

Celebrity Worship, Micro-Communities and Consumer Well-Being

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Abstract

Celebrity worship attracts limited attention in the marketing literature (exceptions are O'Guinn 2000; Pimentel and Reynolds 2004). In this study, we examine the case of sustained celebrity worship within an affinity group (Macchiette and Roy 1991) by focusing on the Cliff Richard Fan Club in Sydney, Australia. Our findings support and contradict prior research (e.g., O'Guinn 2000). We extend theory by demonstrating that affinity groups sustain celebrity worship by providing benefits beyond those directly linked to celebrity worship (Jenkins 1992; Kozinets 2001), for example by creating an extended social network that provides positive social stimulation and on-going emotional support.

Keywords

Celebrity worship, fan clubs, consumer well-being

“So you like Cliff Richard? Is he a bible basher? Is he gay? Has he got a girlfriend? Why isn't he married? These are questions you face once you reveal that you are a Cliff Richard fan. You feel like a Christian thrown to the lions. I often wondered, I must be odd, because I'm the only one who likes Cliff. You ask record shops, they answer Cliff who? So can you imagine how I felt when I joined the Australian Fan Club, reading that there were people like me who enjoyed Cliff's music? My first meeting with a Cliff fan was Steve, It took a lot of courage to dial that telephone number, just didn't know what to expect. I was sure I was the only Cliff fan in the world that had all Cliff's records. Receiving Cliff's *Reflections* magazine was like gold dust. The minute I received it, I would spend hours reading it from cover to cover. It is a great magazine, full of Cliff news and the latest information. There was talk about starting a Cliff Club. I wasn't too sure about this. I received a letter from Sharon, who was thinking about meeting with other Cliff fans. We arranged a meeting at Sharon's place at "Cliff House" at Cronulla. We talked about

starting a meeting house, so we can meet other fans who were interested in Cliff, we could play records, watch videos and talk Cliff. So we placed an ad in *Reflections* number 27, our first meeting was at St George Leagues Club to celebrate Cliff's record contract with EMI. We had 7 people attend, it was a great night, and so that was the birth of the Sydney meeting house back in October 1983." (excerpt from *History of the Cliff Richard Fan Club, Sydney*)

The opening quote is worthy of note. Written by the current President of the Sydney Cliff Richard fan club, the words capture well the conflicting emotions typically experienced by consumers who engage in celebrity worship. They fear revealing their obsession to others; inevitably experiencing feelings of embarrassment and stigmatization when they do (Kozinets 2001). Only when socializing with like-minded fans do they feel relaxed and accepted by others when openly pursuing their passion. In these situations, they participate in seemingly endless discussions, finding anything remotely fascinating associated with their celebrity (O'Guinn 2000). Do these behaviors imply that celebrity worshippers are mentally ill? If so, then the world must be stir crazy! Substantial evidence suggests that celebrity worship pervades contemporary societies (Hills 2002). Recent research suggests that at least one in three people engage in celebrity worship (Maltby, Houran and McCutcheon, 2003). Boon and Lomore found that over seventy-five percent of young adults reported a strong attraction to a celebrity (typically musicians or movie stars) at some point in their lives. Significantly, although choice of celebrity tends to vary, celebrity-worship transcends social class (O'Guinn 1991). A quick glance at our most popular magazines adds weight to these observations. Images and stories of celebrities appear on most pages. Their front-covers lure readers with 'fascinating' questions such as: "Is Britney's really marriage over? Are Tom and Nicole back together? Will Calista win her fight with anorexia?"

