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Fame and the social self: The need to belong, narcissism, and relatedness predict the appeal of fame

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ABSTRACT

The present online survey study (Amazon's MTurk; $n = 371$) investigated links between three different social self-concepts (the need to belong, narcissism, and relatedness) and the appeal of fame. We examined fame attitudes using a newly-devised fame appeal scale (yielding three factors: Visibility, Status and Prosocial), as well as with two items probing frequency of fame fantasizing and perceived realism of becoming famous. Results show that higher belongingness needs were associated with increased appeal of all three fame factors, as well as increased frequency of fantasizing about fame (accounting for age and gender). Narcissism was associated with increased appeal of Visibility and Status, more time spent engaged in fame fantasy, and greater perceived realism of future fame. Finally, Relatedness predicted increased appeal of the Prosocial fame factor only. Findings illuminate the socioemotional underpinnings of fame appeal and the individual differences that may render certain aspects of fame particularly alluring.

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1. Introduction

We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favorably, by our kind (James, 1893, p. 179).

The present media landscape is increasingly saturated with images of fame and celebrity. From television to magazines to websites and blogs, we are chronically confronted with other people's glamorous lifestyles, wardrobes, romantic partners and success stories. Further, we are living in a cultural moment in which ostensibly anyone can achieve sudden fame via the latest reality television show or YouTube.com video (or via celebrity scent osmosis with Lady Gaga's perfume: *Fame*). While the allure of fame is certainly not a new phenomenon, the ubiquity and perceived accessibility of fame seems to be at an all time high. Thus, it seems prudent to empirically interrogate why fame may be appealing and for whom. The present study investigates trends in views of self in concert with views of fame in an adult sample.

Specifically, we explore three constructs that tap individuals' sense of self in relation to others: the extent to which individuals are preoccupied with inclusion (i.e., the Need to Belong, Leary,

Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2005); the extent to which individuals feel superior to others (Narcissism, Konrath, Meier, & Bushman, 2013); and, the extent to which individuals feel securely connected to others (i.e., the Relatedness subscale of Deci & Ryan's, 2000, Basic Psychological Needs scale). We reasoned that these constructs captured three distinct if related views of self in a social context, which would help clarify social psychological motivations for fame. A desire to fit in, a belief in self-importance, and a sense of positive social connection might each be linked to a greater or less extent with particular appeals of fame. We examine the latter via a newly-devised scale that incorporates various motives—from being recognized, to being wealthy, to having the ability to help others.

1.1. Need to belong

The need to belong, or to feel positively and consistently connected to others, has been conceptualized as a fundamental human need that underlies various cultural institutions, from religion to marriage, and is associated with emotional well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This affiliative motivation may have primitive, powerful roots. Many scholars agree that throughout human history, being a member of a cohesive social group could mean the difference between life and death from any number of outside threats. The extent to which physical survival hinged on successful social bonds is also supported by recent research in social neuroscience. For example, reminding people of recent rejection

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experiences activates areas of the brain associated not only with emotional pain, but with physical pain (Kross, Berman, Mischel, Smith, & Wager, 2011). We are apparently biologically prepared to attend to and avoid social rejection much in the same way that we are motivated to attend to and avoid physical pain.

If being seen and valued are of paramount importance to human survival—physical and emotional—it is intuitive to imagine that fame, and the visibility and value it confers, may be considered the ultimate vehicle by which to accomplish these goals. Indeed, Baumeister and Leary (1995) point out that in modern society, the fundamental need to belong may manifest in a “fundamental quest for fame” (p. 521)—motivated by the fantasy that fame may come with the promise of lifelong social inclusion. In a related vein, recent scholarship has shown that fame may be particularly appealing to those whose primitive anxieties about death have been aroused. In three different studies, Greenberg, Kosloff, Solomon, Cohen, and Landau (2010) found that priming people with death anxiety increased interest in becoming famous, having a star named after them, and increased liking for a painting that was attributed to Johnny Depp (vs. a lesser known artist). The explanation for these findings, according to the authors, is that being famous provides a form of symbolic immortality.

