



Social comparison, parasocial relationships, and attachment style: how and when do celebrities improve self-liking?

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ABSTRACT

The recent exponential increase in information available online has not only increased access to information about celebrities, but also decreased the degree to which that information is unambiguously positive. In the current work, we examined how positive celebrities (i.e. celebrities who are primarily admired) versus more ambiguous celebrities (i.e. celebrities about whom people have mixed feelings) differentially affect feelings about the self. Across three studies, we found that high attachment anxiety was associated with assimilating positive celebrities to feel better about the self, whereas attachment avoidance was associated with contrasting ambivalent celebrities to feel better to feel better about the self. Implications for parasocial relationships, social comparison, and attachment are discussed.

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Modern technology has greatly increased the ways that human beings can connect with others (Gabriel et al., 2016; Okdie & Rempala, 2019; Paravati et al., 2021). However, not all of these connections are unambiguously positive (Okdie & Wirth, 2018). As the media surrounding celebrities becomes more immediate (e.g., being able to read a Tweet about a celebrity event just seconds after it occurs) and involved (e.g., drones being able to take paparazzi shots of celebrities from virtually any location), everyday people are increasingly able to know more about celebrities than ever before—including both positive and negative aspects of their personal and professional lives (Furedi, 2010). This modern ability to have insight into celebrities' more negative decisions and personality traits has allowed fans to create and maintain mixed evaluations of these celebrities (hereafter called “ambivalent celebrities”), rather than just overwhelmingly positive evaluations formed from exposure to carefully manufactured efforts by celebrities' public relations teams (hereafter called “positive celebrities”). No research, to date, has compared how people view and are affected by these different kinds of celebrities. The current research examined the degree to which interaction with celebrities can affect feelings about the self, in particular when the relationships with the celebrities are not unambiguously positive. Celebrities provide individuals with a standard to compare themselves to and thus, individuals will differ in how that comparison target affects them (Gabriel et al., 2008; Vogel et al., 2015).

Based on past research, we predict that attachment style will moderate the effects of parasocial bonds with ambivalent and positive celebrities on the self.

Parasocial bonds

People sometimes form bonds with media figures through repeated exposure. These relationships are referred to as parasocial relationships, or one-sided relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956). An explosion in the amount of information available online has greatly increased the amount of information

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available about celebrities. The increased exposure to celebrities can lead to a feeling of shared experiences (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

A variety of work has shown that the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of parasocial bonds tend to mimic the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of real-life relationships (Giles, 2002; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). For example, parasocial relationship partners can provide the experience of belonging, much like real life friends can provide feelings of inclusion (Derrick et al., 2009; Paravati et al., 2021). Greater investment and satisfaction with parasocial relationships predicts commitment to the relationship much like it does for real friendships (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). Parasocial relationships can provide individuals with the opportunity to self-enhance (Derrick et al., 2008; Young et al., 2012) in the same way that friendship provides this opportunity (Gardner et al., 2002). On a more affective level, people experience distress when they encounter a parasocial “break-up” (e.g., a favorite TV show character leaves the show; Cohen, 2003; Cohen, 2004), much like they experience distress after a real-life breakup (Bakermans-Kranenburg & Van Ijzendoorn, 1997). Additionally, people experience reduced prejudice after interacting with minority member parasocial relationship partners (Schiappa et al., 2005, 2006), just as repeated contact with real-life out-group members can reduce prejudice (Rothbart & John, 1985). In summary, a variety of literature suggests that parasocial relationships function similarly to one’s real-life relationships.

Ambivalent feelings about relationship partners and attachment

Research on traditional friendships suggests that people have friends about whom they have highly ambivalent feelings – they like some things about them, but they also strongly dislike other things about them (Gabriel et al., 2005). Those friends have very different effects on self-liking than friends about whom one is more generally positive. Positive friends make one feel better through assimilation of their positive traits to the self, whereas ambivalent friends make one feel better through contrasting them to the self (Gabriel et al., 2008). For example, thinking about a friend who one sees as being vain can make one feel less vain by comparison, and thus feel better about oneself.

