



## Review Article

# Framing emerging behaviors influenced by internet celebrity



Suwan Juntiwasarakij

College of Innovation, Thammasat University, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

Arguably, the advent of the Internet and, recently, social media have, to a certain extent, contributed to the global quest for fame and celebritization. Fueled by advanced telecommunication technology and capitalism, the coined Internet celebrity has become a cultural phenomenon that captivates, especially, younger generations struggling for being "liked" or "shared" in the "connected" society. By analyzing the literature on celebrity conceptualization and related topics, this study aimed to explore theoretically the phenomenon and the underlying social cultural influence of this new kind of capital through social construction, mostly based upon Max Weber's fragmentary theory of the modern state, of contemporary celebritization in the modern social media era, including celebrity meaning, celebrity status, celebrity capital, and celebrity culture. The parasocial interactions between Internet celebrities and their audiences lead to emerging online behaviors. In addition, the ultimate goal for future research is to investigate the impact of social media celebrity on the younger generations in a consumerist society.

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## Introduction

The advent of the Internet and, recently, social media has greatly contributed to the global quest for fame and celebrity. Fueled by advanced telecommunication technology and capitalism, the coined Internet, self-made, pseudo-celebrity or Internet celebrity has become a cultural phenomenon that captivates, especially, the younger generations struggling for being "liked" or "shared" in the "connected" society. They are the witnesses to and the victims of the "bandwagon effect" (Cohan, 2001) that "exists when an individual's demand for a good is increased by his observation of other consumers using that good (Biddle, 1991)."

Perhaps, our craze for fame and acceptance has emerged and resulted from today's fast-paced, consumeristic, solitude society. It is the engineering of the mind, a psychological mechanism that makes us crave human connections by making ourselves "there" on the virtual world. Illustrated

in Sander and Putnam (2010), a series of studies unveiled that Americans are more lonely, isolated, and diffident than they were in the 1960s, demonstrating the decline of friends and family gatherings, the eroded sense of community, and the lack of face-to-face social interactions. As hundreds of millions Americans, or even billions globally, are experiencing loneliness, collections of lone minds have devised a diversion, an escape, with a hope to revive their withered souls and be re-connected among themselves.

Manufactured against Hollywood's norm, reality television initiatives have taken place across the globe. It began in Amsterdam in 1991, when seven strangers were forced to live together for several months in a show named "Nummer 28." Their activities were unscripted and "almost" self-directed including the after-the fact confessions toward the end of each episode.

Inspired by Nummer 28, MTV network decided to launch a production of its own version of Nummer 28, "MTV Real World" featuring "issues of contemporary young-adulthood relevant to its core audience, such as sex, prejudice, religion, abortion, illness, sexuality, AIDS, death,

E-mail address: [suwanj@tu.ac.th](mailto:suwanj@tu.ac.th).

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politics, and substance abuse, but later garnered a reputation as a showcase for immaturity and irresponsible behavior of the declining morals of contemporary youth [Wikipedia. \(n.d.\)](#)” Mirroring MTV Real World’s success, reality television programs were budding shows such as Survivor, American Idols, Big Brother, America’s Got Talent, and the X Factor USA, just to name a few.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr., a renowned American writer, once said, “Television is providing artificial friends and relatives to lonely people.” This statement could not be more powerful than when it is applied to reality television programs, for these programs offer sympathetic pseudo-reality of life’s mundanity, a moment of shared life experiences. Above all, this television genre has captivated the minds of younger generations, rendering a hope that every single one of them could be given a try to feature on the programs. Hence, this was the beginning of the quest for global fame, celebrity, and stardom.

By analyzing a collection of the literature on celebrity conceptualization and related topics, this study aimed to explore theoretically the phenomenon and the underlying social cultural influence of this new kind of celebrity through social construction, mostly based upon Max Weber’s fragmentary theory of the modern state, of contemporary celebrity in the modern social media era. This article introduces the concept of celebrity, defines and explores celebrity status, examines celebrity culture, and investigates celebrity capital. Then, the Internet celebrity phenomenon is exemplified through the theoretical lens. In addition, the ultimate goal for future research is to explore theoretical frameworks for investigating the impact of Internet celebrity on younger generations in our consumerist society.

