Abstract Popular belief to the contrary, celebrity has a very long history. Many of the indications of a celebrity culture were already in place in classical antiquity. By drawing on examples from the rich literary tradition of Greece and Rome we can better understand and analyze what is very likely to have been a perennial aspect of the human psyche in all developed societies the world over.

Keywords Celebrity culture · Visibility · Gladiator · Classical antiquity · Fame-intensive

I am an ancient historian, so what have I got to contribute to a debate about celebrity? Lots, I’ll venture to suggest. We may be right in assuming that our celebrity culture is spinning giddingly out of control, but most if not all of what characterizes it as such was already in place at least 2,000 years ago, albeit not to the same intense degree. The Greek and Roman world has bequeathed to us an exceedingly rich gallery of individuals who were celebrities in their own day and whose careers provide us with the means to undertake a detailed and in-depth investigation of a phenomenon that is by no means exclusive to modern times, even if the means of promotion available today outdo anything that the most avid celebrity-seeker in antiquity could have lustfully dreamed of. In short, the classical word produced its fair share of media tarts and tabloid queens, notwithstanding the fact that the Greeks and the Romans lacked the terminology to describe them as such. By an interestingly bizarre linguistic inversion, the Latin word celebritas, which gives us our word ‘celebrity’, actually meant either ‘commonness’ or ‘a crowd’.

Although there now exists a veritable library of literature, both pseudo-scholarly and pop, devoted to the subject, little attempt has been made to synthesize with any degree of rigor the social and Psychological consequences of our celebrity culture either for those in the public gaze or for those of us who are blinded by their glare. The subject seems to be one that is perhaps inherently difficult to write about except by either adopting a posture of stuffy superiority or as a quasi-cultic groupie, leering even as one informs. Seeking to avoid both pitfalls, I shall attempt in this essay to outline what I believe to be some of the principal psychological and sociological effects of our contemporary celebrity culture, both beneficial and deleterious, with the purpose of creating a limited taxonomy.

I shall do so by drawing exclusively on examples from classical antiquity. My premise, as stated, is that the phenomenon of a celebrity culture is by no means peculiar to our age. On the contrary, I suspect that some of its features are present in all developed human societies. Though the term ‘celebrity culture’ is therefore somewhat redundant, I use it in this essay to identify a set of specific tendencies, psychological and sociological, that operate within both individuals and society as a whole. That’s to say, I would argue for a sharp distinction to be drawn between a fame-intensive society like ours and one with a much more modest set of resources with which to promote visibility.

Psychological Factors

Human nature being what it is, there surely have always been people afflicted with a pathological desire for
attention. A striking example of this involves an arsonist called Herostratus, who set fire to the great temple of Artemis at Ephesus in Turkey in 348 BCE for no better reason, as he later confessed under torture, than being driven by an insatiable appetite for celebrity. That in itself suggests something approximating to a celebrity culture was already alive and well over two thousand years ago. Incidentally, the Ephesians sought to punish Herostratus posthumously (and no doubt discourage imitators) by banning all mention of his name. The fact that he is remembered to this day proves that the tactic was a dismal failure. In other words, Herostratus exploited the fascination with fame to his undying advantage. Ancient Rome was equally unsuccessful, as we know from the attempt by the Roman Senate to control the tendency on the part of some of its emperors to commit heinous crimes by the passing of a decree called damnatio memoriae against a particularly egregious offender. It resulted in the destruction of his images, the erasing of his name from inscriptions, and the abolition of his decrees. The message from the Senate to would-be imperial malefactors was clear: fame and infamy are mutually exclusive. The inescapable paradox is that they are virtually identical.

So what interior drives motivate individuals to seek celebrity status? First, there is the natural human desire, which at times can become all-consuming, to receive full recognition for one’s talents and for one’s unique contribution to society. Neither good nor bad in itself, this motivation was (perceptibly) seen in antiquity as frequently resulting in downfall and ruin. Greek legend provides plentiful examples of individuals who were destroyed by their ungovernable desire to be recognized for their uniqueness. One such figure was Ajax, who, when he lost out to Odysseus in a contest over who was the best fighter in the Greek army, went berserk and in a fit of madness slaughtered a herd of cattle in the belief that he was avenging himself upon the judges. Once he returned to his senses, Ajax felt so humiliated that he committed suicide by falling on his spear.

An extension of the yearning for recognition is the desire that one’s name be remembered for all eternity. In the Iliad the Greek hero Achilles tells us that when he was given the option of living either a long but undistinguished life or one that, though brief, would bestow upon him the option of living either a long but undistinguished life or one that, though brief, would bestow upon him glory. In the Greek army, went berserk and in a fit of madness slaughtered a herd of cattle in the belief that he was avenging himself upon the judges. Once he returned to his senses, Ajax felt so humiliated that he committed suicide by falling on his spear.

