



TOM DALEY WAS THE MOST TALKED ABOUT OLYMPIAN AND **EMMA WATSON** WAS CONSIDERED HARD-WORKING

saw as hard-working, 'real' and not money-driven, such as actors Emma Watson, and Olympian Tom Daley. But celebrities like singers Nicki Minaj and Justin Bieber were often described as 'famous for nothing' and 'fake'. The researchers say that how young people talk about celebrities should not be taken at face value, and that their talk about celebrities serves important social functions at a time when politicians talk about meritocracy, in a climate of austerity and growing inequality.

Academic Michael Billig has argued that when ordinary people talk about elites, like royalty and celebrity, they are also talking about themselves. When they compare themselves to the more privileged, it is often their own lives that end up looking better.

CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS

The young people were often critical of celebrity culture, dismissing footballers' 'ridiculous' salaries and debating the value of modelling, reality TV stardom, or being in a boy band. While some were envious of celebrities' jobs or wealth, many criticised those they felt hadn't worked hard and didn't deserve their fame, comparing this to their own experiences and their past and possible future struggles. For example, a 16-year-old young man compared his life to Justin Bieber's: "At the end of the day, when I leave school I've got to go out looking for a job. He can just sing a couple of songs, and there we go."

They also talked about the pressures celebrities faced, comparing this to the anonymity of ordinary life – a 14-year-old initially talked about liking the idea of being rich and famous, but also felt that this would have drawbacks: "People wish they were rich, like Eminem... ...[but] you wouldn't be able to go McDonald's without being harassed by loads of fans."

Many of the students were taking exams, and facing university fees and rising youth unemployment. The researchers show that their judgements about celebrities' lives create a framework for understanding the world around them, including these inequalities, and reflect dominant contemporary values like hard work. The stories show what kinds of aspirations and futures are seen as desirable and achievable in our society.

Young people are already having critical conversations about celebrities. The researchers believe that rather than dismissing celebrity culture, educators can engage with these cultural stories to talk with young people about their education and career futures. ■

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THE TOP 12

Case studies were conducted on 12 of the celebrities that were discussed regularly in initial group interviews.

Who they were

The top men: **Tom Daley** (Olympian), **Justin Bieber** (singer, right), **Will Smith** (film star), **Bill Gates** (entrepreneur), **Mario Balotelli** (footballer) and **Prince Harry**.



The top women:

Katie Price (ex-glamour model), **Kim Kardashian** (reality TV star), **Nicki Minaj** (singer), **Emma Watson** (actress), **Kate Middleton** (princess, right) and **Beyonce** (singer).



What was said

▶ Singers Justin Bieber and Nicki Minaj attracted the most negative comments, while Beyonce was considered a role model.

▶ Katie Price was attacked, but defended by some for her role as a mother. Bill Gates was much discussed in relation to his philanthropy, and how stars use money.

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CELEBRITY ASPIRATION

Are young people obsessed with finding easy fame or are their expectations much more realistic?

DEBATES ABOUT THE impact of celebrity often dismiss young people as 'The *X Factor* generation', who want to get-rich-quick through reality TV. But the ESRC-funded CelebYouth research by Dr Heather Mendick and Dr Laura Harvey at Brunel University, and Dr Kim Allen at Manchester Metropolitan University, challenges this. It shows that few young people aspire to easy fame; their talk about celebrity actually serves a social function. By comparing their lives with those of the rich and famous they are making sense of the massive inequalities between them, replacing envy with pleasure in being 'ordinary'.

Last year, the researchers spoke to young people aged 14-17 in schools across England about their views on 'celebrity culture'. Most valued celebrities who they