Furthermore, the tendency to contrast the friend is linked to attachment style (Gabriel et al., 2005, 2008). Bowlby (1973) suggested that humans have two working models of attachment: attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. People high in attachment anxiety worry about their bonds with others whereas people high in attachment avoidance avoid intimacy with others (Brennan et al., 1998). The avoidant component of attachment’s association with keeping relationship partners at a psychological distance leads to contrasting others to the self (Dijksterhuis et al., 1998). This suggests that attachment avoidance should be associated with getting boosts in self-image by thinking about more negative aspects of relationship partners. For that reason, people high in attachment avoidance are interested in relationship partners about whom they have ambiguous feelings – enough positive feelings to maintain the bond, but enough negative feelings to boost their self-image (Gabriel et al., 2008). Indeed, research suggests that avoidant individuals are most likely to experience increased self-liking after thinking about ambivalent friends (Gabriel et al., 2005, 2008). For example, if Dwight is high in attachment avoidance, he will feel better about himself if he thinks that his friend Andy is not smart. Therefore, based on the research suggesting that traditional relationships and parasocial relationships operate in a similar manner, we predict that individuals high in avoidance will feel better about themselves when thinking about ambivalent celebrities.

Perhaps because of their anxiety about real life relationships, attachment anxiety is consistently related to forming parasocial relationships with celebrities. For example, people high in attachment anxiety are most likely to seek out parasocial relationships (Cole & Leets, 1999). Among adults and adolescent girls, attachment anxiety predicts involvement and intensity of parasocial relationships (Theran et al., 2010). People high in attachment anxiety are the most distressed when parasocial relationships end (Cohen, 2004). Finally, attachment anxiety is most strongly related to transportation into narratives, which often involves an empathic identification with the characters of a narrative

(Greenwood, 2008). Thus, a large amount of research suggests that people high in attachment anxiety are more likely to feel close to celebrities.

Research suggests that feeling close to relationship partners tends to lead people to engage in assimilation (Aron et al., 1991; Gabriel et al., 2005; Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995). In other words, previous research suggests that feeling close to relationship partners is associated with getting boosts in self-image by seeing those partners in a positive manner. For example, if Andy feels close to his relationship partners, he will feel better about himself if he sees his friend Dwight as smart. Because attachment anxiety is tied to feeling close to celebrities, we predict that those high in attachment anxiety will feel better about themselves after thinking about positive celebrities due to assimilation effects.

The current work

The current research aims to extend previous work on attachment and parasocial relationships by examining the hypothesis that attachment moderates the effects of celebrities on self-liking. All studies involved undergraduate students at a large university in New York State who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course. The research was approved by the university's internal review board and was carried out in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines. All data was collected before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study 1 was a correlational study which used regression analyses to examine the association between attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and their interaction on feelings about ambivalent and positive celebrities. We predicted that anxious individuals would be more interested in positive celebrities and avoidant individuals would be more interested in ambivalent celebrities (Hypothesis 1). Study 2 examined manipulated exposure to a positive celebrity. We predicted that attachment anxiety would be associated with increased self-liking when primed with a positive celebrity (Hypothesis 2). Study 3 manipulated exposure to an ambivalent celebrity. We predicted that attachment avoidance would be associated with increased self-liking when primed with an ambivalent celebrity (Hypothesis 3).

Study 1

Study 1 examined the associations between attachment anxiety, avoidance, and people's feelings about both positive and ambivalent celebrities.

Method

Participants and procedure

This study included 170 undergraduate participants (95 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.87$ years; 62.9% white).

The survey first included the measure of adult attachment style. Next, participants were asked to complete a series of questionnaires about celebrities, which included items assessing participants' desire to seek out positive and ambivalent celebrities, their preference for positive over ambivalent celebrities, and how much they enjoyed "hating on" ambivalent celebrities. These questionnaires were presented in random order. Finally, participants completed general demographic measures, including age, gender, and race. Below are descriptions of each measure.

