

**“Defining Celebrity and Driving Conversation”:
Celebrities on the Cover of *People* Magazine (2000-2010)**

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Abstract

This study explores the production of fame and celebrity through the covers of *People* magazine during the first decade of the 21st century. The findings suggest that *People*'s cover-worthy celebrities, mostly entertainers, were featured because of a combination of accomplishments and dramatic personal lives. The selection of predominantly white celebrities or minorities from their circles suggests that the magazine aims to glorify a racially homogeneous celebrity elite, with little regard for the demographic realities of American society.

Keywords: celebrities, entertainment, magazines, popular culture, race

Introduction

The premiere issue of *People* magazine, dated March 4, 1974, featured actress Mia Farrow on the cover, dressed in character for her role in *The Great Gatsby*, a film noted as “the year’s next big movie.” The film fell short of expectations, but the magazine was well on its way to a long and successful run, forging a relationship with both the promotion and production of celebrities. The editors introduced the magazine to its readers by claiming:

Week after week, PEOPLE will focus entirely on the active personalities of our time—in all fields. On the headliners, the stars, the important doers, the comers, and on plenty of ordinary men and women caught up in extraordinary situations.¹

The editors also wanted for the magazine “[t]o be the indispensable guide to those millions of aware Americans who cheerfully acknowledge that what interests those millions

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of aware Americans who cheerfully acknowledge that what interests them most is other people—especially the above average, the important, the charismatic, the singular.”²

Jessica Evans referred to these goals as “celebritisation,” which is “the process in which someone is turned into a celebrity, or to put it more strongly, the process in which celebrity is fabricated.”³ There have been critics of this process, as well as the media’s role in celebrating both the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary.” As far back as the early 1960s, Daniel Boorstin lamented that “images and appearances” had become more important than the “substance of a message.”⁴ He argued that in the 20th century, celebrity was created by “the quintessential media pseudo-event” and that “all celebrities are interchangeable.” More than 50 years later, America’s celebrity obsession has expanded exponentially.

A quick survey of the media landscape in 2014 indicates a growing number of media products dedicated to the establishment, re-establishment, and maintenance of celebrity status: magazines (*People*, *US Weekly*, *In Touch*, *OK!*); entertainment news programs (*Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood*, *Extra*); reality shows (*Dancing with the Stars*, *Celebrity Apprentice*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*); websites (*TMZ*, *PerezHilton*, *Gawker*); and an entire cable network (E! Entertainment Television). The 24/7 media cycle and new communication technologies have created a celebrity culture that Kathy Ferris and Scott Harris described as “this most ubiquitous of modern status phenomena.”⁵

This study investigates the pervasiveness of celebrity culture by addressing the production of fame and celebrity through a content analysis of one media product—the cover of *People* magazine during the first decade of the 21st century.

Literature Review

The Powerful...the Beautiful, the Talented

Mitchell Stephens (1988) noted that celebrity news and gossip have captured the public’s imagination for centuries, and there has always been a fascination with “the powerful, the adventurous, the beautiful, the talented.”⁶ He also suggested that the “state of the projects and romances of celebrities can fire our curiosity at least as surely as the state of some proposition in some parliament.”⁷ In other words, for at least a portion of the public, celebrity news is certainly more enticing than politics, business, and the humdrum of everyday life.

However, until fairly recently, “the study of celebrity was widely held in ‘serious’ academic circles to be a marginal pursuit. Fame and celebrity were seen as trivial topics, unimportant to a comprehensive understanding of the social world.”⁸ Yet, with the increase of celebrity-related media products, the subject has certainly been receiving greater attention. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett argued that far “from being frivolous, celebrity permeates our social dialogue and generates millions of dollars in revenue for celebrities themselves and the various people and companies that latch onto these individuals.”⁹ In addition, the study of

