

## The Past, Present, and Future of the Psychology of Celebrity and Celebrity Worship: A Bibliometric Study

Mostafa Ahadi, Mara Aruguete, Lynn E. McCutcheon, & Ágnes Zsila

The issue of Celebrity Worship is on the rise. Consequently, academic research on celebrities and Celebrity Worship across disciplines has increased accordingly, resulting in an increase of scholarly publications across diverse journals. Notably, psychology has been a significant field of inquiry regarding this phenomenon for nearly three decades. This study aims to analyze the body of extant scholarship published on celebrity worship. The literature reviewed included 983 documents from the Scopus database (articles, reviews, and conference papers) published in English, from 1963 to 2025. Data were analyzed using VOS viewer, employing various bibliometric indicators to create a scientific map that illustrates the trajectory of this field. Overall, the findings indicate that the psychology of celebrity worship has increasingly addressed issues related to personality and health psychological correlates in recent years. Furthermore, the expansion of social media has significantly influenced research in this subject area. The findings underscore the increasing significance of celebrity worship in psychological research, particularly with regard to personality and health. Moreover, the influence of social media is evident across this growing body of literature, suggesting a dynamic evolution in this field.

### Introduction:

In the past three decades, the terms "celebrity" and "celebrity worship" have emerged as significant concepts across various academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, management, advertising, economics, politics, and media studies. Celebrity worship refers to an intense form of attraction towards a favored celebrity, typically measured using the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS) in one of three versions (see Maltby et al., 2011; Zsila et al., 2024, for further discussion). In the 23-item version the CAS comprises three dimensions of which the entertainment-social dimension refers to a healthy engagement with an admired celebrity, whereas the intense-personal and borderline-pathological dimensions reflect problematic levels of absorption in the personal life of favorite celebrity. A phenomenon known as "celebrity culture" has attracted recent attention, prompting psychologists to investigate the meanings and implications that celebrities hold in the lives of their audiences (Brooks, 2018). Extensive research has shown that celebrities have the power to influence audiences' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, particularly in contexts such as purchasing decisions and political views (Austin et al., 2008; Locker, Jr. et al., 2024; Malik & Guptha, 2014). The present study examined the trends in scholarships on celebrity worship using bibliometric analyses to determine the trajectory of this research area over time. Results will highlight prolific researchers and investigatory topics in the study of celebrity worship, in addition to providing direction for future studies on celebrity fandom.

A large and growing body of research has explored correlations of celebrity worship (e.g., Griffiths, 2024; Maltby et al., 2011; McCutcheon et al., 2016; Zsila et al., 2020). Findings indicate that some fans develop strong attachments to their favorite celebrities, highlighting a one-sided relationship that is crucial to the identities and emotional lives of these fans (Hackley & Hackley, 2015; McCutcheon et al., 2002). Building on this foundation, the first theory of celebrity worship, known as the Absorption-addiction Model (A-aM), was developed by McCutcheon et al. (2002). The A-aM suggests that predisposed individuals seek to strengthen their identity structure through their admiration for celebrities,

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which can manifest as a behavioral addiction in extreme cases. This dynamic may lead to excessive and potentially delusional behaviors that reinforce a one-sided para social relationship. Celebrity worship can also yield positive outcomes. Individuals who engage in celebrity worship for entertainment and social reasons tend to exhibit greater levels of optimism, sociability, and happiness. Conversely, those who worship celebrities for intense personal reasons often display more obsessive tendencies, along with higher levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, impulsiveness, antisocial behavior, and other problematic traits (e.g., Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001; Griffiths, 2024; Maltby et al., 2011).

As celebrity worship has increased, so has academic interest in its psychological implications. Studies have linked intensely personal and borderline pathological levels of celebrity worship with neuroticism (Maltby et al., 2011) and a range of negative psychological and interpersonal consequences, including suicidal behavior (Zsila et al., 2020), eating disorders (Aruguete et al., 2014), dissatisfaction with life (Aruguete et al., 2019), and problematic social interactions (McCutcheon et al., 2016).

One of the most significant reasons for the growing importance of celebrities has been the rise of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms (Britt, 2015; Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Stever & Lawson, 2013). Social media has transformed the dynamics of relationships between celebrities and their fans. Enhanced communication between celebrities and their followers has the potential to deepen the attachment fans feel towards their favorite celebrities. Overall, celebrity worship has significantly increased over the past 20 years (McCutcheon & Aruguete, 2021). This trend is logically connected to greater access to social media during this period. The ability to continuously seek information about celebrities, coupled with social isolation, loneliness, and declining mental health, may contribute to rising levels of celebrity worship over time (Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001; McCutcheon & Aruguete, 2021).