Materials

Attachment Style was measured using Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) relationship questionnaire. This measure assessed participants' endorsement of vignettes representing four categories of attachment. Each of the four vignettes was rated by the participant on a scale from 1 (*not at all like me*)

to 7 (*very much like me*) scale. Underlying attachment dimensions were derived from linear combinations of the prototype ratings (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). To create a continuous measure of avoidance, we subtracted participants' scores on the two non-avoidance related vignettes from the two avoidance related vignettes. To create a continuous measure of anxiety, we subtracted participants' scores on the two non-anxiety related vignettes from the two anxiety related vignettes. We utilized this measure of attachment because it measures broad attachment patterns unrelated to specific relationships and was used in previous, related research (Gabriel et al., 2005, 2008).

General Interest in Celebrities was the mean of two items: "How interested are you in celebrities in general?" and "Compared to most other people that you know, how much do you follow celebrities?" both on seven point scales ($\alpha = .88$).

Desire to Seek Out Celebrities were measured using two versions of a 13-item modified social surrogate questionnaire (Derrick et al., 2009); one for positive celebrities ($\alpha = .92$) and one for ambivalent ($\alpha = .91$). Positive celebrities were defined to participants as a celebrity that the participant admires and feels connected to (examples of participant responses include Taylor Swift, Adam Sandler, and Beyoncé). Ambivalent celebrities were defined to participants as a celebrity that the participant has ambivalent feelings toward, but still feel connected to (examples of participant responses include Lindsay Lohan, Charlie Sheen, and Snooki). For each question, participants indicated on a 1 (*does not sound appealing at all*) to 7 (*sounds extremely appealing*) scale how appealing they found different parasocial interactions with positive celebrities (e.g., "Watch a TV show with a positive <ambivalent> celebrity as a main character"). Higher scores indicated higher desire for interaction with positive or ambivalent celebrities.

Preference for Positive Celebrities was measured using a five-item scale that we created to assess preference to interact with positive celebrities as compared to ambivalent celebrities ($\alpha = .87$). For each question, participants indicated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale how much they preferred to interact with positive celebrities over ambivalent celebrities (e.g., "I enjoy shows featuring positive celebrities more than shows featuring ambivalent celebrities"). Higher scores indicated a higher preference for positive celebrities, rather than ambivalent celebrities.

Enjoyment of Insulting Ambivalent Celebrities was measured using a single-item measure: "I enjoy 'hating on' ambivalent celebrities." Pilot work within our laboratory suggested that this was a term that our participants would understand and that was used commonly by the undergraduate population to indicate enjoyment of making fun of a celebrity. Participants indicated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale how much they enjoyed insulting, or "hating on," these individuals. Higher scores indicated more enjoyment from "hating on" ambivalent celebrities. This item was included because we expected some individuals, more specifically those who identify as avoidantly attached, might derive benefits from thinking about the negative qualities of ambivalent celebrities. People who enjoy insulting ambivalent celebrities likely would be thinking about how they are different from these celebrities' negative qualities.

Results and discussion

We predicted that anxious individuals would be more interested in positive celebrities and avoidant individuals would be more interested in ambivalent celebrities (Hypothesis 1). To test this hypothesis, we conducted regression analyses in which we entered anxiety, avoidance, and the anxiety by avoidance interaction into the regression equation.

As hypothesized, we found a significant main effect of anxiety for general interest in celebrities, $\beta = 0.18$, $t(166) = 2.22$, $p = .03$, $r^2_{part} = .17$. Specifically, the higher people scored on the anxiety dimension of attachment, the more interested they were in celebrities in general. This is consistent with previous work that suggests that anxious individuals are most likely to form parasocial relationships (Cole & Leets, 1999).

As predicted, we did not find a significant main effect for avoidance on any of the dependent variables related to positive celebrities or following ambivalent celebrities (all $ps > .14$). This finding is

consistent with previous work that suggests little relationship between attachment avoidance and parasocial relationships (Cole & Leets, 1999). As predicted, we found a significant main effect of avoidance for enjoyment of insulting or “hating on” ambivalent celebrities, $\beta = 0.18$, $t(159) = 2.15$, $p = .03$, $r^2_{part} = .17$. This provides support for the hypothesis that avoidant individuals might benefit the most from contrasting the negative qualities of ambivalent celebrities, which is consistent with previous work examining friendships (Gabriel et al., 2008).

