**The Celebrity Influence: Do We Really Care What They Think?**

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Celebrity opinions and endorsements of political candidates, issues and office holders have now become commonplace in the media before and between elections. Many actors and comedians, athletes and talk show hosts share their opinions with society in an attempt to influence the opinions of those who listen to them. Oftentimes these celebrities use their influence to persuade citizens to vote a certain way or advocate for certain issues such as reproductive freedom, environmental protection and human rights. This paper examines young adults’ perceptions about celebrities’ political opinions and endorsements.The research finds that young adults are more likely to listen to individuals other than celebrities for their own political information. However, they do believe that celebrities have an effect on the way people think. The paper also finds that the gender and ethnicity of the respondents affects their attitudes regarding celebrity endorsements.

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“Well the truth of the matter is, whether I contribute or not contribute, you are limited to how much you contribute, so my money isn’t going to make any difference to him,” Ms. Winfrey said. “I think that my value to him, my support of him, is probably worth more than any check.” (Zeleny, 2007)

The above quote exemplifies celebrities’ attitudes regarding the influence of their political endorsements. In 2008, Oprah Winfrey’s endorsement of Barack Obama for president affected the choices that many people made when they voted that year. Although she was far more private in her support for Obama in 2012, it was still understood that Winfrey supported the president in his reelection bid. Ranking number 11 on Forbes Magazine’s The World’s 100 Most Powerful Women list identifies Winfrey as a force to be reckoned with. Her support, whether public or private, is something that political candidates like Barack Obama desire.

In addition to Oprah’s candidate endorsements, her advocacy for children’s rights is also well known. It is believed that endorsements by Winfrey and other celebrities are an effective way of making people aware of the issues and situations throughout the world. From Michael J. Fox’s advocacy for stem cell research to George Clooney’s campaign addressing the crisis in Darfur, celebrities use their notoriety to get the attention of policy-makers and the public.

Research on the influence of celebrity endorsements typically focuses on young adults’ reactions. The effect of celebrity notoriety is assumed to be especially influential when it comes to informing young adults about what they should care about and the choices that they should make. Perhaps this assumption is due to findings emphasizing the importance of the media in politically socializing young people (Chaffee and Kanihan 1997) and the argument that there is a significant connection between the lives of young people and the celebrity culture (Turner 2004; Inthorn & Street 2011). This may explain why research focuses on this age group. Or it could be based on the convenience of having classrooms of young college students to survey. Whatever the reason, studies single out young adults as a group to analyze their responses to the endorsements and opinions of celebrities. Therefore, as this research develops the question becomes, do young adults listen to and trust the information they get from celebrities?

To address this question, this paper utilizes a questionnaire to gather information about young adults’ perceptions of celebrity endorsements in regards to the political process. Responses to the questions are analyzed and conclusions are drawn. The paper begins with a review of the literature that provides a foundation for an analysis of the impact of celebrity endorsements. Following the review, the current study is explained and its results are given. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Celebrity opinions and endorsements of political candidates, issues and office holders have now become commonplace in the media before and between elections. Many actors and comedians, athletes and talk show hosts share their opinions with society in an attempt to influence the opinions of those who listen to them. Oftentimes these celebrities use their influence to persuade citizens to vote a certain way or advocate for certain issues such as reproductive freedom, environmental protection and human rights.

As we examine the influence of these celebrity opinions and endorsements, the research on celebrity endorsements in advertising seems like a good place to start. The advertising scholarship is well-developed and has addressed the effect of celebrity product endorsements on the opinions and intentions of consumers. According to these studies, celebrities catch and hold the attention of consumers (Premeaux 2005; Premeaux 2009; Biswas et. al. 2009). They have a positive effect on how consumers perceive the product because the consumers are more likely to relate to the celebrity (Byrne et. al. 2003) and believe the information presented by the celebrity (Kamins et. al. 1989). However, some suggest that the celebrity endorser must be perceived to have some expertise about the product to influence consumers (Erdogan 1999; Amos et. al. 2008). Furthermore, celebrities improve the recall of the message they convey (Friedman & Friedman 1979). In the end, the endorsements of celebrities appear to improve the likelihood that consumers will choose the endorsed product (Kahle and Homer 1985; Kamins et. al. 1989; Heath et. al. 1994).