## Celebrity

The term celebrity is ubiquitous. Its presence has social, economic, and culture impact in our society, yet the term is nebulously defined. Dating back to 1961, the term was introduced in [Boorstin \(2012\)](#)’s work “The Image: A guide to pseudo-events in America” where the celebrity, namely “a human pseudo-event,” was an individual, amidst mediocrity, being known for his/her well-knownness, amplified by mass media. However, Boorstin’s definition and justification seemed diluted because of the diversity in the class of celebrities.

[Epstein \(2005\)](#) elaborated on the diversity of celebrities and differentiated famous individuals according to their origination (such as hero, idol, superstar). [Gabler \(2001, p. 6\)](#), a cultural historian and renowned film critic, redefined celebrities as people who are “living out narratives that capture our interest and the interest of the media narratives that have entertainment value.” Often, the celebrity’s “well-knownness” was turned into a marketing apparatus.

[Rojek \(2001, p. 29\)](#) argued that celebrity creates impact and influence on “public consciousness” as celebrities seize the attention and royalty of the public while maintaining their social distance:

*“Celebrities are conceptualized as one of the means through which capitalism achieves its ends of subduing and exploiting the masses. They express an ideology of*

*heroic individualism, upward mobility and choice in social conditions wherein standardization, monotony and routine prevail.”*

In order to sustain celebrity status, it is imperative to continuously draw attention from the audience and to witness the transformation of individuals into celebrities [Marshall \(2006, pp. 13, 20\)](#).

Often seen as public figures in the media, celebrities to a certain extent have been given the impression of being role models by their audience, and this influence could shape behavioral aspects of their audience. It begins when the audience has developed a connection, bond, or tie with the image that represents the celebrity. In fact, celebrity endorsement is made possible because they celebrities often perceived as highly attractive and trustworthy ([Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011](#)), and thus it is credible that they change customers’ attitude and attention to buy products or services ([Choi & Rifon, 2012](#)). In this regard, the credibility of the celebrity has been transferred to a particular product or service ([Thomson, 2006](#)). However, [Couldry and Markham \(2007\)](#) found that celebrities can be of use as a public connection that holds people’s attention in a nationwide manner, but this is not necessarily true when applied to political arenas.

## Celebrity Status

The contemporary concept of social status has been greatly influenced by Max Weber’s fragmentary writing on status groups. He argued that such socio-economic-based classes should disappear as a capitalistic, social world develops ([Kurzman et al., 2007](#)). On the contrary, certain classes still exist and a new class system has emerged—“celebrity.” In Max Weber’s work on class, status, and power, he viewed “every society is divided into groupings and strata with distinctive life-styles and views of the world, just as it is divided into distinctive classes. While at times status as well as class groupings may conflict, at others their members may accept fairly stable patterns of subordination and superordination” ([Coser, 1977, p. 229](#)). However, celebrity status is unlike what Max Weber’s status groups proposed since it necessitates commodification of reputation ([Hurst, 2015](#)), audience ([Marshall, 1997](#)), and mass communication ([Milner, 1994](#)).

[Kurzman et al. \(2007\)](#) described celebrity status by the gain of four social privileges based upon the theory of status relations: interactional privilege, normative privilege, economic privilege, and legal privilege. Interaction privilege is derived from social distance between celebrities and their audiences. Interactions and contacts with celebrities have become occasionally rare and the fans crave such experiences. This empowers celebrity status as being superior. Normative privilege refers to celebrities’ standardization of the lifestyle adopted by the public. Economic privilege refers to the economic transformational power of celebrity status. To a certain extent, fame can be transferred to a commodity capable of generating financial benefits. Celebrities, for instance, appear on a variety of marketing campaigns for commercial purposes; the celebrities gain financial benefits from their appearances

such as product and service endorsement. Moreover, accumulating economic privilege and fortune potentially carry on as political influence that could turn legislation to benefit the celebrities themselves. In this case, intellectual property law, for example, favors and recognizes celebrities' image as a trademark which is legally protected.

