'I FEEL SORRY FOR CELEBRITIES; I MEAN THEY HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT THEIR WRINKLES!' (LOLA, AGED 10): PRETEENAGE GIRLS AND CELEBRITY CULTURE

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This paper sets out the problematic nature of the conception within contemporary British journalistic discourse of the relationship between girls and celebrity culture. The pre–teen age group within popular discourse is the primary focus of this paper. Through data collected from four focus groups conducted with girls aged eight to twelve, I aim to give pre–teens a voice in the debate. This paper will explore the girls' definition of celebrity as well as their perceptions of celebrity culture. I argue that the girls' perceptions of celebrity culture and the manner in which they position themselves within this are more complex than is often acknowledged.

Girls and celebrity culture: where gender and age intersect

'Sexualisation of children — who is to blame?' asked Kiss in a recent *Guardian* article. Inevitably, celebrity–saturated popular culture was cited as a key cause. Over the last few years a plethora of newspaper articles, television documentaries and public policy documents have focused on the problematic influence of an increasingly celebrity–driven popular culture on childhood. These concerns are characterised and divided by an aged and gendered distinction, with girls aged six to fourteen being the focus of particular anxieties.

The influences that both celebrities and popular culture wield upon girls are seemingly boundless. Concern focuses on body image, self–esteem and girls aspiring to become glamour models. Many of these anxieties are related to the perception that popular culture for girls is increasingly and inappropriately sexualised. Coy comments on the highly gendered culture divide, drawing attention to the distinctly sexualised nature of culture available to girls. She notes that products designed for girls are either themselves sexualised or otherwise associated with the sex industry. For instance, Mitchell et al.'s research with young people on their consumption of products explored the popularity of the Playboy logo on items from clothing to pencil cases. The Playboy logo is overtly linked to the sex industry and can therefore

be seen as part of the sexualised culture marketed to girls as discussed by Coy. Many young people in Mitchell's research were aware of the sexual nature of the Playboy logo. However, they insisted that displaying the logo did not have that connotation within their peer group; instead the focus was on the logo as a fashion statement, as a 'cute pink bunny' (Mitchell et al).

The popularity of the Playboy bunny and other sexualised popular culture artifacts, including celebrity images, are controversial due to a perceived risk of girls becoming increasingly sexualised from a culture preoccupied with adult images. Newspaper headlines and documentary themes reveal the uneasy relationship between girlhood and adulthood. An article in the *Daily Mail* encapsulates this concern: 'The Rise Of The Child Woman: The New Breed Of Girls Who As Young As 10 Dream Of Manicures, Diets And Breast Implants' (Appleyard). Buckingham suggests that concerns over girls' consumption of celebrity result from the binary distinction of the child world in opposition to the adult: a distinction that celebrity culture transgresses. This idea is encapsulated in another headline: 'The Death Of Innocence: How The Crude Sexualisation Of Pop Music, TV And Fashion Is Destroying Childhood' (Carey). Girls are consistently positioned as vulnerable, passive recipients of media within this discourse. Buckingham argues that there is a fundamental conception of the child's mind as easily moulded. This is shown in the headline, 'Amy Winehouse More Influential Than Teachers And Politicians For Modern Girls' (Beckford). Girls' consumption of celebrity is framed as problematic because of the almost boundless influence the culture is perceived to have. Framing celebrity culture as dangerous stands in stark contrast to the perception of adult consumption of celebrity culture as a frivolous pastime within academic and journalistic discourses.

Concerns over the sexualisation of girlhood through a celebrity–saturated popular culture have gained prominence as they have been politicised. In his 2010 election campaign David Cameron pledged to put an end to the 'inappropriate commercialization and sexualisation of childhood' (Cameron). In 2010 the Labour government commissioned a national survey titled 'The Sexualisation Of Young People Review' (Papadopoulos). In this review Papadopoulos calls for a media literacy program in which the 'cult of celebrity' is addressed. This report has been followed by an independent review of the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood, titled 'Let Children Be Children' (Bailey), which set out to give parents a voice within this debate. It can be concluded that girlhood appears to be in a state of crisis throughout journalistic discourse and public policy.

Girls as consumers

Girls' consumption and use of popular culture has been a key area of interest for academic research from the second–wave feminist movement onwards. This overview will focus on more recent case studies in order to contextualise my own research findings.

