

The Aspiration for Becoming a Celebrity or Hero: A Comparative Study Across the United States, Iran, and Afghanistan

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Abstract: The present study examined cross-cultural differences in the desire to become a celebrity or a hero across samples from the United States, Iran, and Afghanistan. Building on prior findings that individuals in the United States may prefer heroism over celebrity status, the current study explored whether this pattern generalizes across differing cultural contexts. Participants completed the Celebrity Attitude Scale Brief (CAS-B) along with measures assessing the desire to become a celebrity or a hero. Results indicated that celebrity admiration was positively associated with the desire to become a celebrity across all three countries. However, notable cross-cultural differences emerged, with participants from Afghanistan reporting significantly higher levels of both celebrity and hero aspirations, as well as stronger associations between these constructs. In contrast, the United States and Iran showed relatively similar patterns. These findings suggest that sociocultural context plays a critical role in shaping how individuals conceptualize and aspire toward fame and prosocial recognition.

Keywords: Celebrity, Heroism, Cross-Cultural Psychology, Celebrity Worship, Aspiration

Introduction

The study of celebrities and their influence on social and cognitive behaviors is an important area of research that merits an international perspective. In a recent study, Grabbe et al. (2024) found, somewhat surprisingly, that in the United States there was a stronger desire to be a hero than to be a celebrity this finding is notable given that U.S. culture is saturated with celebrity news and media figures, including individuals who achieve fame for reasons not directly tied to talent or merit. Based on this cultural landscape, one might reasonably expect that individuals in the United States would prefer celebrity status over heroism.

Additionally, while the United States has elected several celebrities to high political office, other nations have historically elevated scientists, physicians, and social reformers to positions of leadership. Given this apparent paradox, it is important to examine whether the preference for heroism over celebrity observed in the United States extends to other cultural contexts, such as Iran and Afghanistan.

Previous research suggests that celebrities can both reflect cultural values and, in some cases, signal

maladaptive psychological tendencies. For example, prolonged or intense celebrity worship has been associated with traits such as neuroticism to conspiracy theory belief (Grabbe, 2015; Griffith et al., 2013; Houran et al., 2005; Sheridan et al., 2006). However, studies examining celebrity admiration have consistently found that the celebrities selected by participants are typically individuals from the entertainment industry, rather than those known primarily for humanitarian contributions or societal impact (Aruguete et al., 2019; Hitlan et al., 2021; Nnubia et al., 2020).

Furthermore, when individuals identify positive qualities in celebrities, these qualities are often secondary to the celebrity's primary source of fame. For instance, individuals who admire a musician such as Taylor Swift may primarily value her artistic output, with philanthropic efforts viewed as an additional, but less central, attribute. In contrast, figures such as Mick Foley are often admired first for their altruistic contributions, with their professional achievements viewed as secondary (Grabbe et al., 2024; McCutcheon et al., 2021). This distinction highlights the importance of differentiating between admiration based on talent and admiration based on perceived moral or prosocial qualities.

These distinctions may be further shaped by cultural context. In the United States, widespread media exposure and relatively unrestricted access to various forms of entertainment contribute to a broad and diverse range of celebrity figures, including social media influencers and internet personalities. In contrast, countries such as Iran maintain more regulated media environments, which may influence both the types of celebrities that emerge and the ways in which they are perceived. Afghanistan presents an even more distinct context, characterized by more limited media exposure and a prolonged history of conflict, which may shape cultural perceptions of both heroism and celebrity.

The present study extends prior work by examining these constructs across three cultural contexts: The United States, Iran, and Afghanistan. The United States serves as a useful point of comparison, as most prior research on celebrity attitudes has focused on American and European samples. By comparing these populations, the current study aims to better understand how cultural context influences the desire to become a celebrity or a hero. The present study employed the Celebrity Attitude Scale (Greenwood et al., 2018; Zsila et al., 2018; 2024) to assess celebrity admiration across these three samples.

Methods

Participants

The present study included participants from three countries: Iran, Afghanistan, and the United States. A total of 658 participants were recruited from Iran. Of these, 411 participants were assigned to the celebrity condition (59.4% female, 36.7% male, 3.9% other; $M = 28.19$, $SD = 10.06$), and 247 were assigned to the hero condition (70.0% female, 29.1% male, 0.8% other; $M = 26.07$, $SD = 8.62$). Data was collected from April to May of 2025.