Although this research focuses on the marketing of products, it provides a foundation for the analysis of the effect of celebrity political endorsements. This is especially important since the literature on the influence of celebrity political opinions and endorsements is limited (Jackson 2007). As we look at what has been done on the effect of celebrity political endorsements, we find research that focuses on celebrity influence on youth voting (Wood and Herbst 2007; Austin et. al. 2008). According to these studies, we can argue that celebrities have a mixed impact on motivating young people’s voting behavior. Celebrities can motivate young people to become informed and participate (Austin et. al. 2008) but they are not as influential on the voting behavior of first time voters as other individuals may be. According to Wood and Herbst, family members and significant others are more likely to influence first time voters than celebrities are (2007).

Further research examines the effect of celebrity political beliefs and endorsements on the political attitudes of young people (Jackson and Darrow 2005; Jackson 2007) by using a quasi-experimental approach to gauge the impact of celebrity endorsements on college students. Jackson and Darrow’s quasi-experimental study of Canadian college students found that the endorsements of celebrities reinforce some of the political opinions that young people have and make unpopular statements more acceptable (2005). In Jackson’s study of college students in the U.S., he concludes that celebrities have a positive effect on young people’s attitudes; the likelihood that they will agree with a position increases if a celebrity endorses it. However, he warns that the celebrity must be credible with their endorsement (2007).

In addition, we find research that uses an experimental method to determine the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements on the presidential candidate choices of college students. Usry and Cobb (2010) utilized an initial pretest to define the meaning of the term “celebrity” and measure the traits of the celebrities specifically chosen for the study. The authors then used two experiments to measure the impact of endorsements made by the chosen celebrities. Both experiments found that celebrity endorsements are not beneficial for candidates. In fact, at times, the endorsements hurt the candidates.

Although the use of the quasi-experimental design to analyze the impact of celebrity endorsements allows the researcher to focus the respondents’ attention on specific celebrities, it does not allow respondents to suggest who they believe is a celebrity. In both studies (Jackson and Darrow 2005; Jackson 2007), the authors specified three chosen celebrities and analyzed students’ responses to statements made by the three celebrities. Thus, the authors determined who was a celebrity, not the respondents.

A similar complaint can be made regarding the use of the experimental design in the Usry and Cobb research. Although the authors begin with twenty-two celebrities to evaluate, the list is narrowed down to analyzing the candidate endorsements of only four celebrities during the two experiments (two per experiment). Again, the results may be affected by the four celebrities that were chosen; the endorsements of other celebrities on the initial list may have been more influential and beneficial for the candidates.

Instead of analyzing the potential influence that celebrities have on young people’s political beliefs and behavior, Jennifer Brubaker took a different approach to studying the relationship. She employed third-person effects theory to determine if respondents were influenced by celebrities’ endorsements during the 2004 and 2008 Presidential elections. Utilizing the results from surveys administered to college students, Brubaker found that people were more likely to expect a greater celebrity influence on others than on themselves (2011). The fact that the author did not find first-person effects—where individuals perceive an effect on themselves—supports the findings of Usry and Cobb (2010) and Wood and Herbst (2007).

Focusing more on the reasons why citizens respond the way they do to celebrity politics, Inthorn and Street (2011) use thirteen focus groups and twenty-six in-depth interviews to tap into the opinions of young people in the UK. They caution, like other scholars (Jackson and Darrow 2005), that all celebrities are not equal. Some celebrities are more credible and respected than others and this must be considered when analyzing the influence of celebrities on people’s opinions and decisions. However, their homogeneous sample of white, middle-class young people and their limited use of focus groups and interviews does not lend itself to generalizing that all young people in the UK would respond the same way.