Despite this situation celebrity worship attracts limited attention in the marketing literature (for exceptions see O'Guinn, 2000; Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004). For a few reasons, the neglect is surprising. First, celebrity worship is arguably a distinctive type of consumer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998) that underpins many highly profitable long-term buyer-seller relationships. Marketing academics and practitioners stand to benefit from better understanding how these relationships impact market activities (Christopher, 2002) such as attending films, watching television shows, and purchasing music CDs and fan memorabilia. Second, researchers are increasingly acknowledging the extent to which consumables (e.g., brands, celebrities) currently provide galvanizing points for the development of brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Use of the Internet results in such groups transcending national and geographical boundaries communities. Consumers report that interacting with like minded others within these types of global networks adds considerable richness to their lives. They link this benefit to meeting many different types of people, often with backgrounds highly distinct from their own. Third, the consumption of other's performances is highly pervasive in everyday life yet remains a poorly understood activity (Deighton 1992).

In our study, we examine the specific case of sustained celebrity worship within a micro-community (Macchiette and Roy, 1991) by focusing on the Cliff Richard Fan Club in Sydney, Australia. During their teenage years, members of this group (numbering approximately eighteen, characteristically aged fifty years plus) typically developed an obsession with Cliff Richard. The obsession continues to this day. Cliff Richard is an ageing English pop' star. His career spans forty-five years. He is the largest selling recording artist in the United Kingdom, outselling the Beatles and Elvis. By examining consumers in this context we aim to assess the capacity of the extant literature to explain this behavior and offer additional insights for theory extension.

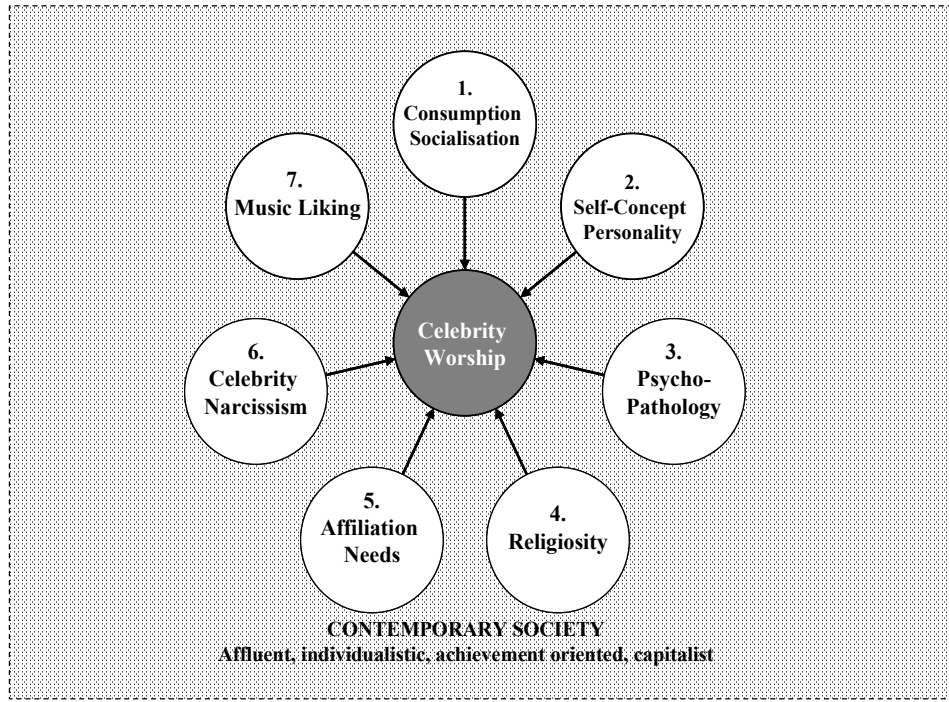
Literature Review

Figure 1 presents a framework for celebrity worship within a micro-community. The framework comprises the following components: 1) consumption socialization, 2) self concept/personality, 3) psychopathology, 4) religiosity, 5) affiliation needs, 6) music liking, and 7) celebrity narcissism. Contemporary societies characterized by affluence, individualism, achievement and capitalist values embed the components.