Given the upward trend in celebrity worship and the substantial number of studies in this area, bibliometric analysis and the creation of a scientific map could be beneficial for a thorough examination of the research trends in this field and for outlining potential future directions for investigation. The current study explores the literature on celebrity worship using bibliometric methods to create a visual representation of the scientific landscape. This research emphasizes the growth of publications, the contributions of various countries and authors, as well as patterns of citation, co-citation, and keyword usage.

## **Method:**

### **Data collection and search strategy**

The volume of scientific research across academic fields has seen a significant increase in recent years (Bornmann & Mutz, 2015). Consequently, tracking relevant literature within specific scientific domains has become increasingly challenging (Zupic & Čater, 2014). To address this issue, the application of quantitative bibliometric methods is essential. Bibliometric research designs are a widely acknowledged method for exploring and mapping the structure of academic output related to specific topics (Piotrowski, 2023). In fact, over the last 20 years, this methodology has been utilized across different sub-disciplines within psychology, as well as in analyses of specific psychology journals (e.g., Piotrowski, 2021; Piotrowski & Watt, 2024). Within this framework, two primary uses of bibliometric analysis are identified: performance analysis and science mapping (Cobo et al., 2011). Additionally, one of the crucial features of bibliometrics is the creation of scientific maps, which provide a unique perspective on the field (Zupic & Čater, 2014).

For the current bibliometric study, data were sourced from Scopus, recognized as one of the most comprehensive databases, surpassing others such as Web of Science and PubMed (Falagas et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2021). The search was conducted using the term "celebrity" or "celebrity worship" in

the titles, abstracts, or keywords of articles across all English-language publications in the field of psychology. To ensure specificity, articles, reviews, and conference papers were included through precise filtering. The results were extracted, encompassing key attributes such as authorship, journal information, and citation counts. Descriptive statistics derived from Scopus, along with visualization tools like VOS viewer, were employed to analyze and present the data effectively.

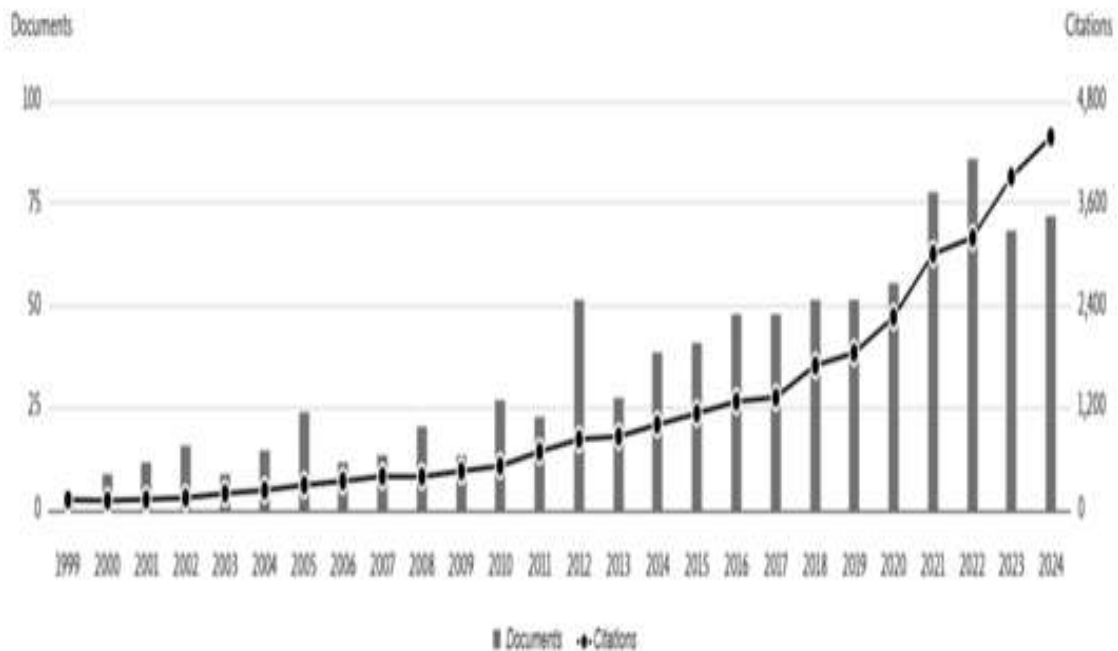
**Data analysis and visualization**

After collecting the data, descriptive graphs and tables were generated to highlight key features of the field, such as the most prolific authors and countries. Additionally, VOS viewer was utilized for visualizing bibliometric maps, as this software is specifically designed for analyzing bibliometric networks. It can produce three types of visualizations: network, overlay, and density visualizations (Anglada-Tort & Sanfilippo, 2019; Van Eck & Waltman, 2009).