The means through which girls use celebrity culture for identity construction is a common theme within this body of academic research. Boden's research explored the influence that celebrity consumption had upon girls' identity creation. She concluded that girls' affiliation with celebrities was displayed through clothing: personality associations (Boden). Using a more specific case study, Murray investigated how fans used the television program *My So–Called Life* (*MSCL*) in their identity play. Murray argued that *MSCL* enabled fans to be in a fluid state of identity. In a more recent case study, Wolf's online research explored the ways in which fans of the Broadway musical *Wicked* used the show to understand themselves and negotiate life through its fan forums.

These case studies suggest that girls have a reflexive attitude towards the consumption of popular culture artifacts. In addition, these artifacts provide individuals with a set of resources with which to negotiate several facets of social life. However, Brookes and Kelly argue that the popular culture resources available to girls are limited in scope and dominated by young and slim females in their investigation into the identity formation of pre–teens.

Lowe's research with fans of Britney Spears highlights the need for a more complex investigation of the relationship between girls and celebrities. Lowes' research demonstrated that girls do not consume celebrity personae in a passive and holistic fashion; instead the girls in her study had a paradoxical relationship to the Britney Spears brand. The girls were highly critical of Britney's public persona whilst simultaneously enjoying her music. Lowe argues that Britney's' public persona provided the girls with a site in which to explore their own sexuality through a combination of mocking and imitation.

The academic studies explored here clearly conflict with the journalistic discourse concerning girls' consumption of celebrity culture, most notably in understanding girls' ability to actively negotiate their own meanings from popular culture. However pre–teens, which my research solely focuses on, are either absent from much of the academic work or are included within larger groupings of teenagers or children.

There is some evidence to suggest that pre–teens should be explored as a separate demographic. Pre–teens, otherwise known as 'tweens',

have often been quoted as the product of marketing strategies that sought to define them as a distinctive demographic (Harris). They are associated with an increase in personal spending power as well as an influence over family spending. Brookes and Kelly argue that celebrities are important role models for girls in their analysis of the tween magazine *Dolly*. *Dolly* draws upon this and explicitly links celebrities to specific products or brands.

Contemporary celebrity culture

Celebrity culture is a fundamental facet of contemporary British society. Giles comments that 'the history of fame is about nothing less than the history of Western civilization' (4). Marshall argues that the place of the celebrity at the centre of culture is due to the compatibility of the notion of celebrity with the concept of individuality, which also resides at the core of Western culture. Celebrity culture has developed into a multi–faceted industry; Turner argues that on the one hand it constructs, promotes and sells positive celebrity images and lifestyles, whilst at the same time it functions to undermine the image of the ideal celebrity and reveal the famous as bad, ugly and corrupt. The industry is not self–contained and its economic value extends through endorsements, merchandising and advertising campaigns, saturating almost every aspect of daily life. The celebrity is therefore a highly visible public figure of success, and as such creates and sustains the desire for emulation, achieved via consumption of celebrity–endorsed commodities. Holmes and Redmond argue that lifestyles are sold along with products, perpetrating the idea that average individuals can achieve a particular lifestyle simply by purchasing the commodities which signify that image. For Feasey, this process functions to create a sense of celebrity membership so the ordinary can feel close to the elite.

Combining celebrities' financial power with their public positioning as icons of success, Marshall argues that they hold a significant voice in society. The position of celebrity provides 'greater presence and a wider scope of activity and agency' (Marshall ix). Marshall suggests that this situating of celebrities gives them certain discursive influence. The celebrity therefore holds a position of power and their voice is seen as legitimately significant.

However, celebrities' ability to maintain their public presence relies on the success and continued consumption of their public personae. Hinerman therefore argues that 'modern stardom entails a belief in the ideology of authenticity' (457). Turner suggests that the authenticity of

celebrities' image has been undermined by the inclusion of 'ordinary' people as celebrities through widespread success of shows such as *Big Brother*. Furthermore Franklin suggests that it is these 'ordinary' people who are regarded as icons of an inauthentic mass–mediated popular culture for achieving their success through reality television (qtd. in Turner 4). The celebrity's persona is a carefully constructed, mediated and sustained image.