Consumption Socialization: Researchers link celebrity worship to identity and taste formation during childhood and adolescence (Boon and Lomore, 2001; Hanson and Hanson, 1991). During this time celebrities often act as role models of desired values and modes of conduct (Greene and Adams-Price, 1990). Exposure to celebrities often contributes to life-long preferences in fashion styles and personal appearance (Schindler and Holbrook 1993) and shapes the basis of sexual attraction to the opposite sex (Holbrook and Schindler 1994). Music preferences have similar origins, following an inverted U-shape that peaks in people's early twenties (Holbrook and Schindler 1989). The moments in which these preferences are set are often intensely emotional because they occur during sensitive periods (i.e., turning points) consumers self development (Holbrook and Schindler 1994). For example, many consumers vividly recall the first time they encountered a favorite celebrity while attending a concert, seeing a movie or soliciting an autograph. For some consumers, these moments become nostalgic anchors deeply embedded in their psyches. As a result they yearn for times past, believing that things were better then than now (Holbrook 1993) Holbrook (1993) found that nostalgia proneness varies across individuals, applying particularly to consumers who are arguably romantic and tenderhearted. Celebrity worship during teenage years and continuance of preferences for goods and services (not celebrities) products established during youth are socially acceptable, yet people tend to regard adult fixation on celebrities as aberrant (Hills 2002). The normal life-course pattern is that adolescent fans out-grow the obsession upon transitioning into adulthood. Significantly recent research suggests that teenagers today are not as susceptible to celebrity worship; forty-four percent name a family member as their role model (Perina 2004). The change is attributed to baby boomer parents' need to befriend their children in contrast to their parents' refusal) to teen's insecurity fueled by perceptions of increasingly unstable and dangerous global environment. Hence sustained celebrity worship within outside micro-communities might not be as prevalent in the next generation of middle-aged consumers. This observation suggests that socio-historic effects (i.e., time a place a person lives) influences the likelihood a person engages in celebrity worship.

FIGURE 1

MEWORK OF SUSTAINED CELEBRITY WORSHIP WITHIN A MICRO-COMMUNITY



Self-Concept/Personality: Self-consistency motives (Baumeister, 1998) contribute to explanations of celebrity attraction. Fans tend to be attracted to celebrities endowed with characteristics that they desire for themselves (Caughey 1994). For example Cliff Richard publicly portrays traditional notions of clean, wholesome living, which encompass idealistic romantic notions, and Christian values. A self-consistency account would reveal that Cliff Richard’s fans prize similar values and modes of life. Other self concept/personality explanations focus on an individual’s tendency to fantasize. People are more likely to seek escape or refuge through fantasy if they lack control in core aspects of their lives or who are materially disempowered. Maltby et al. (2001) found that celebrity adoration is accompanied by poor psychological well-being resulting from failed attempts to cope with daily life. Kozinets (2001; p. 71) found that obsessive *Star Trek* adherents are driven by the attraction of “utopian refuge for the alienated and disenfranchised.” Desire for utopian refuge may contribute to celebrity fandom in cases where the celebrity portrays a better, brighter, fairer, world.

Psychopathology: Some researchers view celebrity obsession much more negatively than others. Grossberg (1991) characterizes adult celebrity fans as “typically dumb, unsophisticated, or poorly educated”. McCutcheon et al. (2003) finds that celebrity worshipers tended to exhibit verbal, visual-spatial, cognitive deficits related to flexibility and associative learning. They were likely to score lower on measures of creativity and critical thinking. McCutcheon et al’s argues that higher cognitive functioning people are better able to distinguish between fantasy and reality; hence are less likely to be absorbed in the fantasy of a celebrity. However, these authors acknowledge modest effects sizes, stating these deficits are likely one of many facilitators of

celebrity susceptibility. Duffett (2003) argues that much of the negative stereotyping of celebrity worshippers is a product of the middle class taste biases of academic researchers. Their derision of fans is a defense mechanism that normalizes non-fans. Other researchers suggest that celebrity worship always involves strongly para-social relationships (McCutcheon et al, 2003), that is, one person believes they knows a lot about person B, but person B knows nothing about person A. In these relationships, people experience a high degree of affinity and involvement with a person with whom they had little if any direct contact. Boon and Lomore (2001) elaborate that strong feelings of attraction to the celebrity involve considerable time and money and persistent thoughts related to the celebrity in question. These behaviors fuel growing identification and the perception that an intimacy exists between the fan and the celebrity. If an individual invests time and money over long periods of time this process may lead to intense para-social beliefs, where they believe that they and their idols share a special bond.