“celebrity culture more closely provides a window through which we can better understand American society.”¹⁰ Julianne Treme claimed that “[t]he importance of celebrity journalism in the first decade of the 21st century offers evidence that the public continues to be interested in the personal life of the celebrity,” and while various publications “have posted circulation and revenue declines, celebrity media is one area enjoying increasing audiences, circulation, and advertising revenues.”¹¹

Joshua Gamson discussed the changing nature of celebrity, arguing that the major development in American celebrity culture in the past 20 years is the “turn toward the ordinary.”¹² He noted that, unlike in earlier times, “when American celebrities were a class of people perceived as extraordinary and treated to extraordinary lives...celebrity culture is increasingly populated by unexceptional people who have become famous and by stars who have been made ordinary.” This shift toward “ordinariness” has also been accelerated by the “emergence of reality TV and of the Internet, especially the Web 2.0 phenomena.”¹³

But what and who, exactly, is a celebrity? Currid-Halkett described celebrity as “the phenomenon of society collectively caring about certain people for reasons that far outweigh (or have nothing to do with) their talent or deserved fame.”¹⁴ P. David Marshall claimed that a celebrity was an “elevated individual,” and an “entire industry evolved around celebrities by the second decade of the twentieth century, with the emergence of movie fan magazines (*Moving Picture World*, *Photoplay*, *Modern Screen*, and *Silver Screen*) that openly celebrated movie stars and their lives.”¹⁵ Indeed, the media have been the central component in the production of celebrity.¹⁶ Gamson argued that a “system for celebrity-creation, at times much less systematic than at others, has been in place firmly since the birth of mass commercial culture.”¹⁷ Along the same argument, Leo Braudy noted: “With the expansion of visual media—photography, film, television, the Internet—the enabling apparatus of instant fame becomes more widespread.”¹⁸

Boorstin, a scholar frequently quoted on the nature of celebrity, defined it in its most basic form: a “person who is known for his well-knownness.” A major factor in the creation of this “well-knownness” is the “pseudo-event,” which has the following characteristics: (a) “It is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it;” (b) “It is planted primarily (not always exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced.”¹⁹

More than five decades ago, Boorstin claimed that a “larger and larger proportion of our experience, of what we read and see and hear, has come to consist of pseudo-events. We expect more of them and we are given more of them.”²⁰ These events “tend to be more interesting and more attractive than spontaneous events. Therefore, in American public life today, pseudo-events tend to drive all other kinds of events out of our consciousness, or at least to overshadow them.”²¹ Boorstin also argued that “in the democracy of pseudo-events, anyone can become a celebrity, if only he can get into the news and stay there,” although “[c]elebrities die quickly but they are still more quickly replaced. Every year we experience a larger number than the year before.”²² For the past 40 years, weekly celebrity publications

and, in particular, *People* magazine has been one of the greatest vehicles for celebrities to gain the spotlight and receive invaluable exposure.

Magazine Covers and “Personality Journalism”

Carolyn Kitch suggested that the “news media have become the public historians of American culture: they have self-consciously taken on the role of selecting the most important people and events of the past and explaining their historical significance.”²³ Historically, one place to feature these individuals is in America’s first national mass medium, magazines, and more specifically, on the cover.²⁴ It has been established that the selection of who will grace the cover is definitely not arbitrary. Publishers have found that up to 80 percent of newsstand sales are determined by the cover image, have placed a great deal of significance on who the individual is, and have also noted that subscribers base their decision on whether or not to renew on these cover subjects.²⁵ Marshall argued: “The magazine cover and the cover story function as the principal advertising mechanisms for magazine sales. Choosing a particular celebrity as the cover image, then, is as much a marketing strategy for the magazine as a news event.”²⁶ It also “identifies the magazine to the reader and reflects its character.”²⁷