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A third motive for seeking celebrity is the desire to be blessed by that unholy trinity comprising wealth, sex, and power. I can’t prove it, but I strongly suspect that it was that which in large part motivated Julius Caesar to conquer Gaul in the 50’s BCE and then to defeat his arch-enemy Pompey a few years later. In fact it would not be far-fetched to interpret Caesar’s entire career as a very public bid to satisfy a giant-sized, out-of-control ego. Self-promotion and power were intimately related in late Republican Rome, and other leading politicians were as much interested in their public standing as in what they could do for Rome. It’s one of the reasons why the Republic ultimately failed. The dictator Sulla was honored with the title ‘Felix’, meaning ‘Blessed’ and Caesar’s enemy Pompey with ‘Magnus’ meaning ‘Great’. These titles tell us much about the giant shadows that these powerful men cast as they strutted their stuff across the public stage. Julius Caesar, however, overshadowed them both. He was by far the most powerful man of his generation—perhaps of any age—as well as the wealthiest. His sex drive, moreover, seems to have been in perpetual overdrive. ‘Every woman’s man, and every man’s woman,’ was how one of his enemies described him. Incidentally, his funeral was the prototype for that of Princess Di in that the outpouring of grief at his untimely death completely took the authorities (as well as his assassins) by surprise.

A final, more altruistic motivation (though it is rarely unrelated to the others we have been discussing) is the desire to achieve visibility not purely for visibility’s sake or for one’s own advancement but in order more effectively to promote an ideal or cause. If anyone in antiquity deserves to be credited with celebrity-seeking in order to promote a thoroughly worthwhile cause, that person is the Emperor Augustus. Had he been alive today, I suspect that Augustus would have been revolted by many of the manifestations of our modern fame-intensive society, craving as he often did to be out of the full glare of publicity. But that doesn’t alter the fact that he knew full well how to turn the fascination of the Roman public with his superstar status to his distinct political advantage. By the weight of his press clippings alone, so to speak, he would easily have outdone even his adoptive father Julius Caesar. That is because the system of government that he established channeled public attention undeviatingly towards the First Citizen (as he called himself), who was seen as society’s benefactor in all sorts of ways. I’ll have more to say about him a bit later. Julius
Caesar, by contrast, though professing to serve the interests of the common man and though gifted with the common touch to a much greater degree than Augustus, belonged in essence to a party of one.

We pass next to a consideration of the psychological consequences of celebrity status for individuals. The first point to note is that the attainment of celebrity tends to complicate an individual’s assessment of her or his self-worth. This in time frequently leads to a damaging and destructive disjunction between an individual’s sense of selfhood and the estimation in which that individual is held by her or his supporters or fans. The career of the brilliant but unstable politician Alcibiades, one of Athens’ most important generals during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), provides a textbook example of the complex relationship that celebrities often ‘enjoy’ with their fans. It was in fact as much the shifting and unstable allegiance of his fans as his own flawed personality that ultimately brought him down. His Roman biographer Nepos wrote of his early days: ‘The people thought there was nothing that he could not accomplish.’ Whatever Alcibiades’ own view of his talents may have been—and it’s very likely that he shared the opinion just expressed—it was the supreme confidence that the Athenians placed in his powers that did him in. His career followed the now well-trodden path of the celebrity who initially rides high on the tide of public favor and who later falls spectacularly from grace, in part because of the fickleness of his fans and in part because of his own propensity to flaunt his success. As the god Dionysus aptly observes in Aristophanes’ comic masterpiece the Frogs, which was produced in 405 BCE, barely a year before Alcibiades’ downfall: ‘The city longs for him and hates him.’ History does not record whether Alcibiades was traumatized by the fickleness of public opinion, but he must at the very least have found the treatment of him vexatious, unnerving, and even humiliating. He retired to lead a Howard Hughes-like life of withdrawal at the court of a Persian governor.

Another psychological consequence of celebrity is that it erodes, if it does not wholly destroy, one’s ability to enjoy anonymity and privacy. This greatly contributes to the strain that an individual is placed under when having to deal with pressures in her or his private life. For obvious reasons privacy was much more attainable in antiquity than it is today, though that didn’t make it any the less precious. One Roman who sought to guard it at all cost was the shy and retiring epic poet Vergil, author of the Aeneid. Vergil’s biographer Suetonius wrote: ‘If ever Vergil was recognized in Rome, which he visited rarely, he would hide in the nearest building to get away from the people who were trailing after him and pointing him out.’ Suetonius’ vignette reveals that a Roman poet could be the victim of something akin to Beetlemania, even though few of his fans are likely to have been teenage girls. And, of course, once he returned to the countryside, Vergil would hardly have been plagued by journalists and photographers, like those who incessantly stalk celebrities today.