In Afghanistan, 236 participants were recruited. Of these, 68 participants completed the celebrity condition (86.8% female, 13.2% male; $M = 24.13$, $SD = 7.63$), and 168 completed the hero condition (64.0% female, 33.3% male, 1.8% other; $M = 24.64$, $SD = 7.59$). In the United States, 156 participants were recruited. Approximately half were assigned to the hero condition ($n = 80$) and half to the celebrity condition ($n = 79$). The U.S. sample consisted of 115 females, 43 males, and one participant who did not report gender ($M = 23.5$, $SD = 7.2$).

Materials

Celebrity Attitude Scale Brief (CAS-B)

Celebrity admiration was assessed using the brief version of the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS-B; Zsila et al., 2024), which includes two subscales: Healthy admiration and Problematic admiration. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), with higher scores indicating stronger celebrity attachment. Prior research has demonstrated good reliability and validity of this measure (Greenwood et al., 2018; Zsila et al., 2018; 2024).

Desire to Be a Celebrity

Participants completed a two-item measure assessing the desire to become a celebrity, adapted from prior work. The items assessed (a) Willingness to sacrifice to become a celebrity and (b) Degree of distress if one never became a celebrity. Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating stronger desire.

Desire to Be a Hero

A parallel two-item measure assessed the desire to become a hero, using the same format and scaling as the celebrity desire measure. Items assessed willingness to sacrifice and distress associated with never becoming a hero.

Procedure

Participants completed the study via [online/in-person insert if needed]. After providing informed consent, participants completed the CAS-B followed by either the hero or celebrity condition measures. Assignment to conditions was structured to allow comparison between desire for heroism and celebrity status across cultural contexts. The study procedures were consistent with prior research using the CAS-B and adhered to ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Results

Correlation Analyses

Zero-order correlations were computed separately for Iran, the United States, and Afghanistan to examine the relationships between celebrity admiration (CAS-B) and both celebrity and hero desire measures (see Table 1). Across all three countries, the desire to be a celebrity was positively and significantly correlated with scores on the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS-B). This pattern was consistent across the healthy, problematic, and total CAS-B subscales, indicating that higher levels of celebrity admiration were associated with a stronger desire to become a celebrity.

In contrast, the relationship between celebrity admiration and the desire to be a hero was weaker and less consistent. In both Iran and the United States, correlations between CAS-B scores and hero-desire measures were generally small and non-significant. However, in Afghanistan, significant positive correlations emerged between CAS-B scores and hero-desire variables, suggesting a stronger association between celebrity admiration and heroic aspiration within this sample.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons

To examine differences across countries, a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted for each dependent variable (see Table 2). Significant differences were observed across countries for all variables, including hero-desire (sacrifice, bother, and total), celebrity-desire (sacrifice, bother, and total), and CAS-B scores (healthy, problematic, and total).

Table 1: Correlation coefficients between celebrity and Celebrity Attitude Scales

Scale	Iran						USA						Afghanistan					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Celeb-desire sacrifice	-	**	**	**	**	**	-	**	**	**	**	**	-	**	**	**	**	**
2. Celeb-desire bother	0.608-	-	**	**	**	**	0.424-	-	**	**	**	**	0.613-	-	**	**	**	**
3. Celeb-desire total	0.6080,8790	0.608-	-	**	**	**	0.4240,9200	0.424-	-	**	**	**	0.6130,8920	0.613-	-	**	**	**
4. CAS-B healthy	0.2900,3420	0.8790,914-	0.2900,3420	-	**	**	0.3520,4280	0.4240,9200	0.3520,4280	-	**	**	0.3240,2750	0.6130,8920	0.4180,3050	0.4010,4400	0.7790,925	0.5020,3090
5. CAS-B problem	0.3540,4380	0.9140,3420	0.3540,4450	0.7190,899	-	**	0.4380,4450	0.7450,2300	0.3600,2830	0.5460,836	-	**	0.3580,8360	0.9040,3050	0.4010,4400	0.7790,925	0.5020,3090	0.4480,9250
6. CAS-B total	0.3540,352	0.9140,428	0.3540,438	0.7190,899	0.951	-	0.4380,4450	0.7450,2300	0.3600,2830	0.5460,836	0.916	-	0.3580,8360	0.9040,3050	0.4010,4400	0.7790,925	0.5020,3090	0.4480,9250

