



The role of media figures in adolescent development: relations between autonomy, attachment, and interest in celebrities

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Abstract

The influence of figures from the mass media on adolescent development has been somewhat neglected in the literature to date. One particularly important influence concerns the parasocial relationships that adolescents form with favourite celebrities, which have been described as secondary attachments. In this study, celebrity interest was investigated in a sample of 191 British adolescents between the ages of 11 and 16, using a shortened version of the Celebrity Attitude Scale. It was hypothesised that celebrity attachments would reflect the transition from parental attachment to peer attachments and would also be related to increasing emotional autonomy. It was found that, after controlling for age-related effects, high emotional autonomy was a significant predictor of celebrity interest, as well as high attachment to peers and low attachment to parents. Different patterns were observed according to the functions of celebrity attachment: intense, personal interest in celebrities was best predicted by low levels of security and closeness. These findings suggest that celebrities provide adolescents with a secondary group of pseudo-friends during a time of increasing autonomy from parents, but intense focus on a single celebrity may result from difficulties in making this transition.

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A hundred years ago, the range of people who could exert an influence over adolescent socialization was restricted to peers, relatives, neighbours and teachers. In the intervening period, this number has swelled out of all proportion with the appearance of the mass media. Today,

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young people are exposed, for better or for worse, to an immense range of influential figures through television and radio, popular culture, print media and the internet. However, the role of the mass media has had negligible impact on theoretical models of development.

Media use among teenagers continues to increase over time. Recent figures suggest that in the USA and UK, they spend a daily average of 2.8 hours watching television (Larson & Verma, 1999). In Western Europe, the vast majority of young people have television in the family home; in some countries, over 50% of all teenagers have personal television sets in their bedrooms, rising to over 70% in the UK (Pasquier, Buzzi, d'Haenens, & Sjöberg, 1998; van der Voort et al., 1998). In addition, reading magazines, listening to music, playing computer games, and surfing the World Wide Web occupy yet more leisure time, not to mention many hours of subsidiary media use, such as peer discussion about media content.

One of the effects of so much media use is the increasing importance that figures from the media and popular culture come to assume in young people's lives. A recent study of celebrity influence found that over 75% of young adults reported a strong attraction to a celebrity at some point in their lives, mainly musicians or movie stars, but also a variety of other figures (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Media figures may act as role models in adolescence, although there is disagreement over the use of this term. Some researchers prefer to use the term "hero" to describe remote figures (Bromnick & Swallow, 1999), or "reference idol" (McEvoy & Erickson, 1981). In Boon and Lomore's (2001) study, 59% of respondents claimed that their idols had influenced some aspect of their attitudes or beliefs, mostly in positive directions, such as taking up creative writing, or sport or community work. Nevertheless, there is widespread concern that media figures may exert harmful influences over young people; some have even argued that the overwhelming popularity of celebrities over more worthy figures constitutes a "hero crisis" (Pleiss & Feldhusen, 1995).

Erikson (1968) has described attachments to distant figures as "secondary attachments", arguing that they play a transitional role during adolescence. In addition to acting as occupational role models, these secondary attachments may also perform social and emotional functions, particularly when they are romantic in nature (Adams-Price & Greene, 1990; Greene & Adams-Price, 1990). For example, a romantic attachment to a musician or movie star may enable a young person to act out an imaginary relationship at a safe distance as a kind of "dress rehearsal" for adult relationships (Hinerman, 1992; Steele & Brown, 1995). Attachments to media figures in general are referred to as *parasocial* relationships, where, although all the interaction is one-way, the person feels as if they know the figure as a friend or colleague (Giles, *in press*; Horton & Wohl, 1956). While such relationships are imaginary, they are nevertheless experienced as real, and parasocial relationships share many similarities with actual social relationships (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

The increase in media use during adolescence may be explained partly by the fact that more time is spent alone at this point in the lifespan, often in a private bedroom (Brown, Dykers, Steele, & White, 1994; Larson, 1995, 1997; Steele & Brown, 1995). At the same time, the adolescent enters a critical phase in identity development, characterised by a shift away from identification with parents (Cramer, 2001). The result is a gradual movement towards autonomy (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), or individuation (Goosens & Marcoen, 1999). Media figures play an important part in this development, since they offer a variety of possible selves that a young person might wish to try out, and provide exemplars "of how to think and feel in different circumstances" (Larson, 1995, p. 538). They also provide cultural materials for developing gender role identity,

forming values and beliefs, and learning sexual and romantic scripts (Arnett, 1995; Brown, Childers, & Waszak, 1990).