Methodology

The data for this research was collected through four focus groups with girls aged 8 to 12. First a pilot study group was held with four girls. Group A consisted of twelve girls from Brookside (a co–educational state school). Groups B and C, each containing six girls, were held at Meadowhall (an all–girl private school). A total of twenty–eight girls aged between 8 and 12 were included in the focus groups. Twenty seven would describe themselves as white British and one as British Indian. This lack of diversity in ethnicity represents a clear drawback to this research. From an epistemological standpoint, I approached celebrity consumption as a discursive process; focus groups allowed for a discussion of this process.

The focus groups were semi–structured with the girls mostly directing the conversation within the broad arenas of celebrity. I follow Christensen and James in working from the belief that 'children are social actors with a part to play in their own representation' (xii); the focus group therefore had flexibility for the girls to discuss areas which they felt were important to them. The age of the girls was also taken into account within the research design. Hill suggests that 'children enjoy being with their friends and outnumbering adults' (Tisdall 76). With this in mind the set–up of the focus group facilitated the girls' discussion through making them feel comfortable and willing to express themselves.

From an ethical perspective I felt that focus groups gave the girls a real choice to opt in and out of the discussion. Issues that individual girls may have found difficult to discuss on a one–to–one basis could therefore be talked about in a more natural way. Focus groups were also advantageous as anonymity could be guaranteed. I discussed this with the girls beforehand so they were more involved in the research process, and they chose their own pseudonyms. In this way the concept and value of anonymity was better understood by the participants.

Who counts as a celebrity?

An exploration of the girls' definition of celebrity culture is needed in order to contextualise the rest of the analysis, as it was quite specific. As Turner has argued, the binary definition of celebrity as either a natural talent or an inauthentic commodity renders it difficult to discuss celebrity discourse meaningfully, making the particular definition of celebrity important.

An oft–quoted definition of celebrity is Boorstins' 'a star is well known for his/her wellknowness' (162), and within the literature of celebrity culture a broad definition of celebrity is often utilised. However, when asked to name their favourite celebrities the girls focused exclusively on actors and singers. The distinction the girls drew between actors/singers[1] and other celebrities became increasingly clear as non–entertainment celebrities were suggested and met with very negative reactions. Just three girls named non–actors/singers as deserving of celebrity status: two named footballers and one an author. Aside from these exceptions, the girls across all groups rejected non–entertainment celebrities; in groups B and C they termed these 'fake' celebrities, as opposed to the 'real' celebrities with whom they affiliated.

The classification of celebrity types with common features and the development of hierarchies has been a clear area of academic interest. In this context it is useful to explore Rojek's categorisation of celebrities as ascribed, achieved and attributed. These definitions arise from the context under which an individual can be said to have gained celebrity status. Rojek defines achieved celebrity as derived 'from the perceived accomplishments of the individual in open competition' (18). Turner discusses how talent is often framed as a natural or innate quality. This positions the celebrity as an extraordinary individual. Combining Rojek and Turner's concepts seems to mirror the girls' definition of 'real' celebrities as individuals with exceptional talent who have achieved success.

The girls' collective definition of celebrity meant that for the majority of the discussion when they talked about celebrity they referred only to actors/singers. However, it is interesting to explore the discussions the girls had around the 'fake' celebrities I brought into the discussion as a way of understanding their definition. In the following quotation the girls are discussing model Katie Price:

> DELIA: They don't do anything ever,
> MORGANA: They are just famous for being like —
> POPPY: Having big boobs!

DELIA: Yeah it's just her big boobs
MORGANA: That's why she is famous. (Pilot)

In the same manner the girls in Group B had extremely negative reactions to the idea that Katie Price could be included alongside actors and singers as a celebrity of the same status and deserving of the same admiration:

PIPPA: You are allowed to be mean about celebrities.
She hasn't done anything to get famous, she is mean
and she has way too much plastic surgery….
LOTTIE: She is mad, mental and believe me she is
horrible. (Group B)

In both extracts the girls felt that Katie Price had done nothing to achieve celebrity status. It is clear that for the girls in the study, public acceptance as a celebrity was a marker of deserved status derived from innate talent. For the girls, talent was the defining characteristic of a 'real' celebrity. In fact they seemed to view fame, success and celebrity status as an inevitable by–product of talent. This notion is clear in a quote from Avril: 'you are *bound* to be famous: if you are a wonderful singer, then you will be famous' (my emphasis, Group A).