Scale	Iran						USA						Afghanistan					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Hero-desire sacrifice	-	**	**	**	**	**	-	**	**	**	**	**	-	**	**	**	**	**
2. Hero-desire bother	0.297-	-	**	**	**	**	0.449-	-	**	**	**	**	0.246-	-	**	**	**	**
3. Hero-desire total	0.2970,7580	0.297-	-	**	**	**	0.4490,8120	0.449-	-	**	**	**	0.2460,7520	0.246-	-	**	**	**
4. CAS-B healthy	0.0600,1230	0.8480,0980	0.0600,1230	-	**	**	0.0170,1440	0.4490,8120	0.8860,0890	0.1090,1790	0.5120,849	-	0.1500,1380	0.8240,1740	0.2960,3160	0.7970,925	0.3330,1910	0.3240,9250
5. CAS-B problem	0.5660,855	0.8480,0980	0.5660,855	0.912	-	**	0.1230,566-	0.8860,0890	0.1090,1790	0.5120,849	0.889	0.889	0.1680,8490	0.8240,1740	0.2960,3160	0.7970,925	0.3330,1910	0.3240,9250
6. CAS-B total	0.0170,1440	0.8480,0980	0.0600,1230	0.912	0.912	-	0.0170,1440	0.8860,0890	0.1090,1790	0.5120,849	0.889	0.889	0.1680,8490	0.8240,1740	0.2960,3160	0.7970,925	0.3330,1910	0.3240,9250

Table 2: ANOVA for three countries

Scale	Iran		USA		Afghanistan		F	Partial eta2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
1. Hero-desire sacrifice	3.90	1.425	4.25	1.317	4.78	1.922	15.005**	0.057
2. Hero-desire bother	3.46	1.789	2.83	1.659	3.95	2.238	9.355**	0.037
3. Hero-desire total	7.36	2.617	7.08	2.540	8.73	3.290	14.364**	0.055
4. Celeb-desire sacrifice	3.21	1.804	2.16	1.213	4.19	2.358	23.057**	0.077
5. Celeb-desire bother	2.67	2.119	1.27	0.711	3.71	2.498	27.275**	0.089
6. Celeb-desire total	5.88	3.520	3.43	1.646	7.90	4.361	31.486**	0.102
7. CAS-B healthy	10.70	2.846	9.36	2.727	11.17	2.826	20.403**	0.037
8. CAS-B problem	10.00	3.897	7.81	3.456	11.97	4.066	55.745**	0.096
9. CAS-B total	20.70	6.172	17.17	5.417	23.14	6.535	44.848**	0.079

Participants from Afghanistan consistently reported the highest scores across both hero and celebrity desire measures. For example, hero-desire total scores were highest in Afghanistan ($M = 8.73$, $SD = 3.29$), followed by Iran ($M = 7.36$, $SD = 2.62$) and the United States ($M = 7.08$, $SD = 2.54$), $F(2, \dots) = 14.36$, $p < .01$.

Similarly, celebrity-desire total scores were highest in Afghanistan ($M = 7.90$, $SD = 4.36$), followed by Iran ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 3.52$) and the United States ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.65$), $F(2, \dots) = 31.49$, $p < .01$. CAS-B scores also differed significantly across countries, with Afghanistan showing the highest levels of celebrity admiration, followed by Iran and then the United States. Effect sizes (partial η^2) indicated that these differences ranged from small to moderate in magnitude.

Overall, the results indicate two primary patterns. First, across all countries, greater celebrity admiration was associated with a stronger desire to become a celebrity. Second, notable cross-cultural differences emerged, with participants from Afghanistan reporting higher levels of

both celebrity and hero aspirations, as well as stronger associations between these constructs, compared to participants from Iran and the United States.

Discussion

The present study sought to extend prior research on celebrity admiration by examining cross-cultural differences in the desire to become a celebrity or a hero across samples from the United States, Iran, and Afghanistan. The results revealed a striking pattern. Participants from Afghanistan reported significantly higher levels of both celebrity and hero aspirations compared to participants from Iran and the United States. In contrast, only minor differences were observed between the United States and Iran, suggesting a surprising degree of similarity between these two cultural contexts.