Regardless of whether the basis of the decision is financial or journalistic, the cover certainly “gives prominence to the story, person, or event.”²⁸ Herbert Gans wrote that magazine covers “serve feedback, commercial, and competitive purposes; and more significantly, they are viewed as giving recognition and assigning national importance to individuals or subjects.”²⁹ Sammie Johnson and William Christ suggested that covers are seen as “providing benchmarks to history and give a sense, generically, of who wields power and influence.”³⁰ As the variety of these studies suggest, magazine covers merit consideration, as they set the tone, personality, and promise of the magazine.³¹

The cover of *People* was selected for examination because among the current celebrity weeklies, the magazine has been around the longest, and based on circulation figures, is the most popular. In 1974 *People* magazine emerged from the “People” section of *Time*, and for content, “it took its cue from our culture’s fascination with celebrities.”³² By the 1980s, nearly all the traditional fan magazines had folded, replaced largely by *People*.³³ According to the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM), among American magazines, it had the ninth highest circulation (3,542,185) for the first half of 2013.³⁴ Classified as “Personality Journalism” by the AAM, its closest competitor for celebrity news in this category is *US Weekly*. These magazines are popular because they “depict a glamorous celebrity lifestyle in which even ordinary acts, such as picking up dry cleaning or taking out the trash, warrant coverage. Themes of consumer interest include marriage, divorce, weight gain, weight loss, incarceration, pregnancy, and drug use.”³⁵

According to the Time Inc. digital press kit, *People* magazine is “Defining Celebrity, Driving Conversation, Inspiring Action” and leads the “entertainment news category by providing users with inside celebrity access, along with the latest beauty and fashion trends.”³⁶ While there may be some question as to how much action the magazine inspires,

one of the premises of this study is that it certainly is one of the definers of celebrity in the United States. The popularity of *People* naturally makes the magazine a shaper of public opinion, covering issues and individuals it deems salient to the community—and serving as a “gatekeeper” by indicating who is considered prominent during a given week.³⁷ Founding editor Richard Stolley “developed a formula for best-selling cover stories. In one of the most famous quotes of magazine history,” he claimed that (a) young is better than old; (b) pretty is better than ugly; (c) rich is better than poor; (d) TV is better than music; (e) music is better than movies; (f) movies are better than sports; and (g) anything is better than politics.³⁸

In 2009, *People* editor Larry Hackett wrote: “The cover sells the magazine. The cover brings people into the big tent.”³⁹ It was a lesson learned from the early years of the publication. The top-selling covers in the mid- and late 70s were Cher and Gregg Allman (1975), Cher, Gregg Allman, and their child (1976), Olivia Newton-John (1978), and Farrah Fawcett (1979). Even celebrity deaths featured on the cover have been among the magazine’s all-time bestsellers, including Princess Diana (2.9 million issues), John F. Kennedy, Jr. (2.8 million), John Lennon (2.64 million), and Princess Grace (2.62 million).⁴⁰ Winerip noted that *People* attracts both young readers (18- to 34-year-olds, 38 percent of its readership) as well as aging baby boomers (49 to 59, 28 percent). Overall, as Treme suggested, “*People*, coupled with its propensity to document the lives of celebrities, makes it a good choice to proxy cumulative celebrity power.”⁴¹

The combination of the widespread influence of celebrity culture and the significant role that magazine covers have served in identifying and elevating certain individuals in society warrants further exploration. This descriptive study seeks to identify who was featured on the cover of *People* in the first decade of the 21st century, including by gender, race/ethnicity, and celebrity type.⁴²

Methodology

Content analysis was used as the primary research method for this study. All covers of *People* published between January 1, 2000, and December 31, 2010, were analyzed. The covers were obtained from the magazine’s website (www.people.com), which archives all covers published since *People*’s start in 1974.