The girls had a fairly deterministic attitude towards talent. If an individual with talent had reached celebrity status they must be of worth almost by default. Giles argues that this attitude continues the pretense that the route to celebrity status is a fair and meritocratic one in which an individual with talent will succeed. The untouchable place of talent was clearly demonstrated throughout all the discussions. Girls who were highly critical of a celebrity's clothes, body image and personality would say, 'but of course they are talented'. Talent itself was not on the agenda for discussion, with this rule broken just once when Lottie and Pippa discussed negative aspects of Miley Cyrus:

LOTTIE: I don't mean to be rude to Pippa or anything
but I actually don't think she is that good.
Audible gasps and the silence.
MICHELE: Well she can be snobby but she is a good
singer. (Group B)

The group's reaction to Lottie's opinion on Miley Cyrus's talent highlighted how the girls did not discuss the talent of celebrities. The link the girls made between talent and celebrity status illuminates some

Figure 1: Lottie's depiction of a weeping celebrity signing autographs.

of the reasoning behind several participants' aspirations to reach celebrity status, as it is a clear marker of success. Marshall argues that the notion of the celebrity functions as a mechanism for marking success publicly; in the context of this argument, celebrity can demonstrate success across a spectrum of areas. The girls viewed celebrity status as denoting success: this was seen as transferable to diverse fields, exemplified by Tilly's ambition to become a famous airhostess (Group A).

Perceptions of celebrity culture

The girls were asked to draw a picture of what it would be like to be a celebrity. Their perceptions of celebrity culture came across most vividly in their explanations of these drawings. There were similarities across many of the girls' drawings, relating to icons of celebrity life in the media such as paparazzi, red carpets, stages and adoring fans. Perhaps unsurprisingly the girls focused on these media aspects of celebrity culture when asked to describe their drawings. The girls' drawings positioned them directly within contemporary celebrity culture and the

imagined impact of a dominating media culture was the focus for many of the girls in their discussions. These interactions between the girls and the media icons of celebrity life provoked emotional responses from most participants. In the images the paparazzi and adoring fans are often portrayed as overwhelming the individual. Lottie drew a vast number of fans asking for her autograph in her picture (Figure 1). She is crying while signing the autographs, showing that she is upset, but interacting with fans is something that celebrities have to do.

The girls tended to focus on how they would feel if they were celebrities within this highly mediated culture. Emma said: 'if the camera was like always following you around it would be a bit…hard' (Group A). None of the girls had a positive reaction to the media–saturated nature of contemporary celebrity culture. However some girls — mainly those who aspired to become actors or singers — drew a renegotiated position for celebrities away from the pressure of conforming to particular standards (I return to this discussion later).
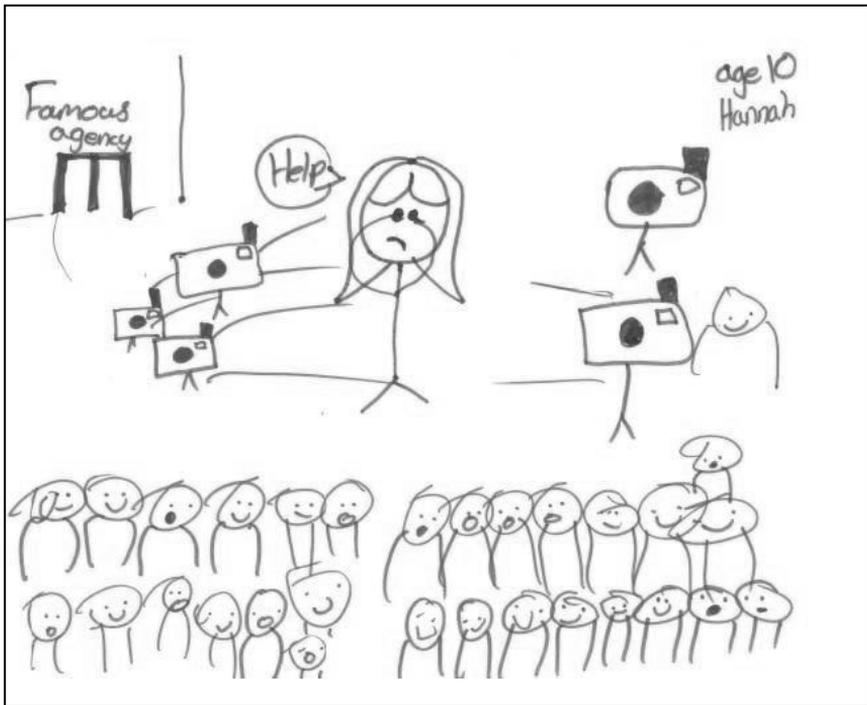