Religiosity: In the literature, associations between celebrity-worship and religiosity are common (e.g. Doss 1999; O'Guinn 1991). Research concludes that fans imbue celebrities with god-like powers, regard the celebrity as "everything," and seek to serve and/or suffer for their celebrity (O'Guinn 2002). They treat celebrity-related objects as sacred (O'Guinn 2002). Displays of celebrity memorabilia in fans' homes are comparable to religious shrines. Yet the issue of whether fandom is an act of adoration or an act of worship is hotly debated. Maltby et al. (2002) finds that many celebrity fans practice mainstream religions. Duffett (2003) argues such observations are superfluous as fans don't make god-like claims about their favorite celebrities.

Affiliation Needs: Jenkins (1992) argued that we should emphasize the active positive benefits when fans create social networks around favorite celebrities. Formal and informal groups often develop around common interest, often resulting in long-term friendship. O'Guinn (1991) found that fan clubs act like a surrogate family for many members and that the personal relationships that developed often became amongst the most important in their lives. However, since the benefits stemming from friendship and social support hold universal appeal, this alone is not a sufficient explanation for celebrity attraction.

Music Liking: Music is often liked because of its positive mood altering capacity. Music can lift one's spirits and lighten emotional flatness (Holbrook and Schindler, 1989). If music makes us feel better then this should also reflect positively on our evaluation of the performer. Consistent with balance theory (Heider 1958), this is likely to strengthen liking for the celebrity when there is a long term association with their music.

Celebrity Narcissism: A celebrities need for adoration fuels celebrity worship (Fuller, 1996); the more so if they are excessively narcissistic. The celebrity-fan relationship takes on a symbiotic character where both fans and celebrity develop a strong need for each other. Each party becomes "prisoners" of their expectations of each other. This is particularly interesting in the case of Cliff Richard whose success was seeded in the 1950's when he swept up a generation of teenage fans. Since then he appears to have carefully catered for and adapted to this loyal fan base. In this case celebrity and fans play their respective roles in a scripted manner that both rigorously adhere to. There are no surprises or exceptions. Cliff Richard exhibits a stunning constancy in music, style and broader values. In this case continued delivery of what the fans desire helps to maintain the relationship.

Methods

Research site: Was the Cliff Richard Fan Club in Sydney. As noted above the club was formed in 1983 and many of the original members remain active. The bulk of the group has been in the club for over fifteen years. All but one is aged 50 or over. Only two of the eighteen are male. Typical socioeconomic status could be classified as lower middle class.

Data collection: Every six weeks, over a period of eight months, we attended meetings in fan club members' homes. During these meetings we acquainted ourselves closely with its eighteen members. We met and conversed with members' families. We initially interviewed them in a group. Then we conducted individual or couple interviews after meetings or outside of club meeting times in their homes. We interviewed many members more than once. We videotaped all interviews, club meetings and the interiors of their homes. We collected a large body of photographic history about the fan club, the individual members, and about Cliff Richard himself. We listened to the music and watched numerous video clips of Cliff's concerts. We examined extensive newspaper scrapbooks going back to the 1950's which are maintained by club members. We reviewed a large variety of Cliff Richard memorabilia and read several books about Cliff's life.

Analysis: The objective of research approach was to immerse ourselves in the setting and gain depth of understanding. An interpretative analytic approach was employed developed in an iterative manner individually and through discussion between the two researchers and also periodic focus back into the literature. Initially a 40 minute video-ethnography piece was developed to summarize the findings.

Findings

The findings ostensibly follow the framework appearing in Figure 1.