**Sociological Factors**

Next I propose to analyze the benefits and defects that celebrity culture offers to society as a whole. I’ll begin with the benefits. To start with, it creates positive role models that arouse in others the desire to imitate the same values that those role models exemplify. Arguably the earliest celebrities produced by ancient Greece were its athletes. In fact the first name to enter the Greek historical record is that of a humble baker called Coroebus of Elis, who won the footrace at the first celebration of the Olympic Games in 776 BCE. We know of Coroebus’ victory—and therefore remember his name—because it was the practice to identify each Olympiad (or quadrennial celebration of the Olympic Games) by the name of the winner in the stade footrace, which was the first event to be instituted. (A stade was a distance of about 200 meters). There could hardly be a more effective way of publicizing the achievement of someone who had previously been a complete nonentity to society at large, since his name would henceforth have been emblazoned throughout Greece. Though we don’t tend to think of athletes as performing a particularly useful service for society today other than as a species of entertainers, in antiquity physical fitness was enjoined upon the entire citizen body, since all males were required to perform military service on behalf of the polis or city-state to which they belonged. The achievement of Olympic victors, as well as the achievements of victors in other athletic games, would thus have acted as a powerful incentive, since training for the military was closely tied to training for athletic competition. One event at the Olympic Games, moreover, the so-called hoplitodromos, in which hoplites (or heavily armed soldiers) sprinted against each other—the literal meaning of the word—had a direct application to warfare, since this was how armies sometimes engaged.

Second, the cult of celebrity stimulates a spirit of competitiveness in ways that are at times highly beneficial to society, in particular by encouraging them to perform acts of public generosity. An interesting example of someone who was stimulated in this way is the ‘courtesan’—she should more accurately perhaps be identified as a high-class hooker—called Phryne. Prostitution was one of the few professions that offered a woman the opportunity of making a name for herself in antiquity. The others were all connected with showbiz—chiefly mime and pantomime. Phryne, like other celebrity courtesans of whom we have
record, became fabulously wealthy. Clients visited her from all over the Greek world and showered her with gifts. When she had become something of a grande dame she offered to use her wealth to re-build the walls around the city of Thebes, which had been flattened by Alexander the Great. She did so on condition that the walls should bear an inscription recording, or rather advertising, her generosity. Incidentally, when Alexander the Great destroyed Thebes for rebelling against his rule, the one house he spared was that of the famed lyric poet Pindar, who had died some three hundred years before. In Greece as in Rome poets could become big celebrities.

A third benefit deriving from a celebrity culture is that it helps to unify, even to stabilize society. The most significant example of this phenomenon involves the Emperor Augustus, to whom we alluded earlier. Augustus, who became Rome’s first emperor in all but name, wasn’t at all interested in celebrity for celebrity’s sake. Even so, celebrity was essential to his political agenda. It’s no exaggeration to state that it was in large measure his fame that enabled him to establish one of the most stable systems of government that the world has ever seen. Augustus exploited his celebrity status to project the image of the quintessential public servant, a man whose life was unswervingly devoted to the common good. At the same time he ruthlessly eliminated all the outlets for self-advertisement that had been available to ambitious politicians under the Republic. Though he rejected the more vulgar forms of attention-seeking, his face, or at least an idealized simulacrum thereof, was known to everyone who had a bronze denarius to call his own, since it appeared on the obverse of every coin. The number of coins that were minted bearing Augustus’ image can be reckoned in the millions—an unprecedented development in the history of celebrity and one that was wholly due to his initiative. In addition, every town worth the name would have erected a statue to him.

We pass next to the drawbacks accruing to society from a celebrity culture. To begin with, it creates negative role models that have a deleterious effect upon society by investing the lives of those who deserve no public attention with a spurious glamour. A striking example of this is the adulation that was paid to gladiators in the Roman world. Gladiators were mainly drawn from the ranks of convicted murderers, arsonists, slaves, and other low-life characters. They had no choice but to become gladiators. Because they risked their lives for the gratification of the crowd, however, the best of them achieved spectacular fame. Some of them became household names and even household faces. The Colosseum, which was specifically built to house gladiatorial displays, could accommodate at least 50,000 people. Such was the media attention that they received that others who craved equal adulation, including freeborn women, knights, senators, and even the Emperor Commodus, offered their own services as gladiators in the amphitheater.

Incidentally, like bull-fighters, their cultural descendents, gladiators were thought to be exceptionally potent. No doubt groupies hung about the amphitheater after a fight, as they do today after a rock concert. The satirical poet Juvenal poured scorn upon Eppia, the wife of a senator, who eloped to Egypt with a gladiator called Sergius. ‘What was the attraction?’ Juvenal demands. ‘The fellow was a physical wreck.’ ‘Ah, but he was a gladiator. That’s what transforms his like into pretty boys. That’s what she preferred to children, country, sister, and husband. What her sort like is iron.’ The Latin word for ‘iron’ was a metaphor for ‘erection’.