Interestingly, we found a significant main effect for anxiety on desire to seek out ambivalent celebrities, $\beta = 0.17$, $t(165) = 2.11$, $p = .04$, $r^2_{part} = .16$. Specifically, the higher people were in attachment anxiety, the more they desire to interact with ambivalent celebrities. Additionally, anxiety was not associated with enjoying to “hate on” celebrities. If anything, it seemed to be associated with *not* enjoying to “hate on” ambivalent celebrities, $\beta = -0.16$, $t(159) = -1.90$, $p = .06$, $r^2_{part} = -.15$. Because anxious individuals seek out ambivalent celebrities and don’t enjoy insulting or “hating on” them, it appears that these individuals may not focus on the negative of the celebrities and instead may like them (although, the data suggests they don’t like them as much as they like the positive celebrities).

In summary, the first study was highly consistent with our Hypothesis 1. It suggests that attachment anxiety predicts attraction to celebrities, whereas avoidant attachment predicts enjoying “hating on” ambivalent celebrities.

The second and third studies examined the implications of those patterns. Study 2 examined the effects of positive celebrities on self-liking, and Study 3 examined the effects of ambivalent celebrities on self-liking.

Study 2

Study 2 examined whether attachment anxiety and avoidance moderated the effects of positive celebrities on self-liking. Based on previous literature and on the results of Study 1, we predicted that people who were high in anxiety would experience increased self-liking when presented with a celebrity that they admired and had positive feelings toward (Hypothesis 2).

Method

Participants and procedure

This study included 119 female undergraduate participants ($M_{age} = 18.59$ years; 69.3% white).¹ Participants completed either a positive celebrity priming task or a control prime task. Afterward, participants were asked to complete our measure of self-liking, which served as our dependent variable.² At the end of the study, the same measure of adult attachment used in Study 1 was assessed to examine the avoidance and anxiety dimensions of adult attachment. The procedures of this study were designed to mirror the procedures of Gabriel et al. (2008) work examining the effects of different friends on self-view.

Celebrity prime

As a manipulation of positive celebrity exposure, the participants completed a writing task. Participants in the celebrity condition were asked to write about a celebrity that they feel connected to and admire. Participants in the control condition were asked to write about everything they did the previous day. The participants engaged in this task for about 4 minutes ($M_{time} = 3.56$ minutes; $M_{celebrity} = 3.04$ minutes; $M_{neutral} = 4.07$ minutes).³

Self-Liking was assessed using a composite measure, which included the 10-item Rosenberg (1965). An example item is “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”; $\alpha = .93$. We also included a four item self-certainty scale (example item: “Right now, I feel very comfortable with who I am”; $\alpha = .92$). The last self-liking item was a modified version of the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale designed to assess how close the current self was to the ideal self (Aron et al., 1992). Participants were asked to think

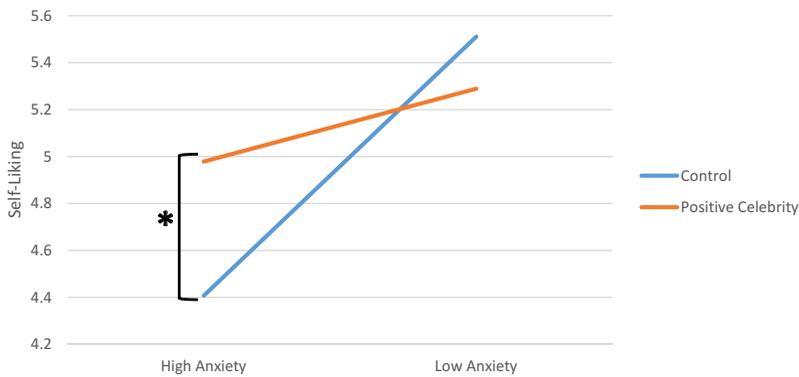


Figure 1. Feelings of self-liking based on attachment anxiety predicted scores (high vs. low) and condition (positive celebrity prime vs. neutral prime) in Study 2. Asterisk (*) indicates significant difference ($p < .05$) between conditions.

about their actual self (what they are like) and their ideal self (what they want to be like). They were then shown a series of circles that varied from completely separate to almost completely overlapping. They were asked to report which image represented the relationship between their actual self and their ideals for themselves. We then took a composite of all three self-liking measures. This composite measure was utilized in previous research (Gabriel et al., 2008) and was highly reliable ($\alpha = .95$) as well as valid as a composite measure (with a factor analysis suggesting one component was the best fit for the measure).