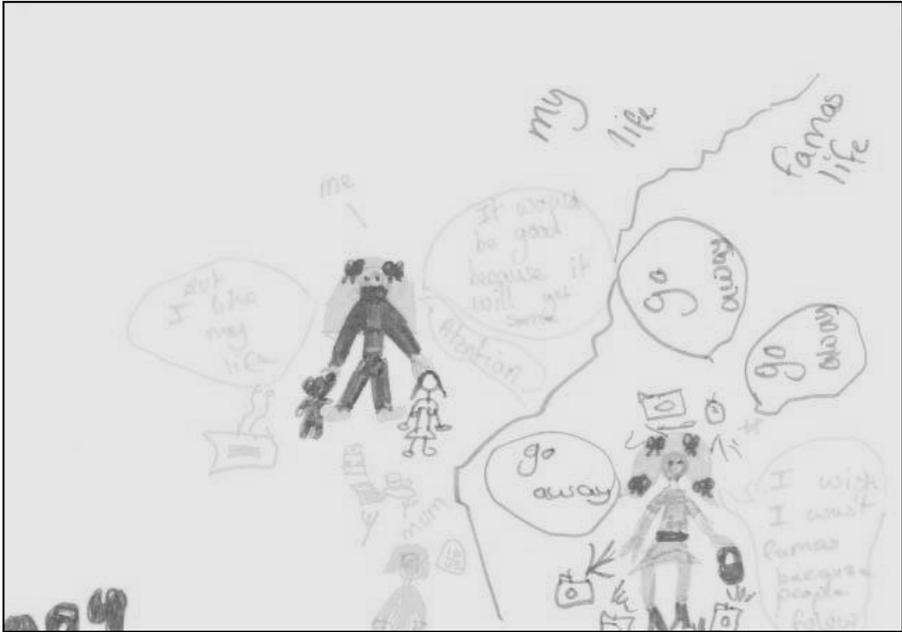Figure 2: Hannah's image of a celebrity calling for help.

Figure 3: May's drawing of the dual 'lives' of a celebrity.

The negative emotions the girls attributed to their future celebrity personae varied from 'sad' to Hannah's celebrity crying and calling out for help while being swamped by the paparazzi (Figure 2). Many of the girls felt that becoming a celebrity meant that their lives would change. Lauren said when you are a celebrity, 'you're not normal'. A few of the girls demonstrated this visually, drawing two pictures of 'my life' and 'famous life', thus creating a clear distinction between the two lives, such as in May's picture (Figure 3).

   The girls suggested that current celebrities have to work to maintain an image and part of this involves managing their emotions. The notion of the outwardly happy but inwardly sad celebrity was mentioned on several occasions. In Group A Katie felt that makeup was used to put on a happy public face that disguised the sadness really felt:

>   KATIE: They sit in a chair and put powder on their face
>   and they cry and put the makeup on again. (Group A)

Avril demonstrated this idea visually in her drawing, in which her celebrity was smiling for the paparazzi on the red carpet (Figure 4). However, Avril said that after two hours of standing and smiling for the

Figure 4: Avril's picture of a celebrity's 'true' and public emotions.

cameras she would get tired, and the yellow frown drawn underneath would be her true emotion.

Both Katie and Avril utilised the idea of putting on makeup as a way for celebrities to hide their real emotional states. A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the emotional work involved in being a successful celebrity and the pressure to present a happy, beautiful image to the world. Nunn and Biressi suggest that the constant re–working of the life story in order to portray the individual in the best light is a widely undertaken process of emotional work. However, the re–working of the celebrity life story is intrinsic to maintaining consumption in light of fractures in image. Nunn and Biressi argue that the re–working of

scandal into survival against the odds is expressed as an emotional journey that has been complicated or worsened by media attention. They argue that celebrity status is 'an endless project to achieve, sustain and manage' (Nunn and Biressi 53). The girls clearly felt that the media focus would be the source of their unhappiness as imagined celebrities.