1. Consumption Socialization: Virtually all the club members first encountered Cliff Richard in their teenage years. This contact was highly memorable. Vivid descriptions recalling these events indicate these were defining moments in their lives. Delving back into this period—1960's—we found that Cliff Richard was a phenomenon comparable to the Beatles. Widespread fan hysteria surrounded Cliff. He had a series of musical recording that topped the charts and he starred in a number of hit movies (e.g. Summer Holiday, The Young Ones). Experiencing these events left a deep impression on each of our informants. These impressions were more than just about the music, but were a product of all the socio-cultural and life stage issues of teenage life and transition from childhood. One female informant put it thus: "Cliff was my first introduction to music and all the things that go with it ... the party gatherings, the boys, and all the adolescent stuff." Another informant explained that she remembered falling in love with her husband while listening to one of Cliff's hit songs at a restaurant.

2. Self-Concept/Personality: Our informants displayed a very traditional value set. Their personal values and preferred lifestyles closely aped Cliff Richard's. Most of the informants were practicing Christians. Hence Cliff's appeal is strongly rooted in his openly professed his Christianity. "We definitely admire him, a Christian man, not afraid to admit this. I revered him from afar, but when I met him he became just like my next door neighbor. I respect him for his Christian beliefs; he cares for people in third world countries and just has a heart of

compassion.” Part of their admiration is that in the 1980’s Cliff publicly professed his Christianity. This was commercially risky for rock musician but alienated only a small portion of his audience at the time. A male informant admired that Cliff because “he speaks up for the things that he believes in and admires his courage, his honesty, straightforwardness, genuineness, and the fact that he does not follow along with the mainstream, like a lamb.” Terms like “clean” and “wholesome” are commonly used to describe Cliff Richard. His music, video clips and entire public presentation are imbued with the traditional romantic fantasy of the “boy next door”, “clean shaven” appearance, and “white picket fence” family values. These are the same aspirational values expressed by our informants. Hence, value congruency is found to be an important aspect behind Cliff’s appeal.

3. Psycho-pathology: Despite never personally meeting Cliff many of our informants appeared to exhibit close identification of a para-social nature. For example, one female informant said, “You feel you know him. He’s a bit like an extension of your family. When we went to the airport to see Cliff arrive I took my young son. He ran up under everyone’s legs right up to Cliff and asked him for a kiss and a cuddle. He just sees him as an extension of our family, because Cliff is always present in our home.” This case illustrates the close, familiar, and omni-present manner of Cliff in fan’s lives Another informant when asked the question: “What if you didn’t have Cliff in your life”, looked absolutely shocked and replied, “I’d be devastated. Our lives would be poorer. We have so many memories. He’s part of our life and he’s part of us.” The centrality of Cliff in their lives is further illustrated by the informant who has actually picked the three Cliff songs that she wants her family to play at her funeral.

Other aspects of the celebrity-fan relationship are significant. Informants’ descriptions of their Cliff Richard attachments resemble Fournier’s (1998) dependencies i.e., obsessive, highly emotional, selfish attractions cemented by the feeling that the other is irreplaceable with high tolerance of the other’s transgressions. For example: informants forgive Cliff many of his faults including his widely acknowledged questionable dress-sense: “Over the years, he’s worn some dreadful outfits. Maybe he has no say in what wears? Somebody said he’s color blind.” Excessive selfishness is tempered by the fan club’s acquiescence to a social norm; i.e., respecting the celebrity’s privacy: “We try to stay in the same hotel as Cliff, but we’d never follow him for an autograph. Others might, but fan club members know not to cross the line.”