The need to belong can be conceptualized as both a fundamental human need and as an individual difference that captures the extent to which individuals are preoccupied with social inclusion (e.g., “I want other people to accept me”; Leary et al., 2005). Individuals with heightened inclusion needs may find fame and celebrity particularly appealing because of the social value fame confers. Indeed, related research shows that increased belongingness needs predicted increased imagined intimacy with media figures (Greenwood & Long, 2011). Famous others may function as idealized “friends” with whom to affiliate; such affiliations may also temporarily soothe the inclusion needs (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009). To our knowledge, however, no one has yet assessed the need to belong in concert with an interest in fame *per se*. Our study is designed to test this prediction.

1.2. Narcissism

Much scholarly and popular discussion has focused on the rise of narcissism in American culture (e.g., Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Although psychologists continue to clarify the definitional nuances of narcissism (grandiose vs. vulnerable subtypes; unstable vs. truly high self-esteem), it is typically characterized by an explicit perception of superiority over others and is often linked to anti-social tendencies such as aggression and lower levels of empathy (Bushman & Thomaes, 2011). Explanations for this increase are diverse and speculative, but scholars have noted a comorbid emphasis on self-aggrandizement in both social and entertainment media (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). A cultural climate that celebrates self-promotion may not only render fame appealing to those hoping to fit in, but to those hoping to stand out. Perhaps not surprisingly, narcissism has been found to predict an interest in fame (Maltby, 2010) and in extrinsic aspirations (including a desire for fame and wealth) more broadly construed (Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

One of the most elaborate recent investigations of fame interest was undertaken by Maltby (2010), who found that narcissism was positively correlated with Intensity (e.g., “Very little matters to me apart from being famous”) Celebrity Lifestyle (e.g., “I want to be rich”), Drive (e.g., “I work hard everyday to be famous”), and Perceived Suitability (e.g., “I’ve got what it takes to be famous”). Narcissism was not correlated significantly with altruistic motives for fame, nor was it correlated with an acknowledged interest in fame due to personal feelings of vulnerability (e.g., “I want to be famous because then people would notice me”). The present study repli-

cates and extends Maltby’s (2010) work by reassessing associations between narcissism and fame interest and constructing a new, streamlined fame measure. Maltby’s (2010) utilized 42 items and six subscales, which proved difficult to simplify due to high overlap among them; we aimed for greater parsimony by generating fewer, more focused items with the goal of capturing fewer distinct factors. Further, rather than ask participants to report on a personal investment in fame, we ask about the broader perceived appeal of fame, which taps normative motivations. We also build on Maltby’s (2010) work by contextualizing narcissistic links to fame appeal with less overtly attention-seeking tendencies: the need to belong and our final self-concept construct, a positive sense of feeling connected to others.

1.3. Relatedness

Relatedness has been conceptualized as one of three “basic psychological needs” by Deci and Ryan’s (2000), along with feelings of autonomy and competence, all of which are indicators of a healthy socio-emotional life. Scoring high on relatedness, unlike scoring high on belongingness needs, does not indicate anxiety about social exclusion, but rather a sense of security with one’s social network and the degree to which one is valued by others. Research has found that daily feelings of relatedness—feeling understood and having meaningful interactions with social partners—were associated with positive mood, vitality and well-being (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Further, when one’s relational needs are met, one may be less motivated to attain extrinsic goals such as image, fame, and wealth (Deci & Ryan, 2000)—the latter of which have been shown to be associated with lower levels of emotional health and well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Compared to individuals with inclusion anxiety or with heightened perceptions of their own superiority, individuals whose social and emotional needs are met by their existing social networks may not feel the need to fantasize about being seen and valued on a grander scale.

1.4. The present study

The present study seeks to clarify how specific views of self are associated with specific dimensions of fame appeal. The goals of the present study were two-fold: (1) to devise a streamlined measure of fame appeal, and, (2) to determine whether and how the need to belong, narcissism and relatedness predict specific facets of fame appeal. With respect to the first goal, we generated a series of items aimed to capture various motives: to be seen/recognized, to have status/wealth, to help others or be a role model, and to have power/control over one’s life. Although we were engaged in exploratory scale development, we designed the scale with anticipated conceptual groupings in mind, which were used to generate relevant hypotheses.