Results and discussion

We predicted that anxiety would moderate the relationship between positive celebrity exposure and self-liking (Hypothesis 2). To test this hypothesis, we conducted regression analyses to examine the associations between these variables. In all analyses, we entered anxiety, avoidance, prime condition, and all interactions of these terms into the regression equation. There were no significant main effects.

As predicted, we found a significant two-way interaction between anxiety and celebrity condition, $\beta = -0.28$, $t(111) = -2.07$, $p = .04$, $r^2_{part} = -.18$. When participants were in the control condition, anxiety predicted lower self-liking, $\beta = -0.54$, $t(111) = -4.18$, $p < .001$, $r^2_{part} = -.36$. This is consistent with previous literature that suggests a strong relationship between self-esteem and anxious attachment (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Leary et al., 1995). However, when participants were allowed to think of their favorite celebrity, that relationship disappeared, $p = .27$ (see Figure 1). In other words, thinking about a favorite celebrity seemed to erase the negative effects of attachment anxiety on self-esteem. In support of that explanation, we also found that participants high in anxiety liked themselves more after being primed with a positive celebrity as compared to control $\beta = -0.28$, $t(111) = -1.95$, $p = .05$, $r^2_{part} = -.17$. Participants low in anxiety did not differ based on condition, $p = .36$ (see, Figure 1).

As predicted, we did not find a significant three-way interaction between anxiety, avoidance, and celebrity prime, $p = .67$. Additionally, as predicted, we did not find a significant two-way interaction between avoidance and the celebrity prime, $p = .22$, or between avoidance and anxiety, $p = .44$, on feelings of self-liking.

Study 2 supported our Hypothesis 2; priming positive celebrities increased self-liking for those high in attachment anxiety. This is consistent with the findings from Study 1, which suggested that anxiety is associated with liking celebrities and with the previous research demonstrating that attachment anxiety is related to parasocial relationship formation (e.g., Cole & Leets, 1999; Greenwood, 2008). As expected, avoidance did not moderate the relationship between a positive celebrity prime and self-liking.

Study 3

Study 3 examined the role of ambivalent celebrities on self-liking. We predicted, based on previous research on avoidance and ambivalent friends (Gabriel et al., 2008), that ambivalent celebrities would have the most benefits for self-liking in avoidant individuals (Hypothesis 3). This is consistent with Study 1, which found that avoidant attachment predicted enjoying “hating on” celebrities.

However, Study 1 also found that high attachment anxiety was associated with not viewing ambivalent celebrities as being particularly negative. If people high in anxiety focus on the positive, instead of the negatives of ambivalent celebrities, then they may not benefit from contrasting themselves to the celebrities. Therefore, we explored the hypothesis in Study 3 that only individuals high in avoidance *and* low in anxiety would benefit from contrasting ambivalent celebrities to the self.

Method

Participants and procedure

This study included 195 female undergraduate participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.85$ years; 65.6% white). A total of 14 participants were excluded for rating their target celebrity as a 7 out of 7 in admiration, which therefore does not classify their celebrity as ambivalent as instructed. This left a total sample of 181 participants.

First, participants completed an ambivalent celebrity priming task or a control prime task. Afterward, participants were asked to complete the same measures as Study 2.