When asked for the reasons behind choosing their favourite celebrities, the authenticity of the individuals was often mentioned. Rose, discussing Miley Cyrus, commented: 'she is actually not hiding herself she is showing herself' (Group A). When elaborating, Rose said she felt she knew Miley Cyrus and that the individual she was attached to was not an image or an act, but Miley's true self. Many of the girls echoed this, feeling that knowing a celebrity's real personality was important to them. The girls' discussions over the authenticity of the celebrity image resonate with Myers' argument that 'we can never really know the truth about a celebrity…the pursuit of that truth allows audiences to organize and understand themselves and the world around them' (905).

During their discussions the girls demonstrated some understanding both of the pressures the media place on the celebrity persona and the importance of the media for producing and promoting the celebrity. The girls in two focus groups mentioned how Alesha Dixon's popularity increased after climbing Kilimanjaro for charity; they argued that this put a positive spin on her personality. Drawing on Bell's work exploring the bad–to–mad celebrity, the importance of renegotiating bad behavior as the result of a mental illness is clear. Bell argues that celebrities needed to re–tell their narratives in particular ways in order to be accepted into mainstream culture. The girls, too, noticed how important image creation was for celebrities. Conversely, the girls were also aware of how the media can operate to negatively present an individual. Hannah argued that the paparazzi 'can make you look like anything, like if you did that [touching her nose] they will make you look like you were picking your nose' (Group C).

The debates and discussions the girls held over plastic surgery, pressures to be thin and the construction and constant presentation of an image of the happy self demonstrated that they had a deeper understanding of the process of becoming and maintaining a celebrity persona than is often acknowledged. As previously mentioned, Buckingham argues that girls are positioned without agency and as passive consumers of culture within journalistic discourse. However, this research suggests that pre–teen girls have a greater understanding of media processes and, importantly, how this may affect celebrities than is commonly assumed.

The future

Of the twenty–eight girls who took part in this study, sixteen felt that it was either important or very important to be a celebrity or famous when they were older. All of these girls had a performance–based career in mind, and listed it as one potential career out of many. This

Figure 5: Morgana envisions herself as a celebrity, with thin waistline and enlarged breasts.

counters much of the research reported in popular discourse, which claims 'celebrity is the new career of choice' (Tallent). Interestingly, this project had the same percentage of pre–teens who wanted to be famous as Lindstroms' large global survey (Lindstrom). The girls' aspirations to become famous fit in with their definition of who should count as a celebrity and what the marker of celebrity status means for wider societal standing. Moreover, ten of the girls said being famous was not important at all: by no means did all of the girls aspire to be famous.

The girls saw the current media pressure on celebrities to conform to particular beauty standards as deterministic. However, many of the girls who aspired to be famous or a celebrity felt that they would have agency to renegotiate this position for their futures. These girls felt that what mattered in successfully becoming a celebrity was their personality and uniqueness. In particular, the girls questioned the need to have a 'hot' body. Morgana summed up this renegotiation of celebrity in the explanation of her drawing (Figure 5). She drew herself forced into a mould: very skinny, with large breasts, lots of makeup and highlights in her hair. Morgana said that when she became an actress she would resist this pressure and keep her own body shape and individuality. Many of the girls who aspired to be celebrities expressed similar feelings of being able to be their own type of celebrity. Therefore the girls who aspired to celebrity status did not simply subscribe to a set of values presented to them, but felt that they could meaningfully negotiate a new position for themselves as celebrities.

My research highlights the complexity of the relationship pre–teen girls have with celebrities, a complexity largely missing from journalistic discourse. The girls' definition of real and fake celebrities illustrates why so many of them aspire to celebrity status, as it is a socially noted marker of success. The girls' often emotional accounts of what it would be like to be a celebrity demonstrated that they had a much more critical and reflexive engagement with the notion of celebrity and the reality of celebrity life than is often acknowledged. This is further reinforced by the desire expressed by some of the girls to renegotiate a position for the celebrity, void of many of the emotional burdens that they saw as currently harming celebrities in general.

NOTES

[1] Celebrities who were not actors and/or singers by profession were regarded by the girls as non–entertainment celebrities. From here on the term 'non–entertainment celebrities' refers to any celebrity who is not an actor and/or singer.

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