The unit of analysis was the main (i.e., largest) cover photograph. Given that the cover photograph is always accompanied by a headline, it was determined that photos on the cover related to the headline for the main photograph would also be coded. For example, the October 22, 2001, cover contains several photographs under the headline “Your Favorite TV Student Bodies from the ’80s and ’90s. Where Are They Now?” A photo of the cast of the sitcom *Facts of Life* is the largest photo on the cover. However, given that the other four smaller photos on the cover are of the casts of other popular shows during that time, the individuals in those photos were also coded. The March 19, 2001, cover provides an example of a case where it was determined that a photograph appearing on the cover should not be coded. Actor Julia Roberts appears in the main photograph, accompanied by the headline “Julia’s Great Year.” However, there is a smaller photograph of singer Celine Dion and her

newborn child on the cover. Dion and her child were not coded because they were unrelated to the main photograph as well as the headline for that photograph.

Coding for gender and race/ethnicity of the individuals featured in cover photos was done through a visual inspection of the covers. If questions and issues arose, the authors discussed them, and additional published resources, such as books, magazines, and newspapers, were consulted to resolve any discrepancies. This method is similar to that used by Eric Primm, Summer DuBois, and Robert Regoli in their examination of race on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* magazine.⁴³ The coding categories for gender were (1) female and (2) male. The coding categories for race/ethnicity were (1) Asian, (2) Black, (3) Hispanic, and (4) White. These categories were chosen for the sake of simplicity, although we discuss their limitations later in this paper.

Celebrity type was coded in a similar fashion into the following 13 categories: (1) actor—individuals best known for their performance acting on stage, film, and/or television; (2) athlete—individuals best known for their proficiency in a sport; (3) child—individuals best known for being the child of a celebrity or a politician; (4) director—individuals best known for their work supervising the creative aspects of a film or television production; (5) event celebrity—individuals best known for their relationship to a particular event who otherwise would not be considered celebrities (for example, Elizabeth Smart, who was abducted as a child, or murder victim Laci Peterson); (6) host—individuals best known for moderating or emceeding television or radio programs; (7) journalist—individuals best known as a writer, editor, or reporter for a news medium; (8) model—individuals best known for their work posing for painters, sculptors, and photographers and/or displaying merchandise, such as fashion or cosmetics; (9) musician—individuals best known for their talents in music; (10) political figure or royalty—individuals best known for their participation in activities concerning the governance of a country or area, along with individuals who are members of a royal family; (11) reality TV—individuals best known for appearing as contestants, participants, judges, or hosts of television programs in the reality TV genre; (12) spouse—individuals best known for being the wife, husband, girlfriend, boyfriend, or life partner of a celebrity or politician; (13) other—individuals who do not fit into any of the above categories, such as cartoonist Charles Schultz.

The celebrity type was determined based on what individuals were best known for at the time the cover was published. For example, Elisabeth Hasselbeck, best known as a co-host of popular talk shows *The View* and *Fox & Friends*, appeared on the February 5, 2001, cover under her maiden name of Elisabeth Filarski as a contestant on the reality television program *Survivor*. Given that she appeared on the cover nearly three years before beginning her position on *The View*, she was coded into the reality TV category. If questions arose regarding celebrity type, additional resources were consulted.

The authors served as coders for this project. Even though all final coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consultation of other sources, an intercoder reliability test was conducted. A total of 132 covers (23 percent) containing

photographs of 323 (25 percent) individuals were coded by both authors, and the results were not discussed before being compared. Using Ole Holsti’s formula for intercoder reliability, the level of agreement for gender was 1.0, the level of agreement for race/ethnicity was .97, and the level of agreement for celebrity type was .95.⁴⁴

Results

All 599 covers published from 2000 to 2010 were examined. Thirty-five covers featured non-celebrities, or as *People* referred to them, “ordinary people.” For example, during the decade there were a number of covers featuring non-celebrities who had lost significant amounts of weight. Given that this study sought to shed light on celebrity portrayals, the main cover photographs for these issues were not included in the results. A total of 1,294 individuals appearing in the main cover photographs and in photos related to the main photographs and headlines of 564 issues were coded for gender, race/ethnicity, and celebrity type.

