



Turning to the empirical audience: the desired but denied object of celebrity studies?

Heather Mendick, Kim Allen & Laura Harvey

To cite this article: Heather Mendick, Kim Allen & Laura Harvey (2015) Turning to the empirical audience: the desired but denied object of celebrity studies?, *Celebrity Studies*, 6:3, 374-377, DOI: [10.1080/19392397.2015.1063757](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.1063757)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.1063757>



© 2015 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis.



Published online: 08 Jul 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 413



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

FORUM

Turning to the empirical audience: the desired but denied object of celebrity studies?

Heather Mendick^{a*}, Kim Allen^{b**} and Laura Harvey^c

^a*Department of Education, Brunel University, London, UK;* ^b*Education and Social Research Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK;* ^c*Sociology Department, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK*

(Received 23 July 2014; accepted 11 June 2015)

The 2010 launch of *Celebrity Studies* brought a call from Graeme Turner for more work on people's readings of celebrity to sit alongside burgeoning textual analyses. He went so far as to call the dependence on textual analysis 'regressive' (Turner 2010, p. 13). This was not new: in 2004, Su Holmes signalled the importance of 'the real, or empirical audience' (2004, p. 169). Indeed such calls appeared to act as both mantra and disclaimer at the 2014 *Celebrity Studies* Conference in London, ritually recited by keynote speakers before they went on to discuss yet more textual research. Despite these invocations towards 'the empirical audience' that we understand as the everyday consumers of celebrity, we argue that too few scholars have made such a shift to consider how people use celebrity and negotiate its discourses and representational strategies. Indicative of its marginal position within the field, a recent special issue of this journal on 'Audiences' was dedicated to addressing the still 'sporadic and small-scale' status of work on audiences (Barnes *et al.* 2015, p. 1). Why is so much of the field of celebrity studies reluctant to engage with audiences through empirical data collection? Why, when it does, do the researchers focus on fan cultures, and neglect more everyday, ambivalent and even hostile engagements with contemporary celebrity culture? Is the shift to empirical audiences one that celebrity studies both desires and fears because of its potential to disrupt and transform the field?

We intend this short forum piece as a provocation, drawing on our work in a large-scale Economic and Social Research Council-funded study of 'the role of celebrity in young people's classed and gendered aspirations'.¹ Young people are often positioned in public and political debate as both most engaged in celebrity culture and most 'vulnerable' to its influence. However, the argument we make here applies to the analysis of celebrity more broadly.

While other scholars' (and our own) textual analyses of celebrity have been valuable – illuminating, for example, how celebrity articulates neoliberal discourses of individualism – we are troubled by the continued dominance of textual analysis in the study of celebrity and suggest that this can yield only a partial (if not distorted) understanding of how celebrity is implicated in everyday life. We contend that a turn to how people use celebrity within our methodologies is vital to disrupt the obviousness assumed in wider public and

*Corresponding author. Email: heathermendick@yahoo.co.uk

**Current affiliation: Sociology, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK.

academic debates around people's celebrity practices. As Ien Ang (1996, pp. 514–515) states, a focus on 'the unruly and heterogeneous practices and accounts of real historical viewers or readers ... forces the researcher to come to terms with perspectives that may not be easily integrated in a smooth, finished and coherent Theory'. In this endeavour we are inspired by Ang and other early cultural studies work, notably that emerging from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (see Hall and Jefferson 1976). We also take inspiration from recent feminist scholarship on women's readings of reality television (for example, Skeggs and Wood 2012) and the small strand of empirical audience work in celebrity studies (for example, Stacey 1994, Duits 2010, Inthorn and Street 2011, Cann 2014, Barnes *et al.* 2015).