A second negative consequence is that celebrity-seeking accentuates feelings of loneliness, inferiority, and hopelessness in those who have no hope whatever of securing any love, admiration or attention from society. This in turn may take the form of resentment towards celebrities on the part of those who are unbalanced. A fascinating illustration of this involves the Athenian politician called Aristides (early fifth century BCE), who was popularly nicknamed ‘the Just’ because of his reputation for undeviating uprightness and integrity. Later in his career, when he was threatened with ostracism (exile for 10 years), an illiterate farmer who had never set eyes on Aristides before, went up to him and asked him to write Aristides’ name on a shard of broken pottery or ostrakon in favor of him being ostracized. Without revealing his identity, Aristides asked the farmer if the politician in question had done him any personal injury. The latter replied, ‘No. It’s just that I’m sick and tired of hearing him called ‘The Just’. In other words, he resented Aristides for his over-exposure. He was completely indifferent to the fact that he had earned it as a result of his sterling public-spiritedness. In a later age, one that has taken over-exposure to a wholly different level, he might even have become so fixated on him as to shoot him.

Thirdly, a celebrity-culture generates in mediocrities a powerful desire to become celebrities themselves. A spectacular example of an individual who was driven by a pathological desire for stardom was the Emperor Nero. It wasn’t enough for Nero to be the most powerful man on the entire planet; he wanted to be courted and adored as a world-class entertainer and sports star as well. The biographer Suetonius describes him as having ‘a thirst for popularity and a jealousy of all who caught the public eye by any means whatsoever.’ Nero’s desire to achieve star status was such that the portrait that appears of him on coins may well have been influenced by the hairstyles of famous actors and charioteers. He even went so far as to hire claqués of supposed fans, who were paid to applaud his
musical performances and no doubt as well boo those of his rivals. Anachronistically speaking, Nero clearly saw himself as antiquity’s answer to Michael Jackson. His greatest ambition, however, was to be the winner of the four-horse chariot race. The fact that he was thrown from his chariot when he competed in the Olympic Games didn’t prevent the judges from awarding him the palm of victory. Nero is one of the most tragic manifestations of the pernicious effects of celebrity-seeking of all time. Had he not been depraved—he had his mother drowned—and had he not had the means to force his mediocre talents down the throats of his subjects, he would rate only a footnote in the history of celebrity. It’s difficult to resist the conclusion that his desire for recognition was a reflection of his colossal sense of inferiority, which being the most powerful man in the world had done nothing to assuage.

Finally, a celebrity culture favors and encourages those who are adept at self-promotion. It does not, as we all know, invariably recognize and reward talent. Nero aside, the Greek and Roman worlds produced many other self-promoters, whose command of the media, limited though the media may have been, was equal to any who are alive today. One such was Nicias, Alcibiades’ contemporary, who went so far as to engage the services of a publicity manager called Hieron to help him cultivate the image of a hard-working and self-sacrificing public servant. It was Hieron, who, in the words of Nicias’ biographer Plutarch, ‘helped him most to act out this part, by investing him with an air of solemnity and self-importance.’

It can justly be claimed that modern celebrity culture trivializes judgments of genuine worth and merit relating to all forms of human achievement. In this respect, however, the ancient world was very different from our own. True, a number of low-life characters such as those who were compelled to become gladiators were accorded celebrity status, but we can hardly begrudge them their fame, which was indeed a consequence of their daredevil bravery and skill. Overall, only a handful of individuals achieved celebrity status in the ancient world and almost all those who did achieved that status by virtue of their rank in society or by dint of hard work, Herostratus being the conspicuous exception that proves the rule.

I do not wish to overstate my case. I’m not a fan of ‘The Greeks and Romans were just like us’ point of view, which one can easily flog to death. It would be stretching things unconscionably to suggest that celebrity functioned exactly the same way in antiquity as it does in our society, that it operated with the same degree of intensity, or that it was as omnipresent a factor in the daily lives of the Greeks and the Romans as it is in ours. Nor am I claiming that all the possible consequences for society of a celebrity culture were already in play in antiquity. To note one important difference, the current preoccupation with celebrity is often said to trivialize judgments of genuine worth and merit relating to all forms of human achievement and to pander to sensationalism over genuine ‘content’. There is no evidence to suggest that it had any such effect on Greek or Roman society. Again, our fame-intensive culture helps to fuel the capitalistic market in all sorts of ways that were impossible in the pre-industrial world of antiquity. Mutatis mutandis, however, the opposition between social benefits and drawbacks was already in place, while it goes without saying that the desire to be adored by the hoi polloi is as old as anything under the sun.

**Further Reading**


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