We predicted that increased belonging needs would predict increased appeal of all aspects of fame because fame *per se* may be a powerful draw for those with a strong desire to be a valued group member. However, in step with prior research, we predicted that narcissism would be linked to self-promotional aspects of fame such as recognition and status. Conversely, we predicted that relatedness would be associated with other-oriented motives for fame, if any. Individuals who feel meaningfully connected to others in their social networks may be less likely to crave opportunities for superficial forms of recognition or status. Finally, we predicted that increased belongingness needs would be associated with fantasizing about fame, though not necessarily with perceived realism of fame, whereas narcissism would predict both fantasizing and perceived realism of becoming famous one day.

We anticipated that women would score higher on belonging needs, as was previously found (Greenwood & Long, 2011), as well

as on relatedness and other-oriented fame appeal, given socialization practices that encourage women to be more vigilant about forming/maintaining social relationships (Eagly, 1987). In step with prior research, we anticipated that men might score higher on narcissism than women (e.g., Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003). Finally, we expected that age might be inversely related to fame interest and narcissism, both of which have been found to be prevalent or salient for younger generations (Foster et al., 2003; Uhls & Greenfield, 2012).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (US sample) for a study entitled "Self and culture survey," which they were told would take approximately 20 minutes to complete and yield compensation of USD \$.65 for their time. Originally 408 individuals completed the survey. After various exclusions (e.g., technical difficulties, unreasonably short response times, missing responses to key demographic items), the final sample was $n = 371$ (52% male). The mean age of the sample was 31 (range = 18–73 years; 75% of the sample ≤ 35 years old). Self-reports indicated 78% of the sample identified as White/Caucasian, 8% identified as Asian (broadly defined), 5% identified as Black or African American, 5% as Latino/a, 3% as biracial, .5% as Native American and .5% unclear (e.g., "American").

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Need to belong (NTB)

Belonging needs were assessed via Leary et al.'s (2005) 10-item scale (e.g., "I do not like being alone" $\alpha = .86$). Responses were made on a 1–7 scale (Disagree Strongly to Agree Strongly).

2.2.2. Narcissism

For brevity, we utilized a single-item narcissism scale (SINS) measure developed by Konrath et al. (2013): "To what extent do you agree with this statement: 'I am a narcissist.' (Note: The word "narcissist" means egotistical, self-focused, vain, etc.)." Responses were made on an 11-pt scale (Not very true of me to Very true of me). Though potentially counter-intuitive, this scale is in step with research suggesting that narcissistic individuals are aware of their narcissistic tendencies (Carlson, 2013). The SINS has shown reliable associations with diverse measures of narcissism across at least 10 different survey samples (Konrath et al., 2013).

2.2.3. Relatedness

We utilized the 9-item Relatedness subscale from the Basic Psychological Needs scale (Deci & Ryan, 2000; adapted from Kasser, Davey, & Ryan, 1992; e.g., "I consider the people I regularly interact with to be my friends"; $\alpha = .84$).

2.2.4. Fame appeal

To determine whether specific psychological differences might be linked to distinct motivations for being famous, we initially generated 25 items designed to capture various imagined appeals of being famous: being seen/recognized, enjoying a high status/wealthy lifestyle, helping others, and feeling powerful. Scale instructions asked "Which of the following aspects of fame seem most appealing to you, if at all...?" (7-pt scale: Not very appealing to Very appealing).

Our initial exploratory factor analysis (promax rotation, maximum likelihood) yielded four factors in line with the above descriptions. However, the final factor capturing feelings of domi-

Table 1
Factor loadings for fame appeal items.