The present study was designed to explore more closely the link between adolescent autonomy and the formation of parasocial relationships with celebrities. Many of the functions of media figures in adolescence seem to be inherited from those of parents—as role models, guides, and teachers. Hermes (1995) has likened media figures to an “extended family” and suggests that peer gossip about such figures is important for developing shared standards of morality. Therefore, we should expect to find an increase in attachment to celebrities as the influence of parents wanes. One important process here is the *deidealisation* of parents during adolescence (Goosens & Marcoen, 1999; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Although several authors argue that such processes are culture-specific up to a point, in Western society it seems that this is an important stage in the process of individuation. As parents no longer fulfil the roles of idealised adult figures, this creates a space into which media figures can enter.

An important parallel development in adolescence is the increasing influence of the peer group, characterised by stronger attachments and closer relationships (Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Patterson, Field, & Pryor, 1994). These relationships are also likely to influence, and be influenced by, the development of parasocial relationships with media figures. Recent research on celebrity interest has found two discrete functions of celebrity attachments: a social entertainment function, and an intense personal function (Maltby, Houran, Lange, Ashe, & McCutcheon, 2002). This may be dependent on the role of peers in parasocial relationship development; where celebrity attachments are shared with others; they may fulfil more general social functions, like an extended social network. However, these are likely to be different in nature from private attachments to celebrities, which may result from difficulties in the autonomy process.

In the present study, it was predicted that autonomy would be associated with greater interest in celebrities, indicating a possible switch in idealisation from parents to media figures. To explore the function of secondary attachments to celebrities in adolescence, attachment was also considered in the study. It was expected that two different aspects of celebrity interest—social/entertainment functions and intense/personal functions would be related to different aspects of adolescent attachment; the former would be predicted by positive attachment to peers, while the latter would be predicted by negative attachment to peers and possibly to parents as well.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The participants were 191 schoolchildren (93 males, 98 females), aged between 11 and 16 years (Mean age = 13.57; S.D. = 1.4), sampled from a number of schools in South Yorkshire and Lincolnshire regions of England.

Forty-eight respondents were in Year 7 of school, 47 respondents were in Year 8 of school, 47 respondents were in Year 9 of school, 25 respondents were in Year 10 of school, and 24 respondents were in Year 11 of school. The most frequently cited ethnic group was White British ($n = 109$), followed by Black African ($n = 14$), Pakistani ($n = 14$), Indian ($n = 12$), Black Caribbean

($n=11$), with the remaining respondents reporting ethnicity belonging to a number of different ethnic groups (all $n < 7$).

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. Celebrity interest

The Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS) (McCutcheon et al., 2002) was used to measure adolescents' degree of interest in celebrities. This scale comprised 23 items measured on a 5 point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). High scorers on this scale tend to describe themselves as interested in the lives of many celebrities, and strongly attracted to a favourite celebrity. They also disagree that too much media coverage is given to celebrity-related issues.

The original instrument consisted of 34 items, but it was decided to use a shortened version that had been found to have high reliability with a UK sample (Maltby et al., 2002). The authors of this study found that three factors best explained the scale variance: entertainment/social (e.g. "My friends and I like to discuss what my favourite celebrity has done"), intense/personal (e.g. "I am obsessed by details of my favourite celebrity's life") and mild pathological ("I often feel compelled to learn the personal habits of my favourite celebrity").

In the present study, a principal components analysis produced support for the first two factors, but not for the third. Entertainment/social and intense/personal together explained 50% of the scale variance, and produced the same loading pattern as in the Maltby et al. (2002) study. This yielded two subscales with reliabilities of 0.94 and 0.87, respectively (alpha for the overall scale = 0.84).