One purpose of the study was to determine which celebrities had appeared most frequently on the cover of *People* during the analyzed decade. Table 1 (below) lists the top 10 celebrities with most appearances, ranked in descending order.

Name	Number of Appearances
Jennifer Anniston	41
Brad Pitt	29
Julia Roberts	26
Britney Spears	23
Angelina Jolie	21
Nicole Kidman	18
Jennifer Lopez	18
Tom Cruise	16
Prince William	15
George Clooney	13

Eight of the top 10 are actors. The only non-entertainer is Prince William of Great Britain, who was on the cover 15 times.

Another goal was to determine what “types” of celebrities appeared on the covers. Actor was the leading category with 626 (48.4 percent) appearances. Musicians, the second leading type, were featured in 179 (13.8 percent) photographs, followed by the Reality TV category with 125 (9.6 percent). These three leading categories accounted for more than 70 percent of the celebrities appearing on the cover (see Table 2, below).

Table 2
Distribution of Individuals in People Cover Photographs by Celebrity Type (N = 1,294)

Celebrity Type	Frequency Count	Percent of All Covers
<i>Actor</i>	626	48.4%
<i>Athlete</i>	14	1.1%
<i>Child</i>	106	8.2%
<i>Director</i>	2	<0.1%
<i>Event Celebrity</i>	75	5.8%
<i>Host</i>	20	1.5%
<i>Journalist</i>	10	0.8%
<i>Model</i>	10	0.8%
<i>Musician</i>	179	13.8%
<i>Politics/Royalty</i>	49	3.8%
<i>Reality TV</i>	125	9.6%
<i>Spouse</i>	60	4.6%
<i>Other</i>	18	1.4%

Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

In terms of race/ethnicity, celebrities appearing on the covers were overwhelmingly White, with 1,138 (87.9 percent) of the featured individuals falling into this category (Table 3). Among the black cover subjects, Halle Berry (11) and Oprah Winfrey (9) were the leading females, while President Obama (5) was the leading male. Jennifer Lopez (18) was the leading Hispanic female, with actor Benjamin Bratt (2) being the only Hispanic male with more than one cover appearance. None of the three Asian females appeared on the

cover more than once, while interestingly, the leading Asian male was Maddox Jolie-Pitt (5), the adopted son of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt.

In terms of the gender of celebrity featured on the cover, we found that 761 (58.8 percent) of the celebrities were female. Additionally, the results of race/ethnicity and gender of the cover subjects were compared with both the 2000 and 2010 federal census, in order to determine how the breakdown compared with the demographics of American society during the time period examined (Table 3 and Table 4).

<i>Table 3</i> <i>Distribution of Individuals in People Cover Photographs by Race/Ethnicity (2000-2010) Compared to the 2000 and 2010 Census (N = 1,294)</i>			
Race/ Ethnicity	2000 Census	On the cover of <i>People</i>	2010 Census
Asian	3.6%	1.1% (N = 15)	4.8%
Black	12.3%	7.9% (N = 102)	12.6%
Hispanic	12.5%	3.0% (N = 39)	16.3%
White	75.1%	87.9% (N = 1,138)	72.4%

<i>Table 4</i> <i>Distribution of Individuals in People Cover Photographs by Gender (2000-2010) Compared to the 2000 and 2010 Census (N = 1,294)</i>			
Gender	2000 Census	On the cover of <i>People</i>	2010 Census
Male	49.1%	41.2% (N = 533)	49.2%
Female	50.9%	58.8% (N = 761)	50.8%

Discussion

This report sought to describe the covers of *People* magazine during the first decade of the 21st century. The fleeting nature of fame has always been a bit of a mystery. Celebrities tend to come and go, and it is often difficult to determine who exactly has staying power and whose star will fade. This study was designed to examine the cover of *People* magazine and analyze its contribution to the ever growing celebrity culture in this country. Although limited to one publication, it provides a detailed description of the so-called “elevated individuals” in American society during the first decade of the 21st century.⁴⁵ The

editors of *People* obviously believed that the photographs of these individuals would sell the most issues. The list of celebrities offers an interesting mix of many of the “usual suspects,” a few surprises, and some former stars who have been out of the spotlight for some time. As the oldest and most popular celebrity weekly, *People* is no doubt deluged by publicists and agents hoping to capture “face time” for their clients, especially those attempting a comeback.