Item	Factor 1 (Visibility)	Factor 2 (Status)	Factor 3 (Prosocial)
Being on the cover of a magazine	.845	.026	-.023
Having your picture taken	.834	-.060	.017
Being recognized in public	.812	-.052	-.062
Doing press interviews	.774	-.172	.053
Being asked for your autograph	.730	.034	-.023
Have a lot of followers on Twitter or other social media	.701	.097	-.070
Attending awards shows	.647	.169	.028
Being a spokesperson for favorite products or brands	.621	.044	.134
Having the ability to travel in first class and stay at exclusive resorts	-.126	.864	.032
Receiving free gifts of luxury items	.070	.781	-.055
Living in a mansion or penthouse apartment	.050	.767	-.036
Having VIP access to the best restaurants	.042	.757	.056
Having an expensive/fashionable wardrobe	.276	.571	-.051
Being financially secure	-.215	.454	.220
Being able to financially support family and friends	-.192	.073	.660
Making family/friends proud	.068	.030	.634
Being able to use your fame for important causes	.032	.081	.617
Being a role model to others?	.263	-.122	.606

Note: Bolded numbers represent highest loading items on each factor (items reordered by factor).

nance, accounted for 2.9% of the variance and the highest loading item was .52 ("feeling powerful"); the rest showed numerous cross-loadings ("showing up people who didn't believe in you," "being able to call the shots regarding your future," "being the best in your field": $\geq .32$ on more than one factor, following criteria from Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). When these items and other cross-loading items were dropped from the analysis, three distinct factors remained. The final 18-item scale comprised factors we have labeled: Visibility (Eigenvalue = 6.95, 38.6% of variance), Status (Eigenvalue = 2.67, 14.8% of variance) and Prosocial (Eigenvalue = 1.55, 8.6% of variance). Table 1 shows factor loadings and item wording. All three factors were moderately correlated with one another (shown in Table 2).¹

Two final items asked how often participants imagined being famous: Fame Fantasy; (never, rarely, sometimes, often) and how realistic they believed it was that they would become famous one day: Fame Realism (7-pt scale; Not at all to Extremely).

2.3. Procedure

Self-concept measures (Narcissism, NTB and Relatedness) were counterbalanced with fame measures (alongside other related constructs not the focus of the present study). At the end of the survey, participants were provided with a debriefing page.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses: gender and age

We ran a MANOVA (Bonferroni-corrected) to determine which, if any, psychological or fame variables differed as a function of

¹ Additional validation for the fame measure comes from more recently collected data by the first author; the fame measure shows the same factor structure in a college sample and the same basic patterns regarding narcissism (using the more traditional NPI) and belonging.

Table 2
Means and intercorrelations (controlling for gender and age) among study variables.

	Mean	SD	NTB	Narc	Relate	Visibility	Status	Prosocial	Fantasy	Realism
NTB	4.05	1.02	–	.10	.06	.26**	.21**	.18**	.19**	–.03
Narc	3.84	2.51		–	–.13	.15*	.11*	–.01	.14*	.13*
Relate	5.02	.88			–	–.04	.05	.29**	–.04	–.00
Visibility	–	–				–	.48**	.42**	.55**	.37**
Status	–	–					–	.56**	.28**	.05
Prosocial	–	–						–	.26**	.17*
Fantasy	2.18	.84							–	.37**
Realism	1.87	1.19								–

Note: NTB is need to belong (7-pt scale), Narc is Narcissism (11-pt scale), Relate is Relatedness (7-pt scale), Visibility, Status and Prosocial are the three fame factors (Means = 0; SDs = .96, .95, & .88, respectively). Fantasy is Fame Fantasy (1–4, never, rarely, sometimes, often) and Realism is Fame Realism (7-pt scale). Pairwise correlations were used to account for missing data across variables.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .001$.

Table 3
Hierarchical regression analyses predicting fame factors from Need to Belong, Narcissism, and Relatedness.

