

Celebrityscape in Iran: A Comparison between Celebriphils and Non-Celebriphils

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Abstract

Since Iran is governed by a theocratic administration, social “authority” in this society has always been a political issue. Over the past decades, Iranian traditional family which is the building block of the Iranian society -and the political establishment- has been on the decline and it is not surprising that new sources of authority have emerged. The introduction of social networks and web 2.0 technologies has increased the pace of this trend and now celebrities and minicelebrities on social media increasingly command Iranian millennials’ attention. This study utilizes the data from a countrywide survey (n=14906) on many aspects of Iranian social life and values, to find out what factors contribute to celebrity culture in Iran. The results show that religiosity and feeling of happiness are negatively associated with celebriphilia; also, this research found other factors can predict a person’s inclinations towards celebriphilia.

Keywords: Celebrity Culture; Teenagers; Iran; Celebriphilia; Celebrityscape

Introduction

Ten years ago, celebrities were not that important in Iran. Indeed, they could attract a lot of attention, but, in less than a decade they became extremely successful in guiding people how to live, how to act, and even how to think. Iranian celebrities proliferated and new forms of celebrity appeared and gained power and prominence: chefs, CEOs, tasters, reviewers, dancers, cuties, kids, talents, and even abominable microcelebrities. As celebrities proliferated and diversified, more niche followers were found or created and therefore, the Iranian celebritiescape has become so vast and diverse that the Islamic government who now lately sees celebrities as its rivals can no longer regulate them.

As in 2020, celebrity culture is a phenomenon in all cultures but what makes Iranian celebritiescape especially important is its peculiar nature. In a country of 59 million Internet users, having 10 million followers on Instagram has many meanings. Yes, Kim Kardashian who has no talent at all has more than 180 million followers (more than half of the American population). But, we have to consider that Kardashian's language is English and over 2 billion people in the world now speak English (Huang, 2018). Moreover, English is an international language for many non-English speakers, and therefore at least five of Persian speaking people whom I follow on Instagram are now following Kim Kardashian. With a cursory calculation, we can conclude celebriphilia in Iran is much more powerful than in countries that are known to be bases for celebrity production and consumption. We can see this in a recent Instagram live conversation between two Iranian banal celebrities who held a live session in Persian language and nevertheless they broke the Instagram record for the number of viewers, with more than 640,000 users tuning in - obliterating the previous record held by US rappers Drake and Tory Lanez with some 315,000 people tuned in (Jafari, 2020). It is important to note that these celebrities were able to gather this large population -mainly teenagers, I suppose- in Persian celebritiescape; only 110 million people in the world speak Persian (Perry, 2005) among them people like Tajiks are unfamiliar with Persian Alphabet and less likely to follow Iranian celebrities. That becomes even more important when we consider all these happen in a country in which the political system wants all to know that it is more popular than any other public entity inside or outside the country.

I have been studying celebrity culture for the last decade and I have still not seen a countrywide survey solely studying celebritiescape in Iran. It is wonderful to see so many government-funded cultural institutes are located in the huge governmental body in Iran and still they have neglected the celebrity culture in Iran as an important subject to study. I am, however, aware that there are currently some projects that are conducting studies on this subject, but none of them include a countrywide survey. Particularly, the state of teenagers in the Iranian celebritiescape is like a dark hole to me. No one knows how much Iranian teenagers waste time on consuming and promoting celebrities. My perception is that a considerable part of celebriphilia industry in Iran works on the shoulders of Iranian teenagers. First, Iranian teenagers are new to this celebritiescape and therefore they are more easily seduced by profiteer celebrities. The human brain as an organ becomes roughly mature at the age of 13 (Potter, 2019), though development will continue slowly even to the age of 25 and afterward (Sukel, 2017). Although most teenagers have a fresh and mature brain, they still lack experience and without enough input experience, they might be more susceptible to accept those arguments with which they come in contact. Celebrities take advantage of this condition and mobilize millions of Iranian teenagers and convert teenage attention and work into money and power. Second, Iranian teenagers have more enthusiasm, time, and energy to spend on celebrity promotion and enforcement. We know well that teenage age is the best life span for working with electronic devices. An ordinary teenager spends more than 7 hours a day using screens and 60 percent of teens themselves report spending too much time online is a “major” problem (Brundin, 2019). It is obvious that a great deal of their time online is spent on entertainment content and following up celebrities. Sometimes in Iran teenage celebriphilia finds its way to the real world and streets; in that case, the government might come up with a crackdown. Third, there is a serious “dumbing down” process in the Iranian educational system. Every new president comes with a new Minister of Education who, for avoiding discontent in the society and particularly among the youth, reduces the number of lessons a student should take before graduation. In comparison to only two decades ago, today's books are much lighter and easier. With youth energy and as no much time is needed for a teenager to pass courses, they would inevitably go to find replacements to spend time.