Celebrity prime

The writing task as in Study 2 was modified to instruct participants to write about an ambivalent celebrity rather than a positive celebrity. Specifically, participants were asked to write about a celebrity that they felt connected to, but they had mixed feelings about. Consistent with Study 2, participants in the control condition were asked to write about everything they did the previous day. The participants engaged in this task for about 4 minutes ($M_{\text{time}} = 4.01$ minutes; $M_{\text{celebrity}} = 4.63$ minutes; $M_{\text{neutral}} = 3.41$ minutes).⁴

Results and discussion

In Study 3, we predicted that avoidance would moderate the relationship between ambivalent celebrity exposure and self-liking (Hypothesis 3). Highly avoidant individuals should feel better about themselves after thinking about celebrities who they are ambivalent toward. Additionally, we explored the hypothesis that these effects may be specific to those low in attachment anxiety (based on the findings of Study 1). To test this, we conducted regression analyses to examine the associations between these variables. In all analyses, we entered anxiety, avoidance, prime condition, and all interactions of these terms into the regression equation.

We found a three-way interaction between anxiety, avoidance, and condition $\beta = -0.21$, $t(165) = -1.96$, $p = .05$, $r^2_{\text{part}} = .14$.⁵ Specifically, among participants who were high in anxiety, the avoidance by condition interaction was not significant, $p = .32$. Additionally, no contrasts were significant for those high in anxiety. Therefore, we will focus on the effects found for those low in anxiety.

For participants low in anxiety, the avoidance by condition interaction was significant $\beta = 0.38$, $t(165) = 2.11$, $p = .036$, $r^2_{\text{part}} = .15$. We decomposed that interaction and found that participants low in avoidance and anxiety were not affected by the ambivalent celebrity, $p = .76$. However, when low anxiety participants were high in avoidance, they experienced a significant increase in self-liking when primed with an ambivalent celebrity, as compared to the neutral prime, $\beta = 0.42$, $t(165) = 2.07$, $p = .04$, $r^2_{\text{part}} = .15$ (see, Figure 2). In other words, ambivalent celebrities provided increases in self-liking for participants high in avoidance, but only when those participants were also low in anxiety.

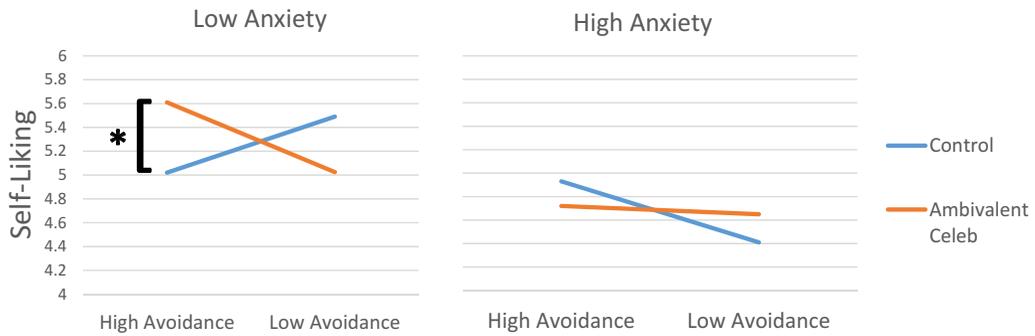


Figure 2. Feelings of self-liking based on attachment anxiety predicted scores (high vs. low), attachment avoidance predicted scores (high vs. low), and condition (ambivalent celebrity prime vs. neutral prime) in Study 3. Asterisk (*) indicates significant difference ($p < .05$) between conditions.

In summary, participants who were high in avoidance (and thus compare themselves to others) and low in anxiety (and thus see ambivalent celebrities as bad) felt better about themselves after thinking about ambivalent celebrities. Although the three-way interaction was at, rather than below, a p value of .05, the follow-up analyses were both statistically significant and the finding was theoretically consistent with the significant findings from Study 1.

General discussion

The current studies examined whether attachment style would moderate the relationship between celebrity exposure and self-liking. We predicted that attachment anxiety would be associated with feeling better about the self after thinking about positive celebrities because attachment anxiety has been found to be associated with strong bonds with celebrities and strong bonds are associated with assimilating traits to the self and increasing self-liking (Gabriel et al., 2005, 2008). We also predicted that ambivalent celebrities would allow people who keep relationship partners at a distance (i.e. avoidant individuals) to feel better about the self. Based on initial findings, we thought that this might only be true for those individuals who see the celebrities as negative (which was only true for those low in attachment anxiety).