Milner (2010) differentiated earlier celebrity status system five-fold. First, visibility and status refers to "to see her is to love her.", that is, the status earned through publicity and media exposure. Second, image and appearance emphasize esthetic presentation of celebrities themselves. Third, implicit and explicit exchange argument is based on social exchange theory and refers to the linkages between celebrity status and social institutional power. Fourth, virtual intimacy and influence arguments are based on intimate association theory; the theory posits that intimate details of celebrities' lives are made available by mass media and increase trust in the celebrities. Therefore, the audience has developed bonds and virtual relationships with the celebrities. In this regard, the audience is subject to the influence of the celebrities. Fifth, fashion and stability convey a sense of contemporariness, instability, and insecurity of celebrity status where celebrities are continually facing challenges such as replacement by newcomers. However, I argue that Milner Jr's pinpointing the distinction between two status systems might be haphazardly too rigid, for it is plausible that the two systems are compatible, comparable, complementary, and even convertible with social transfer functions  $f_i$  ( $i = 1, 2, 3, 4$ , and  $5$ ) as depicted in Figure 1.

## Celebrity Culture

Celebrity status is believed to be so powerful that celebrities can cash in on their success (Bell, 2010; Marshall, 1997), and this has drawn attention from scholars on

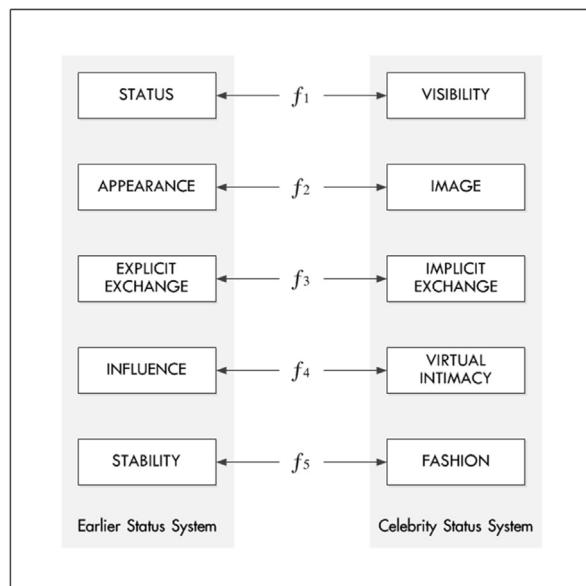


Figure 1 Interchangeability model of status systems

various occasions to investigate its cultural and societal salience. While some scholars (Gamson, 1994; Turner, 2006) refer to "celebrification" to the process of one becoming a celebrity, others (Boykoff & Goodman, 2009; Lewis, 2010) prefer the term "celebrization." Although used interchangeably, these two terms are significantly different. Celebrification is understood by the fact that being a celebrity is a product of an individual's labor (Dyer, 2004), and this is productized by the celebrity industry (Driessens, 2012). On the contrary, celebrization is best understood as "a long-term structural development" at the social field level of analysis where the boundaries of time and space are unclear (Driessens, 2012).

Recent studies on contemporary celebrity culture have shed light on how celebrity has been, intentionally and unintentionally, absorbed by the public in modern society. Turner, Bonner, and Marshall (2000), for example, argued that a high-volume perpetuation of celebrities' personal lives on global-scale mass media has a great deal of power in creating political movement in a nationwide manner. Another example is a survey on American teenagers by the Washington Post and Harvard University in 2005 that showed how celebrity culture has rooted deep in younger generations. According to the survey, the teenagers chose "fame" as a priority in life over intellectual capital development and financial security (Halpern, 2008).

## Celebrity Capital

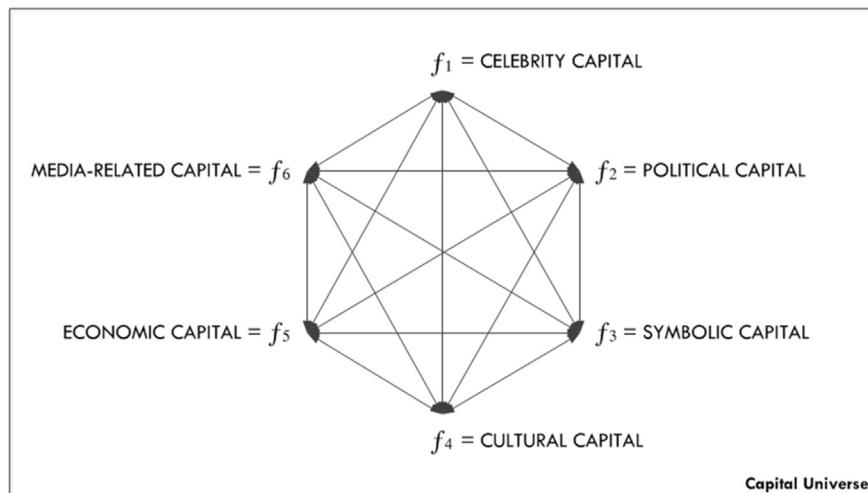
The concept of celebrity capital is interwoven with the concept of celebrity status mentioned in the previous section. Many scholars have studied celebrity, but their works cursorily touch on celebrity capital development as seen in Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hewer, and Daza-LeTouze (2011), McCurdy (2010), Tyler and Bennett (2010), and Weaver (2011).