Fourth, Iranian teenagers are less likely to work or accept responsibilities. It is wonderful that in a country that has been economically devastated either by international sanctions or by incompetency (see, for example, Shahghasemi (2017) and Shahghasemi and Prosser (2019)) Iranian parents still insist their teenagers should not work (Aghajanian, 2008). This, along with the dumbing down process in the Iranian educational system provides a lot of “surplus time” for Iranian teenagers, and celebrities have been fast in exploiting this time.

Fifth, the institute of religion is declining in Iran. Commonly, we hear younger people are less and less inclined to be religious (see for example Cragun et al. (2018), Smith and Denton (2011), and Regnerus (2009) among others); Iranian teenagers are not exempt from this trend and various research have shown the decline of religious authority among Iranian teenagers and youth (see for example Azodi et al. (2017), Egdampur & Haseli (2018) and Ameri, et al. (2017) among others). Obviously, some teenagers will try to find spirituality in other entities, including celebrities. Indeed, as celebriphilia is now threatening the institute of religion, the theocratic administration is now scrambling to tackle it.

Method

This study is a survey on data of a project named *Values and Attitudes of Iranians*, conducted by Research Center for Culture, Art and Communications in 2018. A sample of 14,906 was taken systematically among all Iranians over 15 in all Iranian cities, towns, and villages. More than 59% of participants were men and the rest (about 40%) were women. Most participants (62.9%) were married and 33.6% said they were unmarried. Moreover, 1.7% said they were divorced, 1.3% reported as being widowed and 0.4% said they were “separated.” This survey had envisaged 10 levels of education for which the biggest group (30.3%) was high school graduates followed by BA (19.5%), primary school (11.3%), and others.

Results

In this study, I examined the relationship between celebriphilia and other variables like for example level of education, marital status, happiness, social media use, Internet use, financial status, occupational status, life satisfaction, religiosity, etc. To do the analysis, I adopted two approaches; in the first approach, I divided my sample into two groups of celebriphils and non-celebriphils into two groups of A and B and examined them with Cramer's V to find if there were any relationships among variables. In the second approach, I used a t-test to see if there were differences between means in the two groups and means in independent other groups.

There was a relationship between celebriphilia and level of education but this relationship was not significant (Cramer's $V=0.277$, $P>0.05$). Nevertheless, more scrutiny among educational groups showed that there was a significant celebriphilia difference between the people in the lowest educational group on one hand, and high school, MA and BA students and graduates on the other hand (as we could have predicted, high school students are much more celebriphil than illiterate people).

One factor that can deeply affect a person's attitude on different issues is marriage. Cramer's V test showed that there was a weak but significant relationship between marital status and celebriphilia (Cramer's $V=0.204$, $P<0.05$). I had different categories like widowers, separated, divorced, etc. but their frequencies were not high and therefore, I came to the conclusion that they did not account for any significant difference. Among non-celebriphils, 29.2% were single while 37.3% of celebriphils were single. Among non-celebriphils, 67.9% were married while married people consisted 58.7% of celebriphils. Since the results of this survey can be generalized to the general population of Iran, we can conclude that marriage has a reverse relationship with celebriphilia.