Variable	Fame factor: Visibility					Fame factor: Status					Fame factor: Prosocial				
	B	SEB	β	R^2	F-change	B	SEB	β	R^2	F-change	B	SEB	β	R^2	F-change
<i>Step 1</i>				.02	3.69*				.04	6.25**				.01	3.41*
Gender	–.03	.10	–.01			.25	.10	.13*			.24	.09	.14*		
Age	–.01	.01	–.14**			–.01	.00	–.16**			–.00	.00	–.05		
<i>Step 2</i>				.12	8.29**				.09	6.88**				.12	10.39**
Gender	–.08	.10	–.04			.19	.10	.10			.18	.09	.10*		
Age	–.01	.01	–.07			–.01	.01	–.12*			–.00	.00	–.05		
NTB	.24	.05	.26**			.19	.05	.20**			.15	.04	.18**		
Narcissism	.05	.02	.14**			.04	.02	.11*			.01	.02	.02		
Relatedness	–.03	.06	–.03			.05	.06	.05			.27	.05	.28**		

Note: NTB = Need to Belong; gender is coded such that males are the reference.

* $p < .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

participant gender. Results showed that women scored higher than men on NTB, $F(1, 343) = 5.35$, $p < .05$ ($M = 4.2 > M = 3.9$); and on both the Status fame factor, $F(1, 343) = 4.30$, $p < .05$ ($M = .10 > M = -.11$) and Prosocial fame factor, $F(1, 343) = 5.90$, $p < .05$ ($M = .13 > M = -.10$). Men scored marginally higher on Narcissism ($p < .09$), and Fame Fantasy ($p < .06$) than women did.

We performed additional correlations to examine expected inverse associations between our broad age range (18–73) and key study variables. Age was inversely related to all variables except for Prosocial fame factor (ns) and Relatedness, $r(363) = .12$, $p < .05$.² Thus, younger individuals were higher on Narcissism, Belonging, Visibility and Status fame appeals, Fame Fantasy and Fame Realism than their older counterparts, but lower on feelings of Relatedness.

Due to the above differences, we control for age and gender in the analyses below. However, it is worth noting that results are virtually analogous, with only minor exceptions, when these covariates are not included.

3.2. Primary analyses

Means and partial correlations (controlling for age and gender) for key study variables are presented in Table 2. NTB was robustly correlated with all fame measures except for Fame Realism; Narcissism showed positive associations with all fame measures except Prosocial. In contrast, Relatedness was only significant

² Age was inversely correlated with Visibility, $r(361) = -.14$, $p < .01$; Status, $r(361) = -.14$, $p < .01$; Fame Fantasy, $r(368) = -.17$, $p = .001$; Fame Realism, $r(369) = -.18$, $p < .001$; Narcissism, $r(369) = -.22$, $p < .001$ and NTB, $r(368) = -.15$, $p < .01$.

associated with Prosocial fame appeal. Moderate correlations emerged among fame factors and between fame factors and Fame Fantasy/Realism, as might be expected. Narcissism was inversely correlated with Relatedness; neither was significantly associated with NTB.

To determine the relative contribution of the psychological constructs to each fame factor, we ran three hierarchical linear regressions, including gender and age in Step 1 and NTB, Narcissism, and Relatedness in Step 2. Both steps in each model explained a significant portion of the variance for each regression. As shown in Table 3, each of the significant correlational relationships noted above remain significant when the psychological predictors are considered simultaneously.

4. Discussion

The present study examined how three different indices of social self-concept: belonging, narcissism and relatedness, predicted attitudes towards being famous. Although prior research has focused on links between narcissism and fame, ours is the first to additionally consider whether concerns about or contentment with perceived social value were meaningfully related to fame attitudes. Our measure of fame appeal resulted in three factors: the desire to be seen/valued (Visibility) accounted for the most variance, followed by the desire for an elite, high status lifestyle (Status) and the desire to use fame to help others or make them proud (Prosocial). Our findings show that both belongingness needs and narcissism were associated with multiple dimensions of fame appeal, whereas relatedness was only associated with the prosocial factor.