The ten individuals with the most cover appearances included eight actors, one musician, and one member of a royal family. Of these top ten, six were women and four were men. The only racial minority among the Top 10 was Jennifer Lopez (Table 1). This Top 10 list fits well with the concept of “celebrity residual,” developed by Elisabeth Currid-Halkett, who argues that people whose fame (pure renown) exceeds their talent/achievements have a “celebrity residual.”⁴⁶ This is the so-called X-Factor that makes them so interesting to both the public and the media.

For example, the celebrity with the most cover appearances, Jennifer Aniston, is an actor considered attractive, yet may not be the most talented or the most attractive celebrity. What makes her so cover-worthy? As Currid-Halkett noted, many of Aniston’s movies have not been critically acclaimed, although she did portray one of the most popular characters (Rachel) on one of the popular sitcoms (*Friends*) of all time.⁴⁷

One factor is probably her personal life. Aniston and the second person on the list, Brad Pitt (29 appearances) were married in 2000 and divorced in 2005, so it is logical that their relationship would be so newsworthy during the time frame of this study. It is also logical that Angelina Jolie (21 appearances) was the fifth person on the list, as she started appearing publicly with Pitt in 2005. This created a media frenzy around the Brad/Jennifer/Angelina “love triangle,” and the “Brangelina” moniker also took hold during the middle of the decade. As a result, Pitt and Jolie, along with their children, have a total of 64 individual cover appearances.

Another couple of note, Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise, were married in 1990 and divorced in 2001, which partially explains their positions as sixth and eighth on the list. Kidman’s subsequent relationship with musician Keith Urban and Cruise’s relationships with actresses Penelope Cruz and Katie Holmes (dubbed “TomKat”) account for the attention. As with the others on the list, it appears their appeal as cover subjects stems from a combination of talent/achievement and an intriguing and/or dramatic personal life. If mere ability and accomplishment were the sole determinants of fame, perhaps Meryl Streep (zero cover appearances) or Bruce Springsteen (zero cover appearances) would warrant coverage during the decade. Their lack of cover appeal may be due to the fact that their lives beyond the screen and stage failed to capture the public’s fancy.

It is less of a mystery as to why certain types of celebrities would be featured on the cover of *People*. Actors and musicians are visible year-round (unlike star athletes), their work can be experienced in a variety of settings (live, on television, in the movie theater, etc.) and

formats (DVD, CD, digital download), and their occupations have had an aura of glamour for at least a century.

One category that has emerged in the past decade and will continue to increase is the reality television celebrity. This trend is part of what Boorstin referred to as the creation of fame through the “pseudo-event.”⁴⁸ It is also interesting to note that if one were to combine the “Spouse” and “Child” categories, it would make up nearly 13 percent of the cover appearances. One does not even need to be a celebrity, but merely in a celebrity’s inner circle to experience the spotlight of a national publication. It could be termed “celebrity by association” or “celebrity by relation”—and it could also be a strategy to portray celebrities as being “just like us,” thus making readers feel closer to the subjects and more likely to purchase a copy of the magazine.