Many other activities underpin the celebrity-fan relationship. Our informants invest considerable time, energy and money actively pursuing their passion. For example, one pair of ladies traveled to England during our fieldwork period in which they attended eight consecutive Cliff Richard concerts at the Royal Albert Hall, in London. Every time Cliff tours Australia and New Zealand the club members typically follow the concerts across the six main cities in the region; “We go to every concert in Australia and spend every cent that we have, and blow the credit cards out. We try to stay in the same hotel as him.” Most of them are quite circumspect about the degree to which they follow Cliff around. However, the variety of instances where they encountered Cliff indicates they go to extraordinary trouble to either physically get close to him or to actually meet him. For example, video taping him sun baking by the hotel pool; multiple “chance” meetings on aircraft flights; going out of their way to visit his country home in England: “We made a hell of a noise trampling on pebbles of his driveway, the gardener asked us to leave.” Waiting for him at airports and at the entrance to hotels he is staying at; or seeking out where he is playing tennis. All of the above activities take time and effort. Another significant area where effort is invested lies in the avid collecting of music and memorabilia. Over his forty year career Cliff Richard has released several hundred recordings. Some of the club members have collected virtually every one of them. Substantial collection of memorabilia was found in every one of the homes that we visited. This ranged across Cliff Richard cups, plates, calendars, dolls, clocks, posters, pens,

books, and videos, through to pebbles that had been taken from his driveway and leaves plucked from his holly bush. Many retained all the tickets and programs from the concerts they had attended. In addition, “a lot of the girls have a Cliff room a whole room devoted to Cliff. Some wallpaper their bedrooms.” We observed many of these rooms that were completely decorated and filled with memorabilia. O’Guinn (1991) described similar phenomena in American fans clubs, likening these rooms to shrines of religious devotion

Despite these observations our informants our informants appeared as “normal” people with a strong grip on reality. Most hold responsible jobs in the community (e.g. nurses, school teachers); have family, children and other recreational interests. When asked what marks them as a Cliff Richard fan, the general response was that there was nothing distinctive about them, “we are just normal everyday people” who happened to have a quirky interest. They saw themselves as people having a bit of fun. However they well understood why others might think them strange. One informant joked: “My daughter is psychologist. She is always teasing me. Telling me I should hand out her cards at fan club meetings.” The Cliff Richard passion is certainly a source of temporary escape or diversion from the stresses of everyday life. The group related the following story at one of the meetings where they had all waited late at night after a concert at the entrance to Cliff’s hotel. When he finally arrived he turned to them and asked “haven’t you got homes to go to?” Initially they were a little offended by this treatment. However, one of them rationalized: “We thought he must be terribly tired. Look you accept this from Cliff because fantasy is better than reality. If your husband came home leaving his dirty socks around and treated you like that, you wouldn’t tolerate it. But with Cliff, well he’s not there every day. It’s just a diversion for us.”

4. Religiosity: All our informants identify as devout Christians. Cliff Richard is openly Christian; hence informants’ self-reports as previously raised suggest a consumer-brand relationship based on shared values. Most view Cliff as human rather than god-like. One informant reports meeting him: “He came down off the pedestal; he was just like the man next door.” Yet one informant reports Cliff’s music as helping her overcome a serious illness and another states: “It’s something about his music; it just lifts you up. Most people will tell you that.” Some informants indicated that Cliff’s existence was critical to their well being, while simultaneously stressing the importance of the fan club: “I’d be devastated if he wasn’t in my life ... and I’d never have met all these friends.” Others see Cliff as a pleasant addition to their lives: “He isn’t everything. If he wasn’t there; I’d do something else.” Informants did place great importance on conserving Cliff memorabilia. For example: frequently suggest this behavior. For example an informant explained that when faced by the prospect of bush-fire, she chose to protect a photo of her son and Cliff rather than other possessions.

5. Affiliation Needs: The opening excerpt of this paper describes the lack of fulfillment in not being able to interact with other fans and feeling as though there no one out there with similar interests—“it’s lonely.” Informants described strong motivations to find like-minded fans to share their passion. One informant described the exhilaration of her first fan club meeting, “knowing that you were able to share with like minds. It was so great to have people to talk to about Cliff. I felt so welcome and it was nice to talk about someone that you so admire.” Informants described years of being a fan where they had no regular contact with other fans. Most of them went to considerable trouble to find the fan club and expressed discernable relief when they succeeded. The motivation appears to be more than just the need to interact, but extended into desire for self-validation. The club gives them the sense that they are not aberrant; that they are not weird.