Additionally, while prior research found limited association between celebrity admiration and the desire to

be a hero, the present findings indicate that, in Afghanistan, the desire to be a celebrity was more strongly associated with heroic aspiration than in the other two countries. One possible explanation for these findings lies in the sociocultural and historical context of Afghanistan. Decades of conflict and instability may shape how individuals conceptualize both heroism and celebrity. In such contexts, public figures may be evaluated not solely on entertainment value, but on perceived contributions to society, resilience, or moral strength. As a result, the distinction between “celebrity” and “hero” may be less clearly defined.

In contrast, participants from the United States and Iran showed relatively similar patterns despite differences in media structure and cultural regulation. This suggests that exposure to global media or shared cultural narratives about fame and success may produce converging attitudes toward celebrity and heroism, even in otherwise distinct sociopolitical environments (Grabbe et al., 2022).

These findings extend earlier work demonstrating that individuals may prefer heroism over celebrity under certain conditions (Sansone and Sansone, 2014). However, the present study highlights that this preference is not universal and may vary substantially across cultural and geopolitical contexts. Furthermore, while previous studies have emphasized the psychological correlates of celebrity worship (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2018; Maltby et al., 2011), the current results suggest that cultural context may play a critical moderating role in shaping how admiration translates into aspiration.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the use of self-report measures introduces the possibility of response bias. Self-report measures can have the tendency for self-serving bias and social desirability. They do represent a significant methodological limitation to this study. They were chosen for this study for the sake of adopting a methodology that would be most sensitive to the background and culture of the various nations represented here. Other forms of data collection that may involve observation of behavior would represent logistical problems, for example, in Afghanistan, where social behaviors are monitored by the Taliban, as well as Iran, where there are several paramilitary units that watch over citizens’ behavior. In the interest of being pragmatic, self-report measures were used. Future studies going beyond self-report measures would be an ideal next starting point for this research. However, that would also make methodological assumptions of practicality, given that we are dealing with different cultures undergoing different social and political climates.

Second, the reliance on brief two-item measures may limit reliability, although prior work suggests these measures can still capture meaningful variation. Third, differences in sampling methods across countries may have influenced the results. Additionally, the interpretation of constructs such as “celebrity” and “hero” may vary across cultural contexts, potentially influencing how participants responded to the measures (Gash and Bajd, 2005).

Previous theorists have looked at the desire to be a hero, such as Jung’s archetype or an Ericksonian view among younger people’s development. However, the present findings seem to fit within how social learning theory (Bandura and Walters, 1977), particularly the role of motivation (Firmansyah and Saepuloh, 2022), might be impacted by modeling within the confines of culture. That, in turn, could be impacted by both internal conflict (decades of war in Afghanistan) summoning a desire to be a hero within a culture which has low access to digital media, such as Afghanistan.

In this study we show how Afghanis compared to the United States and Iran, which do have more of a digital culture, albeit somewhat more rigorously censored in the case of Iran. In this context, we may see how the results of this study show a potential new area for research and theoretical consideration, namely availability, which may drive both modeling and motivation as described in social learning theory.

Future research should explore these constructs using more diverse methodologies, including behavioral measures and qualitative approaches. It would be particularly valuable to examine how individuals in different cultural contexts define celebrity and heroism (Flint et al., 2022), and whether these definitions mediate the relationships observed in the present study. Further work could also investigate how exposure to global versus local media influences these perceptions.

In conclusion, the present study provides evidence that aspirations toward celebrity and heroism vary across cultural contexts, with particularly elevated levels observed in Afghanistan. These findings suggest that broader sociopolitical and cultural factors play a critical role in shaping how individuals conceptualize and aspire toward public recognition and social impact.

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Author’s Contributions

Jeremy Grabbe: Contributed to development of the research project and data collection and to writer the manuscript.

Amir Mostafa Ahadi: Contributed to development of the research project and data collection and to writer the manuscript.

Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (APA). Ethical approval was obtained from

the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of the State University of New York at Plattsburgh and Kharazmi University of Tehran. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and all procedures complied with institutional and international guidelines for research involving human participants.

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