1.2.2. Emotional autonomy

The Steinberg and Silverberg (1986) emotional autonomy scale (EAS) was used to measure the degree to which adolescents perceived themselves as independent from their parents. This scale comprises 20 items, measured on a 4-point Likert scale (4 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). High scores on the scale represent a high degree of autonomy from parents.

The scale comprises four subscales, two measuring affective aspects of autonomy (non-dependency and individuation from parents), and two measuring cognitive aspects (perceives parents as people and deidealization of parents). Principal components analysis provided support for these four subscales, and all subscales had reliabilities between 0.76 and 0.82 (alpha for overall scale = 0.80).

1.2.3. Attachment

The Attachment and Object Relations Inventory (AORI) (Buelow, McClain, & McIntosh, 1996) was used as a measure of attachment. This scale consists of 60 items, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). High scores represent high levels of attachment. The scale comprises six subscales, three of them measuring the degree of attachment to specific objects—peers, parents and (romantic) partners, while three measure different styles of attachment—levels of closeness, security and independence. The "partners" subscale was dropped in this study because it was felt to be inappropriate for use with an adolescent sample.

Principal components analysis found support for the factor structure of this scale (although there was some cross-loading on the peers and partners items, as might be expected with an

adolescent sample covering a broad age range), and high reliability overall, with each subscale recording alphas between 0.89 and 0.95.

1.2.4. Data screening

Following inspection of the data, five cases were dropped from the analysis because they were influential outliers with standardised residuals greater than 3.

2. Results

2.1. Bivariate analyses

The Pearson product–moment correlations between the subscales and demographic variables are displayed in Table 1.

The variable of age has significant positive correlations with all the measures in the study with the exception of closeness (no association), and the parents and security subscales of the AORI, with which it has significant negative correlations. These findings are in line with the predictions that celebrity interest and emotional autonomy increase during middle adolescence, and that attachment to parents decreases. The variable of gender was not found to have any significant association with any other variable in the study and was therefore excluded from subsequent analyses.

2.2. Multivariate analyses

Associations between celebrity interest, autonomy and attachment were investigated in a series of hierarchical multiple regressions. The first analysis regressed the autonomy and attachment variables on to the total CAS scores. The second and third analyses regressed the autonomy and attachment variables on to the factor scores for entertainment/social aspects of celebrities and intense/personal aspects of celebrities. In each analysis, age was entered as a control variable on the first step because the significant correlations between the other factors could be explained as a

Table 1
Correlation matrix for age, gender, CAS, EAS and attachment subscales

	Age	Gender	CAS	EAS	Peers	Parents	Partners	Secure	Indep
Age									
Gender	0.07								
CAS	0.55	0.07							
EAS	0.61	0.12	0.49						
Peers	0.48	0.09	0.51	0.54					
Parents	−0.29	0.02	−0.28	−0.49	−0.23				
Secure	−0.33	0.10	−0.44	−0.57	−0.13	0.11	−0.22		
Indep	0.22	0.10	0.25	0.25	0.12	−0.13	0.13	−0.28	
Close	0.02	−0.07	−0.35	−0.25	−0.08	0.07	−0.17	0.39	−0.17

Values in bold indicate $P < 0.01$.

simple function of general maturation. EAS was entered as a second step, followed by the AORI subscales as a third step. The predictor variables were separated in this way in order to examine the discrete contributions of autonomy and attachment to celebrity interest.

2.3. Predictors of overall celebrity attitude

The overall regression equation of EAS and AORI subscales on to the total CAS score accounted for a significant 54% of the variance in CAS scores [$F(7,177)=31.24$, $P<0.001$]. Age alone explained 29% of the variance in CAS, and with this accounted for, both EAS and the AORI variables made further significant contributions (ΔR^2 at step 2 = 0.04, $P=0.001$; ΔR^2 at step 3 = 0.22, $P<0.001$).

A summary of the analysis is presented in Table 2. High emotional autonomy significantly predicted positive attitude towards celebrities, in line with the hypothesis ($\beta=0.24$, $P=0.001$). High levels of attachment to peers ($\beta=0.38$, $P<0.001$) was a good predictor of positive attitude towards celebrities, while attachment to parents was negatively associated with celebrity attitude ($\beta=-0.18$, $P=0.003$). This offers support for the prediction that attachments to celebrities develop in parallel with the transference of attachment from parents to peers. In addition, levels of security ($\beta=-0.30$, $P<0.001$) and closeness ($\beta=-0.27$, $P<0.001$) were both negatively associated with celebrity attitude.