One of the most powerful mechanisms that maintain these fans' interests in Cliff are the strong, enduring friendships that have developed within the group. When interviewing two women their immediate response to the question: "What if Cliff did not exist?" was "Well we would not have met." As one informant describes many of these friendships go back over twenty years: "W have made so many really good friends, and over the years we have shared births, deaths, marriages, children growing up, and so many experiences. We have just sprouted these wonderful friendships world wide." Another informant asserts "it's (the club) like an extension to your family." Instances of mutual support stemming from this community were manifold. For example, one informant described how "for five years I was a single mother and it was really hard, but there was so much love from all these people. It was a huge support for me."

6. Celebrity Narcissism: Despite liking Cliff, informants readily agreed that Cliff was vain and self-assured. One stated: "Oh he loves himself. He has no doubt about his own talents," or "He always tells us that [because we like him] we have good taste in men." Another informant pointed his obsession with his appearance: "He always watches what he eats. He is always on a diet. He eats breakfast, never lunch and very little for dinner." Photographs over the years suggest the occurrence of Cliff's frequent and major cosmetic surgery. Newspaper clips proclaim him as "The Peter Pan of pop'." At sixty-four years of age, he has not a single grey hair maintaining a deep brown hair color. Cliff, himself, infers his excessive dependency on his fans adoration and narcissistic streak when he states in a 1960's film clip: "My fans are everything to me. I will do anything to make them happy." At one stage during his career Cliff adopted a hip funky more contemporary style in his appearance and the music he performed. When his fans indicated their dislike for this change of events, Cliff returned to his original image and music format.

7. Music Liking: Informants spoke of the ability of Cliff's music to lift their spirits. Playing his music is a common coping strategy in response to depressed mood. For example, one informant spoke of "feeling blue" the previous day and staying home all day in bed playing Cliff's music to cheer them up. Another stated: "When you are down you can put on a Cliff record and it really lifts you up." Beneficial musical effects were felt in more dire circumstances, "two years back I was having panic attacks and I was put into a health farm. I didn't realize the effects that Cliff's music would have on me. My husband brought along some Cliff music and it really was great comfort to me. It helped get me going again." Informants are clearly cognizant of the emotional benefits which could be said to have addictive qualities, "you are always anxious when a new Cliff record is about to come out. I can't wait to get it and hear it. It feeds you soul."

Discussion

Our study is exploratory rather than confirmatory. We do not identify which factors carry greater weight with respect to sustained celebrity worship with micro-communities. However our findings validate the importance of a range factors derived from the extant literature and enrich our understanding of them. Contrary to literature our informants appear psychological well-balanced. They readily distinguished fantasy from reality. They understand that Cliff enacts dramatic (Deighton 1992) (rather than naturalistic) performances. Informants' self-reports suggest high emotional intelligence and capacity for mature, honest and respectful relationships across many social spheres outside of the fan club. Strong contributing mechanisms to their fandom include intense and highly salient emotional experiences surrounding their first introduction to Cliff Richard in their teenage years; the inculcation of preference for Cliff's musical genre; the value-congruency that drive admiration for the celebrity; together with the social support and strong friendship bonds that have developed as a byproduct that now acts to

reinforce fan behaviors. A factor not mentioned in the literature, is the sexual attraction that many informants feel for celebrities such as Cliff. For example female fans often state: “He’s really yummy”, “He wiggles his bum really well. He’s very appealing in every way”, and “We just love to watch him. He could sit on stage eating his dinner and we’d pay to watch.” We are less adamant than the literature with respect to the religious metaphor. While our informants hold great admiration for Cliff Richard, their behavior could not be described as religious devotion. They see Cliff as “human.” They were not entirely uncritical of him. These fans appeared reasonably objective because they regard Cliff Richard as just one of the many factors that make their lives complete and satisfying.

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