Across three studies, we found support for the hypothesis that attachment style moderates the effects of positive and ambivalent celebrities. In Study 1, we found that anxiety was associated with general interest in celebrities, seeking out celebrities, and expressing a preference for positive celebrities. Additionally, avoidance was associated with enjoying to “hate on” ambivalent celebrities (and anxiety seemed to be associated with not enjoying it). This suggests that people high in attachment anxiety are interested in positive celebrities, whereas people who are high in avoidance are interested in focusing on the negative qualities of ambivalent celebrities. Study 2 found that participants high in anxiety experienced increased self-liking following a positive celebrity prime. Study 3 found that for individuals low in anxiety, avoidance moderated the effects of celebrities on the self. Highly avoidant and low anxiety individuals experienced an increase in self-liking after exposure to an ambivalent celebrity.

This work suggests that individual differences can impact how people feel about themselves after thinking about celebrities, and therefore has important implications for the way individuals can use their bonds with celebrities to improve their own self-image. Not all individuals will respond the same way to celebrity content. For those with high anxiety, reading about a beloved celebrity may give them a boost in self-liking. With this in mind, they may want to scroll their favorite celebrity’s social media profile, watch them on television, or read about them in a magazine on a day they need a self-esteem boost. On the other hand, individuals low in anxiety and high in avoidance may want to seek out an ambivalent celebrity, rather than a positive one, when they need a self-esteem boost. For these

individuals, reading a gossip magazine about ambivalent celebrities may be a better strategy for increasing their self-liking than reading about positive celebrities.

This research extends previous work on attachment style and social comparison processes by examining these associations in the context of parasocial relationships. This research is consistent with research suggesting that anxious individuals tend to overestimate their similarity with others, but avoidant individuals tend to underestimate their similarity to others (Mikulincer, 1998). These tendencies may lead anxious individuals to be more likely to assimilate the qualities of others and avoidant individuals to contrast. Thus, anxious individuals will benefit from celebrities who provide upwards comparison standards whereas avoidant individuals will benefit from celebrities who provide downward comparisons standards. In these studies, we found supportive evidence for these processes with bonds with celebrities, although we did not specifically examine the processes of assimilation and contrast. Future work will be necessary to examine those processes specifically.

Future work may want to examine whether people strategically select the celebrities they follow based on these tendencies. We suspect that at an implicit level, people are interested in celebrities who will make them feel better about themselves. For example, an avoidant individual may follow an ambivalent celebrity due to the increases in self-liking that they may experience from contrasting a celebrity's negative qualities. This research has the potential to explain why some people spend so much following celebrities about whom there is so little to admire.

This work also extends the previous literature of parasocial relationships. Specifically, no work that we are aware of has examined people's connections with ambivalent celebrities. Much of the previous work has focused on celebrities that people admire and respect, or celebrities that people strongly dislike (e.g., Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Tian & Hoffner, 2010). In contrast, our work suggests that many individuals form connections with celebrities that have both positive and negative qualities, much like they form friendships with people that they have mixed feelings about. Additionally, these ambivalent celebrity friends seem to provide the same positive outcomes for avoidant participants as an ambivalent friend would (at least for those who are low in attachment anxiety). This further supports the previous work suggesting that parasocial relationships function similarly to real-life relationships.

Additionally, this work has real-world implications, as most people have connections with a variety of celebrities. As mentioned previously, most individuals are exposed to celebrities on a daily basis through a variety of outlets. Repeated exposure leads individuals to form a bond with these celebrities. It is important to understand how these bonds influence feelings about the self. This work suggests that individuals may select specific types of celebrities to seek out based on the benefits they have for the self, although likely not on a conscious level.