Men and women have different affectional patterns and therefore, I was interested in knowing if gender had any relationship with celebriphilia. Intriguingly, gender showed no significant relationship with celebriphilia (Cramer's $V=0.11$, $P>0.05$).

I was also interested in knowing if -the perception of- unhappiness had any relationship with celebriphilia. Although I expected people who feel unhappy would be more inclined to develop

a parasocial relationship with celebrities, the findings of this study showed no significant relationship between these two variables (Cramer's $V=0.199$, $P>0.05$).

In the past 10 years, Iranians have increasingly joined social networking sites and platforms. Social networks have their personal and social advantages but we should not forget they have also their dark side. Social networking sites have paved the way for the emergence of people who are famous because they are "ordinary." People feel close to them since they more easily see these new celebrities as their extended others. Certainly, social networks have provided means to spend more time with our favorite celebrities and therefore, these new communication facilities have helped celebrity culture very much. I wanted to know if using social networks among Iranians have any relationship with celebriphilia. Although there was a weak but significant relationship between these two variables (Cramer's $V= 0.212$, $P<0.05$), there was no clear pattern that shows there was an outstanding integrative relationship between these two variables.

But social networks are located on the Internet. Using social networks is so extensive that we sometimes mistake them with the Internet. I was curious if Internet use is associated with celebriphilia. The association test, however, showed no significant relationship (Cramer's $V= 0.168$, $P>0.05$).

Celebrities worldwide promote consumerism. They either promote a commodity or consume conspicuously to value themselves. I wanted to know if inclination towards consumerism had any significant relationship with celebriphilia. Here again, no significant relationship was found (Cramer's $V= 0.070$, $P>0.05$). Similarly, no relationship was found between job satisfaction and celebriphilia (Cramer's $V= 0.087$, $P>0.05$). I also examined possible relationships between the desire to buy branded commodities and celebriphilia and I found a significant relationship between these two variables (Cramer's $V= 0.243$, $P<0.01$). The more one likes to buy branded commodities, the more he or she will tend to like celebrities or vice versa.



In his seminal book *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture* (2012), Pete Ward described how celebrity culture utilizes elements from divinity to give celebrities an aura of sacredness. Indeed, modern celebrities are competing with religion to gain the respect of the people. Therefore, one recurrent theme in studying celebrity culture has been to see how celebrities relate to religion and God. To study this issue in the current context, I studied the relationship between feeling close to God, and celebriphilia, and I found there was a relationship between these two variables (Cramer's $V=0.262$, $P<0.01$). Therefore, we can claim that the more religious an Iranian citizen is, the less he or she might follow celebrities. I expected the same relationship between celebriphilia and belief in judgment day, but I found no significant relationship (Cramer's $V=0.210$, $P>0.05$). Anyway, here we can find another interesting issue: one reason for Iranian teenagers to love celebrities is that they are less religious.

To further study the relationship between religiosity and celebriphilia, I tried to find out how being a “practicing Muslim” is related to celebriphilia. There was a significant relationship between these two variables (Cramer's $V=0.293$, $P<0.01$).

Conclusion

Over the past few years, celebrities have been gaining power and prominence in Iran and it seems that celebrity culture will continue to thrive in the Iranian celebritiescape for the years to come. This is a global trend but what is intriguing about celebrity culture in Iran is that this phenomenon happens in a country in which the official narrative calls citizens to be pure and worship God and forget about all kinds of material wealth and overconsumption.

As younger people are more celebriphil in Iran, we can conclude that in the coming years celebrity culture will become stronger. Yet, we should not forget that as one grows, his or her thinking system will become more experienced and certainly some of the most enthusiastic followers of celebrities will find it absurd during their thirties or later.

Most importantly, we can see that religion is a very important factor against celebrity culture in Iran, even among teenagers. And, at the same time we can see as teenagers are becoming increasingly irreligious, the celebrity culture -or in the other words, sexy Gods- will gain more

and more popularity and we will witness the emergence of new “worshipping followers” in the near future.

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