Perhaps, Driessens (2013) yields the best understanding of celebrity capital. Building on Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1998; Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) seen in Collins (2007), Cronin and Shaw (2002), and Heinich, 2012), he redefined celebrity as an emerging capital. One of his main arguments is the convertibility of celebrity capital into other forms of capital (resources, power). Nevertheless, he cautiously raises concerns that the convertibility of celebrity capital maybe not always succeed as not all celebrities are able to secure the conversion.

In this regard, it is plausible that all forms of capital are likely to transform from one to another freely in the capital universe, hence the transfer functions  $f_i$  ( $i = 1, 2, 3, \dots, 6$ ). Depicted in Figure 2, a capital universe paradigm is proposed. The model consists of celebrity capital, media-related capital, economic capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital, and political capital. While plausible, the transfer functions in the proposed model might be viewed as obscure as their parameters are difficult to identify, enumerate, and quantify.

## Parasocial Interaction

Advancements in information and communication technology have played an important role in revealing



**Figure 2** Capital conversion model

the essence of the influence of the celebrity in our modern lives. In other words, it is “celebrity on steroids” when celebrities meet with social media—this timeline is depicted in [Figure 3](#)—according to its participative structures ([Negrine, 2008](#)) and the imaginary closeness ([Kirk, Sellen, & Cao, 2010](#)).

The imaginary closeness with celebrities in this context refers to emotional attachment towards celebrities on the mass media cultivated upon one-way communication and interactions between the celebrities and their audiences which is “parasocial” ([Caughey, 1984](#); [Cohen, 2004](#); [Giles, 2002](#); [Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956](#); [Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985](#)).

Investigating this imaginary closeness, [Giles \(2002\)](#) studied parasocial relationships and offered a framework that articulates the differences among the relationships based upon the nature of the interactive modes given by the characteristics of the medium (first-order, second-order, third-order). The first-order parasocial interaction takes place as celebrities directly communicate with their audiences (such as on radio with DJs, with talk show hosts, program MCs). The second-order parasocial interaction is co-created between pseudo-fictional characters and their audiences (such as in situation comedies, soap operas). The third-order parasocial interaction is completely made out of imaginary, fictional characters and their audiences; real

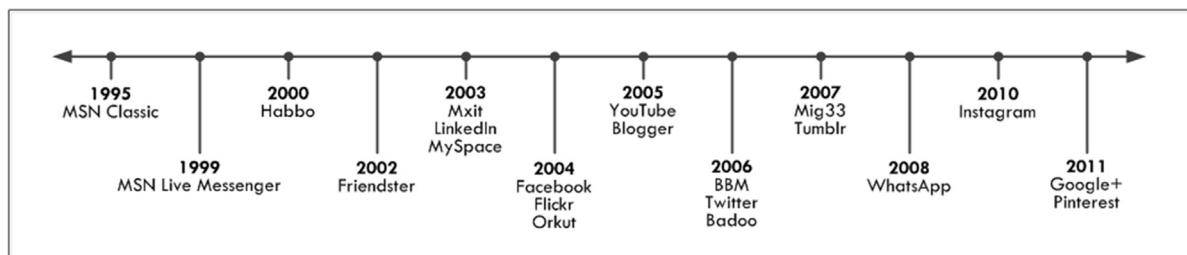
interactions with the characters in real-life are impossible as the characters are fictional.