Limitations and future directions

One limitation of these studies is that only women were used in both experimental studies (Studies 2 and 3). In these studies, our participant sample was inclusive of only women because pretest results indicated that men had a difficult time spontaneously identifying celebrities that they had a connection with, and specifically ambivalent celebrities. However, it is possible that men might experience a similar connection with people in the media that are less commonly followed or appear in the spotlight less, such as athletes or politicians. Men may not have initially thought of these individuals when prompted to identify "celebrities," as athletes and politicians are not always discussed in the media in the same way as actors/actresses, reality stars, and musicians. Future work may want to include these differing descriptors of public interest individuals so that men can more easily identify ambivalent and positive celebrities with whom they feel they have a connection with, and therefore can be utilized in a study sample.

We present our finding within a framework of social comparison motivations. In other words, previous work suggests that people high in avoidance tend to compare the self to relationships partners and feel better when they look better than their partners (Gabriel et al., 2005, 2008). Thus, avoidant individuals should benefit from liking people who they perceive as bad in some ways

(Studies 1 and 3). However, because we did not measure perceptions of the celebrities and outcomes to the self in the same study, we cannot know the social comparison processes lead to the increased interest in ambivalent celebrities. Further research would benefit from directly examining that relationship.

This work focused on positive celebrities and ambivalent celebrities, but did not include fully negative celebrities (in other words, famous individuals that participants felt completely negative toward, rather than a mix of positive and negative feelings as is the case with ambivalent celebrities). Future work may want to consider how thinking about fully negative celebrities interacts with individual differences to impact self-liking.

It is important to note that there are many conceptualizations of, and therefore measures of, attachment style across the field of psychology. This work utilized a well-established measure (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) that has been used in related work (Gabriel et al., 2005, 2008) and was most appropriate for the current research question and study design. However, future researchers may be interested in studying the relationship between attachment style and celebrities in predicting self-liking using a theoretical lens, and thus a different measure of attachment than the one utilized here.

Finally, it is important to understand how far reaching and long-lasting these effects may be for the self. Specifically, future work should examine whether ambivalent and positive celebrities may have threat buffering qualities for individuals differing in attachment anxiety and avoidance. Additionally, it is expected that repeated exposure will lead to a stronger bond with celebrities. Therefore, future work should examine how additional exposure influences these effects.

Conclusion

Much like people approach their real-life relationships differently based on their attachment style, we have found supportive evidence for the idea that participants approach their relationships with celebrities in a similar way. Specifically, we found that positive celebrities provide increases in self-liking for participants high in anxiety, likely because these individuals tend to overestimate their similarity to others, leading to assimilation. Therefore, positive celebrities have the most benefits to provide to these individuals. Ambivalent celebrities, however, lead to increased self-liking for participants low in anxiety and high in avoidance. This is likely because these individuals tend to underestimate their similarity to others and therefore have the most to gain from contrasting the negative qualities of others. Overall, these findings provide a variety of real-life implications, as our society continues to be more and more exposed to celebrity culture and we are likely adjusting our self-views as a result.

Notes

1. We used exclusively female participants in this study because a pretest indicated that men had a difficult time identifying celebrities that they felt connected with, specifically in the domain of ambivalent celebrities. This wasn't surprising, as previous work suggests that women typically have stronger parasocial relationships than men (Bailey et al., 1987). In addition, a re-analysis of Study 1 including gender found no significant interactions with gender. Thus, we only included female participants in both Studies 2 and 3.
2. All filler materials used in this study can be found in the supplemental materials. The supplemental materials, as well as the data that support the findings of this study, are available on OSF [osf.io/5nstf].
3. Because attachment was measured at the end of the study, we wanted to ensure the prime did not have any influence on our attachment dimensions. We did not find a significant main effect of condition on either avoidance, $p = .14$, or anxiety, $p = .84$.
4. ⁴To ensure the prime did not have any influence on our attachment dimensions, we examined the influence of prime condition on attachment. We did not find a significant main effect of condition on either avoidance, $p = .56$, or anxiety, $p = .30$.
5. There was a main effect for anxious attachment, $\beta = -0.23$, $t(165) = -2.06$, $p = .04$, $r^2_{part} = -.15$. High anxious attachment was associated with low self-liking.

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Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/5nstf>.

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