2.4. Predictors of entertainment/social aspects of celebrities

In order to explore in more detail the relationship between autonomy, attachment and celebrity attitude, the EAS and AORI scores were regressed on to the two subscales of the CAS. Firstly, the overall regression equation of EAS and AORI subscales on to the entertainment/social aspects of celebrity attitude accounted for a significant 59% of the variance in this subscale [$F(7,177)=38.31$, $P<0.001$]. Age alone explained 25% of variance in CAS, and with this accounted for, both EAS and the AORI variables made further significant contributions (ΔR^2 at step 2 = 0.02, $P=0.04$; ΔR^2 at step 3 = 0.37, $P<0.001$).

A summary of the analysis is presented in Table 3. High emotional autonomy predicted positive attitude towards entertainment/social aspects of celebrities, although this was only marginally significant ($\beta=0.16$, $P=0.04$). High levels of attachment to peers ($\beta=0.68$, $P<0.001$) was a good

Table 2
Hierarchical regression analysis of autonomy and attachment on to total celebrity attitude score

		<i>B</i>	SE	β	ΔR^2
Step 1	Age	40.58	0.52	0.54**	0.30**
Step 2	EAS	0.30	0.09	0.24**	0.04**
Step 3	Peers	0.53	0.09	0.38**	0.22**
	Parents	-0.27	0.09	-0.18**	
	Secure	-0.44	0.10	-0.30**	
	Indep	0.01	0.07	0.05	
	Close	-0.38	0.08	-0.27**	

** $P<0.01$.

Table 3

Hierarchical regression analysis of autonomy and attachment on to entertainment/social aspects of celebrity attitude

		<i>B</i>	SE	β	ΔR^2
Step 1	Age	20.34	0.30	0.50**	0.25**
Step 2	EAS	0.11	0.05	0.16*	0.02*
Step 3	Peers	0.52	0.06	0.68**	0.37**
	Parents	−0.14	0.05	−0.17**	
	Secure	−0.01	0.05	−0.04	
	Indep	0.01	0.04	0.05	
	Close	−0.12	0.04	−0.15	

* $P < 0.05$.** $P < 0.01$.

predictor of entertainment/social aspects of positive attitude to celebrities, while attachment to parents was negatively associated with entertainment/social aspects of celebrities ($\beta = -0.17$, $P = 0.003$), as was close attachment style ($\beta = -0.15$, $P = 0.004$).

2.5. Predictors of intense/personal aspects of celebrities

The overall regression equation of EAS and AORI subscales on intense/personal aspects of celebrities accounted for a significant 31% of the variance [$F(7,177) = 12.98$, $P < 0.001$]. Age alone explained a significant 11% of variance in CASIP, and with this accounted for, both EAS and the AORI variables made further significant contributions (ΔR^2 at step 2 = 0.02, $P = 0.047$; ΔR^2 at step 3 = 0.20, $P < 0.001$).

A summary of the analysis is presented in Table 4. High emotional autonomy predicted intense/personal attitudes to celebrities, but only to a marginally significant degree ($\beta = 0.17$, $P = 0.047$). None of the object relations scales made a significant contribution to the analysis. However, levels of security ($\beta = -0.31$, $P < 0.001$) and closeness ($\beta = -0.26$, $P < 0.001$) were both negatively associated with intense/personal aspects of celebrities.

Table 4

Hierarchical regression analysis of autonomy and attachment on to intense/personal aspects of celebrity attitude

		<i>B</i>	SE	β	ΔR^2
Step 1	Age	10.87	0.38	0.35**	0.11**
Step 2	EAS	0.14	0.07	0.17*	0.02*
Step 3	Peers	0.01	0.07	−0.06	0.20**
	Parents	0.01	0.07	−0.03	
Step 4	Secure	−0.31	0.08	−0.33**	
	Indep	0.01	0.06	0.02	
	Close	−0.26	0.06	−0.29**	

* $P < 0.05$.** $P < 0.01$.