Our findings in regard to the demographic characteristics of the cover-worthy celebrities suggest that *People* constructs an incomplete and inaccurate picture of U.S. society, with a spotlight on a White elite (Table 3). This fits well with previous research. For example, in a study of reality competition shows, L.S. Kim and Moises Blasini compared the contestants selected as finalists on the WB’s *Popstars* to the racial breakdown of the 2000 Census.⁴⁹ They found that the five females who comprised Eden’s Crush, the name of the pop group formed by the winners of the *Popstars* competition, represented the new “Exotic-American” identity: young, part-white/light-skinned, and not ‘too ethnic’ or overly racialized.⁵⁰ Overall, however, the researchers concluded that at the same time, “popular media texts coming from prime-time network television continue to show a homogeneous vision of young, upper-middle-class white men as the norm.”⁵¹

Kitch has argued that the mirror/reflection hypothesis, according to which mass media products should reflect society in the time period in which they were produced, often lacks scholarly support. Instead, media appear to contribute to the creation of a fake reality, and “their process of ‘selection and interpretation’ is historically significant.”⁵²

The fact that the percentage of women on the covers was higher than in the general population (Table 4) could be viewed as either a positive or a negative. The women on the covers were not always appearing in positive light; for example, Casey Anthony was featured as a suspect in the murder of her child.

Also not surprisingly, minorities on the covers were presented significantly less frequently than their White counterparts. This type of (under)representation could perpetuate the idea that persons of color are less desirable as cover subjects who could potentially sell magazines. When persons of color did appear on the cover, it was often because of their association with members of the White celebrity elite, as demonstrated by Maddox Jolie Pitt’s five appearances, making him the top Asian male during the analyzed decade. On one hand, it is surprising that a child who is too young to have achieved anything in his young life is the leader in this category. On the other hand, he is a family member of perhaps the most famous celebrity couple in the world, so it is natural that he would garner such attention.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In addition to focusing only on *People* magazine, this study was limited by the fact that the content analysis focused on the main cover photo; it did not take into account the smaller photos along the top edge or side of the cover, which could also capture the reader's attention. By coding the appearances of the cover subjects, the study attempted to acquire the manifest meaning of the images, but not the latent ones.⁵³ The researchers of the study also acknowledged that this coding scheme was not perfect, and that "mixed-race" was not utilized as a category in the "Race/Ethnicity" table. However, they decided to employ a "visual inspection" method to determine race, because it reflects the way individuals are viewed by the general public and is one of the most common methods of coding race.⁵⁴

Future studies could focus on the nature of the cover photo (How was the subject posed? Was it a candid?), the exact words in the headline, and an analysis of the stories and photos inside the magazine. Researchers could also conduct a decade-by-decade analysis of the changing face and nature of celebrity, starting in the 1970s.

Considering the rising significance of globalization, international celebrity magazines, such as *People's* Spanish-language edition, could also be examined. While this study focused on the media messages, a more complete picture of the communication process could include a look at media effects. For example, are readers of *People* influenced by the cover? How exactly do audiences decide which celebrities to take an interest in and admire? Finally, with the growing impact of new technologies and social media, how has the celebrity/fan relationship evolved?

Conclusion

It is easy to blame the media for fueling the current celebrity obsession; however, as long as audiences read magazines such as *People* and *US Weekly*, watch shows such as *Entertainment Tonight* and *Inside Edition*, and seek celebrity websites such as *TMZ*, advertisers will continue to support these publications and programs. Gamson has argued that "the publicity machine focuses attention on the worthy and unworthy alike, churning out many admired commodities called celebrities."⁵⁵ However, although the media can place individuals before us, it is the public who determines their ultimate legacy. As Boorstin wrote: "We can fabricate fame, we can at will (though usually at considerable expense) make a man or woman well known; but we cannot make him great. We can make a celebrity, but we can never make a hero."⁵⁶

We turn back to Mia Farrow, who was featured on the first cover of *People*, to offer a final illustration of the complex interaction between media and audiences. She made four other appearances in the following decades: once by herself (March 7, 1994), once for her 1960's relationship with Frank Sinatra (September 22, 1986), and twice for her relationship with Woody Allen (October 25, 1982, and August 31, 1992). As with many others, she was featured for her talent and accomplishments, as well as for the nature of her personal life and association with other celebrities. Her fame, in part created by *People*, in turn helped to

promote the magazine, representing a complex cycle that is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Endnotes

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