Individuals with heightened belongingness needs were drawn to all aspects of fame, except for a belief in fame realism. Both

self-oriented and prosocial fame motives appear to be relevant to affiliative goals. However, for this group, fame motives appear confined to fantasy. It is possible that fame fantasizing—and the imagined social worth it confers—provides a soothing escape from anxieties about inclusion. In the best case, such imaginings may boost mood and enable rehearsal of competent, valued selves. However, similar to the questions arising from research on parasocial engagement with media figures (Greenwood & Long, 2011), it is possible that the allure of fame may inhibit more fruitful ways of meeting inclusion needs—via strengthening actual relationships within one's social network. It is also possible that fame fantasy may exacerbate the discrepancy between actual and ideal selves when a more realistic perspective returns. Longitudinal research is needed to clarify whether fame fantasizing promotes or interferes with well-being.

Narcissism was associated with all aspects of fame except for using fame for prosocial causes, in step with prior work (Maltby's 2010). More narcissistic individuals were focused on the recognition and elite status that fame confers, and believed future fame to be more realistic than their less narcissistic counterparts. Although those scoring higher on narcissism admit to being egotistical and vain, and those scoring high on belongingness needs admit that they feel unhappy to be left out or alone, both groups appear to share a common need to be seen and valued on a large scale. Further, although the two constructs were not correlated in this study, findings shed light on the implied social vulnerability that may accompany narcissism and also help elucidate visibility needs that may underlie belongingness needs. Whether an interest in fame ultimately perpetuates this vulnerability is an important question for future research.

Individuals scoring high on relatedness (inversely correlated with narcissism) only showed an increased interest in prosocial fame—using fame to benefit close others (e.g., helping friends/family financially) or generalized others (e.g., using fame to advance a cause). It is intuitive that individuals who are securely nested within social networks would also report a high interest in using fame to help others. More difficult to interpret, however, are the lack of significant associations with other dimensions of fame appeal. At a minimum, individuals high on Relatedness may not feel compelled or reviled by the idea of fame. Future work is needed to clarify these possibilities.

Age was inversely related to the fame variables, as well as narcissism and the need to belong. A fascination with fame may emerge early in life, as adolescents struggle with identity and belonging. Markus and Nurius's (1986) seminal work on possible selves documents the widespread tendency for young people to imagine that a future self is a “media personality” (vs. a janitor, for example). Further, Uhls and Greenfield (2012) found that a desire for fame was the most popular future goal among 10–12 year olds, overshadowing hopes for achievement and community feeling. They note that the developmental preoccupations regarding “peer acceptance” that characterizes early adolescence might make the social recognition that comes with fame all the more appealing (p. 954). Although the patterns we identified between self-concept and fame remained significant after accounting for age, future research should continue to focus on the role of fame appeal and self-concept among younger individuals.

Women scored higher than men on the status and prosocial fame appeals and on belongingness needs. While the latter two may reflect an increased affiliative focus among women, the status link was unexpected and merits replication. It is possible that women are more often targeted by materialistic media norms than men (e.g., having an expensive/fashionable wardrobe), which may increase attunement to and appeal of elite status.

Our study is limited by the self-report nature of the items, as well as by the use of a non-traditional single-item scale to measure

narcissism. However, the latter has been used successfully numerous times (Konrath et al., 2013) and showed expected associations with key study variables in the present study. Our measure of fame appeal was similar to Maltby's (2010), but it was also distinct in some key ways. Although we similarly identified an other-oriented basis for fame appeal, our factor analysis resulted in a division between the appeal of being recognized and valued, and the appeal of a high status lifestyle, which Maltby's (2010) scale had combined into one “celebrity lifestyle” dimension. As noted earlier, we also opted to frame items in terms of general fame appeal to capture a more normative vs. personal investment in fame. Both scales may have utility in different contexts; we are eager to pursue and encourage future refinement and/or elaboration of fame motivations.

Ultimately, we believe this is a fruitful and understudied area of psychological research. Individuals' affinity for fame tells us not only about its perceived social psychological value, but about the perceived social psychological value of an individual's self-concept. The desire to “light up the sky like a flame,” as the lyrics to the hit song/musical, *Fame*, suggest, may reflect both the basic human need to be seen and valued, and the extent to which such needs are salient or unmet for a given individual.

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