vignette for public celebrity bashing consisted of two tweets, as these forms of communication represent a naturalistic context in which celebrity bashing by the

media/public happens (Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2014; Johansson, 2008). As both media differ in the allowed number of words and the style of writing, possible language effects cannot be excluded. Future research might consider controlling for these effects. This might be more easily realized in an experimental setting. Moreover, an experiment with a pre- and post-test measurement might also help to determine the causality of the suggested relationships. Second, this study was performed among a convenience sample of adolescent girls, who were all studying in group A. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the whole population of Belgian 14-year-old girls. Future research might consider including a representative sample, as well as a sample among boys. However, in that case, it might be advisable to use vignettes about celebrities that boys (dis)like.

The results of this study have some practical implications. As previous research points out a moderate to strong association between adolescents' attitudes toward online aggression and its performance (e.g., Pabian & Vandebosch, 2014), it can be expected that more favorable attitudes toward celebrity bashing lead to higher chances to perform this behavior, as outlined by different theories (e.g., the theory of planned behavior, prototype willingness model). Teachers and parents should therefore enhance moral feelings among adolescents and teach them that online aggression is unacceptable and hurtful for peers and celebrities they dislike.

In sum, our findings provide evidence that attitudes toward celebrity bashing differ based on the type of perpetrator and the likability of the celebrity-victim. It thus seems necessary that future research develops and validates scales that differentiate between different types of celebrity bashing.

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Figure 1. Operationalization of the cases

Below you can find an example of an online news article on Selena Gomez. Under the news article, there are a few Twitter reactions of readers. Read both the news article and the tweets carefully and answer the related questions.

Is the hot Selena Gomez really such a dumb bimbo?

It is hard to deny that Selena Gomez is a gorgeous woman. However, there are some doubts about her mental capabilities.

Not so long ago Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez were a couple. Every once in a while they 'we're on a break' because Justin was such a juvenile asshole sometimes, and Selena couldn't deal with it anymore. However, the lovebirds got back together each and every time.

Earlier this week, the news came out that Justin had slept with a Victoria Secret model. For Selena, this was too much. She could accept that he was flirting with someone else, but doing 'it' was a bridge too far.

However, a couple of hours ago Justin posted a picture on his Instagram together with Selena Gomez hugging and kissing. Underneath the picture he wrote "At this moment all other things are still a bit fuzzy."

When we saw this picture, we immediately wondered: Is Selena Gomez really that stupid? Did she really give that jackass and whoremonger yet another chance?

Reader reactions:

Selena Gomez is HOT, but so stupid!

↩ Reply ⇄ Retweet ★ Favorite ••• More

2
FAVORITES

Is there anyone else who thinks Selena Gomez is a dumb whore or is it just me?

RETWEET   FAVORITES

Below you can find an example of an online news article on Miley Cyrus. Under the news article, there are a few Twitter reactions of readers. Read both the news article and the tweets carefully and answer the related questions.

Is the hot Miley Cyrus really such a dumb bimbo?

It is hard to deny that Miley Cyrus is a gorgeous woman. However, there are some doubts about her mental capabilities.

Not so long ago Liam Hemsworth and Miley Cyrus were a couple. Every once in a while they 'we're on a break' because Liam was such a juvenile asshole sometimes, and Miley couldn't deal with it anymore. However, the lovebirds got back together each and every time.

Earlier this week, the news came out that Liam had slept with a Victoria Secret model. For Miley, this was too much. She could accept that he was flirting with someone else, but doing 'it' was a bridge too far.

However, a couple of hours ago Liam posted a picture on his Instagram together with Miley Cyrus hugging and kissing. Underneath the picture he wrote "At this moment all other things are still a bit fuzzy."

When we saw this picture, we immediately wondered: Is Miley Cyrus really that stupid? Did she really give that jackass and whoremonger yet another chance?

Reader reactions:

Miley Cyrus is HOT, but so stupid!

↩ Reply ⇄ Retweet ★ Favorite ••• More

2
FAVORITES

Is there anyone else who thinks Miley Cyrus is a dumb whore or is it just me?

RETWEET   FAVORITES

16

Table 1. *Descriptive results*

	M	*SD*
Media celebrity bashing after transformations	.78	.06
Public celebrity bashing after reciprocal transformation	.74	.07
Bashing Miley Cyrus	.77	.06
Bashing Selena Gomez	.75	.05