However, while [Giles \(2002\)](#) argued that the first-order parasocial interactions are likely to yield the strongest bond between celebrities and their audience, [Nabi, Stitt, Halford, and Finnerty \(2006\)](#) studied audience's emotional involvement between reality television shows and pure fictional programs, and found that the latter results in the most emotional ties.

### Techno-Psychological Aspect of the Internet

A stream of literature focuses on the techno-psychological aspects of media towards audience's behavioral changes. [Simsek \(2015\)](#) implied that psychological effect of the media can be described in self-fulfillment prophesy. That is, the audience's behaviors determine the use and the utility of the social media, and the social media in turn amplifies the audience's authentic behaviors such as altruism, hedonism, connectionism, homophily, multiple identities, memetics, narcissism, tribalism ([Barak & Suler, 2008](#); [Simsek, 2015](#); [Turkle, 2012](#)), avoidance, escape, blocking, fear, hiding, removal, and protectionism ([Simsek, 2015](#)).

Several studies found a certain degree of similarity of psychological effects between social interactions in the



**Figure 3** Mainstream social media timeline

physical world and those in the virtual environment. The studies showed that online users are vulnerable to reciprocally disclose sensitive details about their personal lives to the people with whom they are emotionally connected (Barak, 2007; Leung, 2002) in personal, one-on-one interactions (Barak & Suler, 2008; Barak, 2007; Joinson, 2001; Rollman & Parente, 2001; Rollman, Krug, & Parente, 2000) and in group interactions (Dietz-Uhler, Bishop-Clark, & Howard, 2005). The studies also found that some people are even more willing to share their very intimate, personal information online when compared with what they do in physical environment (Barak & Bloch, 2006; Beck, 2005; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

Perhaps, it is a matter of trust. A large body of literature showed that trust, as a favorable condition (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Luhmann, 2000), plays a vital role in online communication and collaboration (Komiak & Benbasat, 2004; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998) and in virtual team success (Cook, 2005; Feng, Lazar, & Preece, 2004; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998, 1999; Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004; Leonardi, Nanetti, & Putnam, 1993; Sarker, Valacich, & Sarker, 2003; Thomas & Bostrom, 2008; Whitworth & De Moor, 2003).

## Discussion and Conclusion

This article investigated the impact of social media celebrity on the younger generations by offering a pathway to constructing a theoretical foundation of Internet celebrity and its potential impact on its audience and, perhaps, society at large by integrating the concepts of celebrity and the meaning of celebrity status, celebrity culture, celebrity capital, parasocial interaction, and emerging online behavior. By doing so, a capital conversion model was formulated and proposed as an initial framework to approach the phenomenon. The capital conversion model is constructed based on an attempt to systematically articulate the interplay between the Internet celebritization craze and the societal situation. To demonstrate, Juntiwasarakij (2016) pointed out his concerns over the cultural influence of the so-called "Net-Idol," that has already permeated Thailand's entertainment and education industries. Although the findings in his study are rich, they could not be theoretically framed.

It appears that celebrity culture has rooted deep in the younger generations as studies have showed that many American teenagers choose "fame" as a priority in life over intellectual capital development and financial security (Halpern, 2008). Viewed as a form of capital, the convertibility of celebrity capital into other forms of capital (such as resources and power) is plausible (Driessens, 2013). Emotional attachment between celebrities and their audiences on the mass media is cultivated even though the interactions that take place in real-life are totally one-way communication (Giles, 2002). When emotional attachment comes with trust, some people—youth—are even more willing to share their very intimate personal information online when compared with what they do in physical environment (Milner, 2010).

As to the phenomenon itself, Internet celebrity, consumed and reproduced by the society and fueled by

modern day information and communication technology, has continued to captivate people's mind as celebrity has been materialized by society which has been orchestrating a series of economic, social, and cultural executions that are self-empowering. Such execution is so successful that some members of the audience overdose on it. The concern is with younger audiences as the most vulnerable population. Viewed as a role model, Internet celebrities behaviorally dictate and domesticate their audience. Driven by celebrity success, the audiences are lured into the celebrity field with a hope of becoming "one." Nevertheless, this study gives a glimpse of future research on investigating the impact of social media celebrity on the younger generations in our connected, consumerist society. Based on a series of the author's forthcoming Internet celebrity studies, internet celebrity's theoretical frameworks will be developed, constructed, and proposed to the research community.

## Conflict of interest

None.

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