Our desire to intervene is also informed by our political positions, our interdisciplinary locations (spanning education, sociology and cultural studies), our occupational backgrounds (particularly Heather's as an ex-teacher) and our histories of doing research with young people. Through these factors, we bring to the study of celebrity a 'knapsack' of tools and approaches concerned with studying how people use culture in their everyday meaning-making practices. So what difference does it make when we take everyday uses of celebrity as our starting point? We look briefly at two differences as a way of provoking further discussion. Both focus on how this would disrupt understandings of celebrity based only on textual readings, and so transform textual work on celebrity. We do not intend to suggest that the only, or main, purpose of empirical audience studies is to improve textual analyses. Our intention instead is to challenge the idea that these can be separate disciplines; that so long as there are some academics engaging with empirical audiences, then the mainstream of the field can continue unaffected.

First, taking everyday uses of celebrity as our starting point impacts which celebrities we study. Textual analyses of celebrity focus on public figures whom we assume to be culturally significant. Consequently, critical work on celebrity is inevitably led by the academic (and personal) investments in the cultural sphere² bringing some celebrities into view and not others with some predictability. Young people occupy different spaces literally, metaphorically, physically and virtually, and many of those celebrities who receive academic attention fail to register with young people. It would be interesting to see which celebrities register with other groups and how they too can disrupt our settled ideas about what makes a public figure significant and to whom. By following our participants' tastes, we were led to 12 celebrities as case studies for textual analysis: Beyoncé, Bill Gates, Emma Watson, Harry Windsor, Justin Bieber, Kate Middleton, Katie Price, Kim Kardashian, Mario Balotelli, Nicki Minaj, Tom Daley and Will Smith. Some of these are popular within the field. However, many are not: notably Emma Watson and Tom Daley. These are 'young' celebrities with whom many of our participants had grown up (through Emma's role in the *Harry Potter* films and Tom's highly publicised Olympic 'journey') and there was an intimacy with the image which was important to our participants.

We also uncovered the ubiquity of 'micro-celebrities' within young people's cultural register, including 'YouTubers' – young people who had marketed themselves as comedians, animators or gamers on the global video-sharing site. Using someone else's interests other than your own investments – academic and personal – takes you to different and surprising places and helps you reimagine 'the familiar'. The popularity of YouTubers and the ways in which they were constituted – as 'authentic', self-made, and deserving of their success – generated different questions about celebrity's social function in this current conjuncture. Recent scholarship on 'recessionary' popular culture has attended to the rise of 'micro-celebrities' such as fashion bloggers as embodying new entrepreneurial worker identities characteristic of the recessionary context based on the

monetisation of one's personal pursuits (Negra and Tasker 2014). YouTubers represent such a response to austerity. Their popularity speaks to how young people's anxieties about work within the current moment (of increasingly precarious employment, the rollback of social security) are registering through their attachment to new genres – and indeed definitions – of celebrity.

Second, taking everyday uses of celebrity as our starting point impacts what we attend to and the arguments we are able to make. Even when we study celebrities who are 'mainstream' academic concerns, being oriented to other people's meanings makes a difference to how we read them. We focus on one example here. Beyoncé was universally liked by our participants, often seen as emblematic of 'strong' and 'independent' womanhood. Roman (British Asian and working class) had a particularly strong investment in Beyoncé. He spoke of being bullied extensively because of his non-normative gender and sexual identity. Beyoncé and her association with other famous black women who had struggled against adversity offered a particularly important resource:

I love Beyoncé so much ... to get where she is, she's tried her hardest. She gives her all in everything she does ... [In] *Cadillac Records*, Beyoncé started as Etta James and she just showed how it was for her, as a young woman trying to get into the music business, and how men would just think ... 'these women can't do what we can do' ... That really showed me that no matter what comes in your way, you can always get past that, you always have to stay strong. ... It's Beyoncé who's influenced me, and who I look up to, who helps me thrive to get what I want. ... She inspires me. (Roman, British Asian and working class)

If we were to rely only on textual readings we may be led to simply dismiss Beyoncé's 'popular feminism' as anodyne or, as black cultural theorist and feminist bell hooks (2014) claimed recently, 'anti-feminist' and 'damaging'. To us, having to take seriously the words of young people renders it unethical to write off these participants' relationships to Beyoncé as an investment in something that is entirely recuperable to a patriarchal, capitalist or racist culture. Turning to how young people read and use Beyoncé forces us to confront the complexities of her mediation including articulations of feminism, gender and race. It means acknowledging that, despite the limitations and contradictions of the (post)feminist sensibilities she embodies, she still opens up spaces for young people to mobilise a language of gender equality, and, for some, like Roman, to create a sense of belonging.