3. Discussion

The results from the multiple regression lend support to the hypothesis that emotional autonomy and attachment to celebrities increase during adolescence, and are positively related to one another. Age was highly correlated with both measures, but emotional autonomy still explained a significant portion of celebrity interest after age had been entered on the first step of the regression equation, suggesting that the relationship between the two measures cannot be accounted for entirely by maturational factors.

As predicted, attachment to peers and parents were both significant predictors of celebrity interest. The relationship between attachment to parents and celebrities was negative, indicating perhaps that, as parents become deidealised for adolescents, media figures take over some of the functions that parents had fulfilled in childhood. At the same time, celebrity interest had a positive relationship with peer attachment, suggesting that attachment to celebrities develops simultaneously with attachment to peers.

A previous factor analysis of CAS items yielded three factors; entertainment/social, intense/personal and mild pathological (Maltby et al., 2002). The fact that the factor analysis in the present study did not find the third factor (mild pathological) is consistent with the absorption-addiction model of celebrity worship (McCutcheon et al., 2002). According to this model, most celebrity worshippers begin at the relatively innocent entertainment/social stage. Then some become absorbed into the more problematic intense/personal stage, and some of these go on to an even more problematic stage; mild-pathological. As such absorption occurs over a long period of time, given that the mean age of participants in the present study was less than 14 years, it seems unlikely that many of them had reached the mild pathological stage.

In the present study, the CAS was best explained by a two-factor solution, and, in line with Maltby et al. (2002), these two factors can be interpreted as entertainment/social and intense/personal. Separate regression analyses on these components allowed more detailed examination of the nature of celebrity attachments. The entertainment/social factor was best predicted by high attachment to peers, suggesting that peer interaction is an important feature of such celebrity attachments. It was also predicted by low attachment to parents, and by low levels of closeness. These findings indicate that the main function of celebrity attachments in adolescence may be as an extended social network—a group of “pseudo-friends” who form the subject of peer gossip and discussion (Cohen, 1999).

The intense/personal factor of the CAS was best predicted by low levels of security and closeness. This function of celebrity attachment seems to reflect a more problematic aspect of the transition towards emotional autonomy, in line with Cramer's (2001) suggestion that, during adolescence, identification is used as a defence mechanism to allay anxiety arising from decreasing attachment to parents. However this aspect of celebrity interest was not significantly related to either parental or peer attachment. It may be that intense relationships with celebrities develop during times of stress, or for individuals with less positive peer interaction. This explanation corresponds with communication theories which have attempted to explain parasocial interaction as a functional alternative to social interaction for individuals who are lonely or isolated, or lack social skills (Armstrong & Rubin, 1989; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972).

While the present findings indicate some of the ways in which parasocial relationships can be integrated into theoretical models of adolescent social development, they may only skim the

surface of this important topic. Two aspects in particular merit more intensive exploration. Firstly, no details were obtained about the nature of the celebrity that each respondent chose as their favourite. Although the authors of the CAS designed the scale with the intention of developing a measure of interest in celebrities of any kind, the function of relationships with different types of celebrity may be related to other aspects of social psychological development. For example, it may be that higher levels of autonomy are related to romantic attachments. More detailed data would be required to test such a hypothesis.

Secondly, while interest in celebrities is related to decreasing attachment to parents, this overall pattern may break down according to different aspects of this relationship. For example, attachment may decrease with one parent but not the other; while respondent gender was not related to the other variables in this study, it would be interesting to collect more information concerning the nature of parental attachments. Nor has it been possible in the present study to test the hypothesis that media figures take over from parents as role models for adolescents. This would require considerably more detail about the roles of both parents and favourite celebrities, possibly using some form of semantic differential scaling or repertory grid technique.

Finally, it is unlikely that the observed relationship between parents and media figures holds for all cultures during adolescence. Limited research in this area has found strong cultural influences determining the nature of favourite idols and role models (Yue & Cheung, 2000). A study comparing different ethnic and national groups might provide valuable information about the role of family and cultural values in the function of media figures during adolescence.

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