This research provides a broad picture of what scholars are attempting to identify: the potential impact on young adults of what celebrities say regarding political behavior, issues and candidates. Building on this research, this study examines the responses to questionnaires from college students at California State University, Fullerton. By analyzing the students’ responses, this research addresses the following questions. Do young people trust the political advice of celebrities? Are celebrities viewed as more knowledgeable about politics than the average person? Do celebrities draw attention to political candidates and issues?Also, are citizens more likely to listen to celebrities than other people about political issues?

The Current Study

As mentioned above, the purpose of this study is to determine if young, college-aged adults listen to celebrity endorsements of political candidates and issues, and how they perceive celebrities’ roles in drawing attention to politics. A celebrity is usually defined as a “famous person”. However, this study is more specific in its definition to avoid ambiguity. For this paper the definition of a celebrity is a person who is known as an actor, actress, comedian, singer, musician, talk show host or athlete.

This study employs a questionnaire that was administered in fourteen lower-division American Politics classes during the fall 2011, spring 2012, summer 2012, and fall 2012 semesters. These classes were chosen due to the requirement that all students who graduate from a California State University must complete the general education American Institutions course requirement which this class fulfills. By choosing this class, it is also highly unlikely that the students would have the opportunity to complete the questionnaire more than once.

In addition, by utilizing these fourteen classes, data was gathered from a diverse group of students including all grade levels (entry-level to senior-level) and a variety of university majors. Of these majors, 21% were from the Humanities and Social Sciences, 19% were in the College of Business and Economics, 17% were from the Health and Human Development College and 12% were in the College of Communications; the remainder of the majors were either undeclared (8%) or in the colleges of Natural Science and Math (9%), Engineering/Computer Science (7%) or Arts (7%). Furthermore, the sample of 1,629 students[[1]](#footnote-1) represented the ethnic diversity of the university with 31 % Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, 31% White/Anglo/Caucasian, 25% Asian or Pacific Islander, and the remainder either Black/ African American (3%) or other (10%). This diversity may provide different results from previous findings due to the lack of ethnic diversity in the other studies (Usry & Cobb 2010; Inthorn & Street 2011). The sample also represented the students’ political diversity with 37% of the students identifying themselves as Democrats, 22% identifying with the Republican Party, 22% identifying themselves as Independents and the remainder classified as other. Finally, there were more female students than male students in the sample with 59% female and 41% male respondents. The questionnaire included questions on sources of political information, attitudes regarding celebrities’ endorsements, attitudes about political relevance of celebrities and demographic information about the respondents.

The diversity of this sample provides the opportunity to examine attitudinal differences about celebrities that may be due to the gender or ethnicity of the respondents. By utilizing the advertising literature, there are justifications for expecting these types of differences. Findings that consider the effect of respondent gender on attitudes are mixed. Certain studies contend that women are more likely to be influenced by celebrities than men are (Bush et. al. 2004; Premeaux 2005; Premeaux 2009). However, others argue that women are less likely to be influenced by celebrity endorsements than men (Bashford 2001), or that there is no difference between women’s and men’s attitudes about celebrities (Dix et. al. 2010).

When considering the effect of respondent ethnicity, the research is limited. There is research that compares responses to advertisements among different ethnic groups (Appiah 2001; Whittler & Spira 2002). In addition, a few studies address the effectiveness of using African American celebrities to endorse products for African American consumers (Alleyne 2002), Latino celebrities to attract the attention of Latino consumers (Khermouch 1999; Wentz 2002) or analyzing advertising practices that target Asian Americans (Morimoto & La Ferle 2005). Despite the limited amount of research, the importance of considering the ethnicity of consumers in advertising strategies is stressed in all of these and can justify the expectation that ethnicity may influence attitudes about celebrities.

Results

In analyzing the individual or individuals that young people trust the most when it comes to endorsements of political candidates and issues, the data show that the respondents are more likely to trust a politician, interest group, family member or friend than a celebrity for relevant information. In fact, trust in a celebrity for political information was minimal. When taking into consideration the gender of the respondent, the results were barely statistically significant at the .10 level. Table 1 shows that women are more likely to trust a politician or an interest group for their political information than men are. In addition, the ethnicity of the respondent seems to have an effect. As noted in Table 2, Black or African-American and White/Anglo/Caucasian respondents were more likely to trust family and friends for political information. Asian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic/Latino/Chicano respondents were more likely to trust politicians or interest groups for the information they receive about political candidates and issues. These results are statistically significant at the .01 level.