A turn to the 'empirical audience' is not just a matter of methodology. It is epistemologically significant. Attending to how people use (and do not use) celebrity shifts our understanding of how and to what extent it intervenes into social life. This troubles the obviousness assumed within theories based on textual readings of celebrity, and unsettles easy answers about what celebrity is and does. It is perhaps because of this disruptive potential that the audience remains a desired but largely denied object of inquiry within the field. We hope that this short article provokes more scholars in the field to engage with empirical audiences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/J022942/1].

Notes

1. See the study's website for details of the study aims and methods: <http://www.celebyouth.org/about/>
2. For further discussion of scholars' personal investments in the celebrities and media forms we study, see Holmes *et al.* (2015).

Notes on contributors

Heather Mendick works as a reader in education at Brunel University. Her interdisciplinary research draws across sociology, education, media and cultural studies. She is the author of *Masculinities in Mathematics* and co-author of *Urban Youth and Schooling*. She previously taught mathematics and is currently studying for an MA in Modern and Contemporary Literature.

Kim Allen is a research fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University. Kim is an interdisciplinary feminist researcher. Her work focuses broadly on the sociology of youth transitions; young people's cultural practices; representations of class and gender in popular culture; and the mediation of social inequalities.

Laura Harvey is a lecturer in sociology at the University of Surrey. Her work takes an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on sociology, gender studies, social psychology and cultural studies. Her interests include sexualities, everyday intimacies and inequalities, research with young people, the mediation of sexual knowledge, feminist methodologies and discourse analysis.

References

- Ang, I., 1996. Feminist desire and female pleasure. In: J. Storey, ed. *Cultural studies and the study of the popular: theories and methods*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 513–522.
- Barnes, M., Holmes, S., and Ralph, S., 2015. Audiences for stardom and celebrity. *Celebrity Studies*, 6 (1), 1–5.
- Cann, V., 2014. Only girls like that!: gender-appropriate taste in contemporary youth cultures. Paper presented at Celebrity Studies Conference, University of East Anglia, UK.
- Duits, L., 2010. The importance of popular media in everyday girl culture. *European Journal of Communication*, 25 (3), 243–257.
- Hall, S. and Jefferson, P., eds., 1976. *Resistance through rituals: youth cultures in post war Britain*. London: Hutchinson.
- Holmes, S., 2004. “All you've got to worry about is the task, having a cup of tea, and what you're going to eat for dinner”: approaching celebrity in *Big brother*. In: S. Holmes and D. Jermyn, eds. *Understanding reality television*. London: Routledge, 111–135.
- Holmes, S., Ralph, S., and Redmond, S., 2015. Swivelling the spotlight: stardom, celebrity and 'me'. *Celebrity Studies*, 6 (1), 100–117.
- hooks, b., 2014. *Are you still a slave?* [online]. The New School. Available from: <http://new.livestream.com/TheNewSchool/Slave> [Accessed 8 January 2015].
- Inthorn, S. and Street, J., 2011. ‘Simon Cowell for prime minister’? Young citizens' attitudes towards celebrity politics. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33 (3), 479–489.
- Negra, D. and Tasker, Y., 2014. *Gendering the recession: media and culture in an age of austerity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Skeggs, B. and Wood, H., 2012. *Reacting to reality television*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Stacey, J., 1994. *Stargazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Turner, G., 2010. Approaching celebrity studies. *Celebrity Studies*, 1 (1), 11–20.