Table 1: Relationship Between Gender and Trust of Endorsement by Source.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Politician/ Interest Group | Family and Friends | Celebrity | Other | Total |
| Male | 32.76% | 41.59% | 1.39% | 24.27% | 100% |
| Female | 37.41% | 42.21% | 1.80% | 18.58% | 100% |

Pearson chi2 (4) = 8.2317.   
Pr=0.083  
n= 1,411

Table 2: Relationship Between Ethnicity and Trust of Endorsement by Source.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Politician/  Interest Group | Family and Friends | Celebrity | Other | Total |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 42.66% | 31.64% | 0.85% | 24.85% | 100% |
| Black or African-American | 24.44% | 51.11% | 4.44% | 20.00% | 100% |
| Hispanic/Latino/Chicano | 42.12% | 36.24% | 1.41% | 20.23% | 100% |
| White/Anglo/Caucasian | 28.73% | 53.85% | 1.36% | 16.06% | 100% |
| Other | 24.05% | 49.37% | 1.27% | 25.31% | 100% |

Pearson chi2 (20) = 84.2465.   
Pr=0.000  
n= 1,401

When respondents were asked about their perception of how informed celebrities are about politics in comparison to the average citizen, a majority declared that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that celebrities are more politically informed than average citizens. As we consider the gender of the respondents we find that women are more likely to disagree with the statement than men are (see Table 3).

Table 3: Relationship Between Gender and Celebrities Being More Informed About Politics than Citizens.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
| Male | 18.61% | 28.26% | 36.89% | 13.37% | 2.88% | 100% |
| Female | 12.56% | 40.93% | 36.40% | 9.65% | 0.47% | 100% |

Pearson chi2 (4) = 42.7030.  
Pr=0.000  
n= 1,451

Furthermore, focusing on the ethnicity of the respondents we find that White/Anglo/Caucasian respondents are more likely to have an opinion than any other ethnic group and that opinion is that they disagree or strongly disagree with the statement (see Table 4). The results for both of these are statistically significant at the .01 level.

Table 4: Relationship Between Ethnicity and Celebrities Being More Informed About Politics than Citizens.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 8.31% | 32.96% | 42.94% | 14.68% | 1.11% | 100% |
| Black or African-American | 20.45% | 29.55% | 38.64% | 4.55% | 6.82% | 100% |
| Hispanic/Latino/Chicano | 13.81% | 35.19% | 38.31% | 11.58% | 1.11% | 100% |
| White/Anglo/Caucasian | 18.49% | 40.31% | 30.73% | 9.35% | 1.11% | 100% |
| Other | 25.93% | 33.33% | 32.11% | 7.41% | 1.23% | 100% |

Pearson chi2 (20) = 54.9659.   
Pr=0.000  
n= 1,441

With the statement that celebrities draw attention to a political issue or candidate we find that most respondents agreed with the statement. When the results were broken down by respondent gender, they lacked statistical significance. However, when considering the ethnicity of the respondents, the results were statistically significant at the .10 level. Here (see Table 5) we find that while all ethnic groups agree or strongly agree with the statement, Asian/Pacific Islander respondents are more likely to be neutral than any of the others.

Table 5: Relationship Between Ethnicity and Celebrities Drawing Attention to a Political Issue or Candidate.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 1.12% | 3.07% | 20.67% | 57.54% | 17.60% | 100% |
| Black or African-American | 0.00% | 2.27% | 13.64% | 61.36% | 22.73% | 100% |
| Hispanic/Latino/Chicano | 0.67% | 2.90% | 13.81% | 57.91% | 24.72% | 100% |
| White/Anglo/Caucasian | 0.67% | 1.78% | 10.89% | 57.33% | 29.33% | 100% |
| Other | 0.00% | 2.47% | 14.81% | 56.79% | 25.93% | 100% |

Pearson chi2 (20) = 30.2910.   
Pr=0.065  
n= 1,439

Finally, respondents were asked about their attitudes regarding who citizens are more likely to listen to for information on political issues. In the statement suggesting that citizens are more likely to listen to celebrities than politicians for this information, a majority of the respondents agreed with the statement. When considering the gender of the respondents, males were more likely to agree and strongly agree with the statement than females were (see Table 6). Again, these results were statistically significant at the .01 level. However, the ethnicity of the respondents seemed to have no effect on the results.

Table 6: Relationship Between Gender and Citizens More Likely to Listen to Celebrities than Politicians about Political Issues.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
| Male | 1.69% | 7.46% | 14.58% | 55.76% | 20.51% | 100% |
| Female | 1.16% | 9.88% | 20.58% | 53.95% | 14.42% | 100% |

Pearson chi2 (4) = 17.8809.   
Pr=0.001  
n= 1,450

Modifying the statement to suggest that citizens are more likely to listen to celebrities than academics, experts and scientists about political issues showed less agreement than with the previous statement. However, there was still a significant percentage of the respondents who agreed that people are more likely to listen to what celebrities have to say about political issues. When considering if males and females respond similarly to this statement, Table 7 shows us that, as before, males are more likely to agree and strongly agree with the statement. These results are statistically significant at the .01 level. Once again, ethnicity did not have a significant influence.

Table 7: Relationship Between Gender and Citizens More Likely to Listen to Celebrities than Academics/Experts/Scientists about Political Issues.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
| Male | 5.25% | 19.15% | 19.32% | 41.36% | 14.92% | 100% |
| Female | 4.42% | 24.30% | 24.07% | 36.86% | 10.35% | 100% |

Pearson chi2 (4) = 16.0610.   
Pr=0.003  
n= 1,450

Conclusion

As we can see from these results, young adults are less likely to trust the celebrity endorsement of a candidate or issue, and are more likely to trust the endorsement of someone active in politics, such as a politician or interest group, or someone they know like their family or friends. It appears that they believe that celebrities are not any more informed on politics than the average citizen and this influences their perception of who to trust for important political information.

However, from these results we see that young adults perceive celebrities to be influential as far as drawing attention to a political issue or candidate. They also believe that average citizens are more likely to listen to a celebrity than a politician, academic, expert or scientist. It appears that young adults believe that celebrities are good at getting the public’s attention, but they personally do not trust the celebrity endorsement of a candidate or specific issue.

In addition, we find gender differences as far as who respondents trust for political information, their perception of how politically informed celebrities are, and how much citizens listen to celebrities when it comes to political issues. We also find differences in attitudes based on the ethnicity of the respondents. These differences include who young adults trust for political endorsements, who they believe is more politically informed, and how much influence they perceive celebrities have in drawing attention to political issues and candidates.

From these results we can gather that using celebrities to convey messages to the public is successful because the celebrities draw attention to the message, and people are more likely to listen to them than to others even though the others may have more expertise. However, it appears that young adults do not personally trust the endorsements of celebrities. They are more likely to listen to someone they know and trust or someone they think is more informed.

This study provides evidence supporting Jennifer Brubaker’s contention that celebrity endorsements have third-person effects on college students. The study also supports the findings of Natalie Wood and Kenneth Herbst that at least some young adults, the first time voters, are more likely to listen to people they personally know rather than to celebrities for political endorsements. Finally, the conclusions presented by Kaye Usry and Michael D. Cobb that endorsements by celebrities do not affect young adults’ evaluations of political candidates and do not influence how they vote is also supported by this research.

However, the results found here may differ as election campaigns take place. With the increased campaign coverage in the media that comes in the months before Election Day, voters may turn to the media and those celebrities supporting candidates for information to make their choices. Therefore, one future project for this research is to compare the college students’ perceptions of celebrity endorsements during the individual semesters when the questionnaires were completed. It is possible that the results may differ due to an increase in student interest as the general election comes closer and the students hear more about the political campaigns.

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1. Sample sizes of responses to the questions differ due to missing data or multiple answers circled by respondents. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)