**Results:**

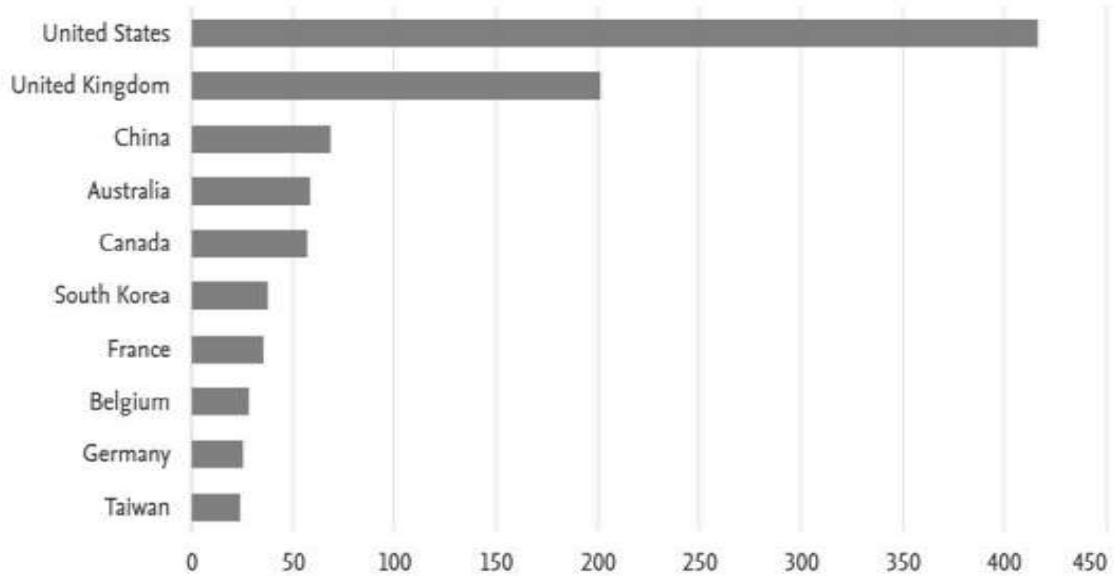
A total of 983 documents from 1963 to 2024 were identified on the Scopus website. The trend indicated that publication in this field has experienced significant growth since the early years of the 21st century, showing a general increase up to the present. As illustrated in Figure 1, the number of publications has increased over time, reflecting the widespread phenomena of "celebrity worship" around the world. Additionally, the trend of citations for these articles has shown a steady upward trajectory, with no declines observed over time. This trend indicates the increasing significance of this topical domain in academic environments worldwide.

**Figure 1: Trend of publications and citations over time**



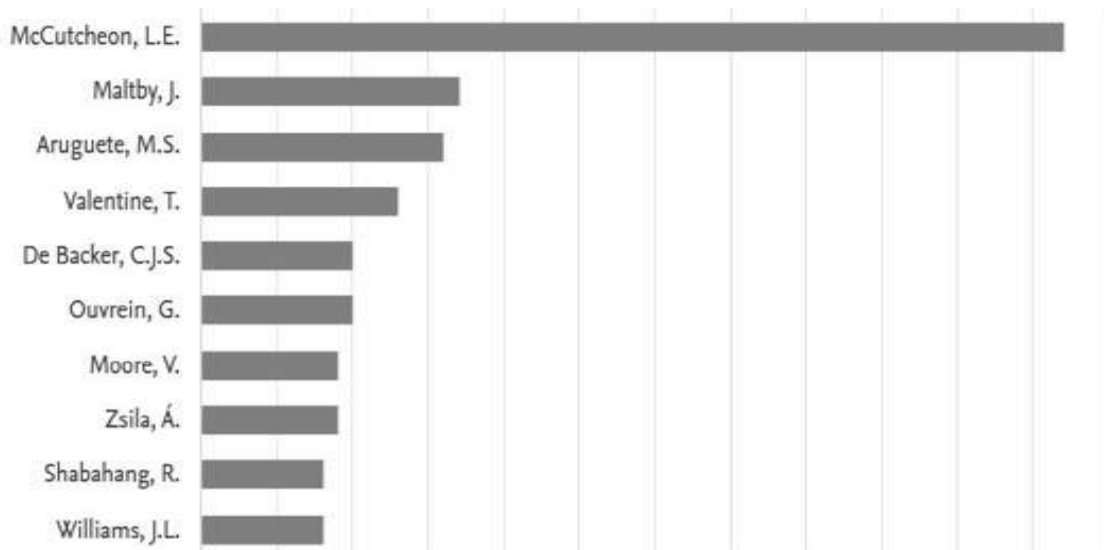
Scientific research in this area has been global. As shown in Figure 2, English-speaking countries have the highest output of scientific publications in this field. Notably, three East Asian countries also appear in the list of the top 10 most prolific nations in this area.

**Figure 2: The most prolific countries**



Another noteworthy feature of the analysis is the prolific authors in this field. The most productive author is from the United States, followed by an author from the United Kingdom. As shown in Figure 3, Lynn E. McCutcheon has authored or co-authored over 50 works during these years, whereas J. Maltby has contributed to more than 15 articles.

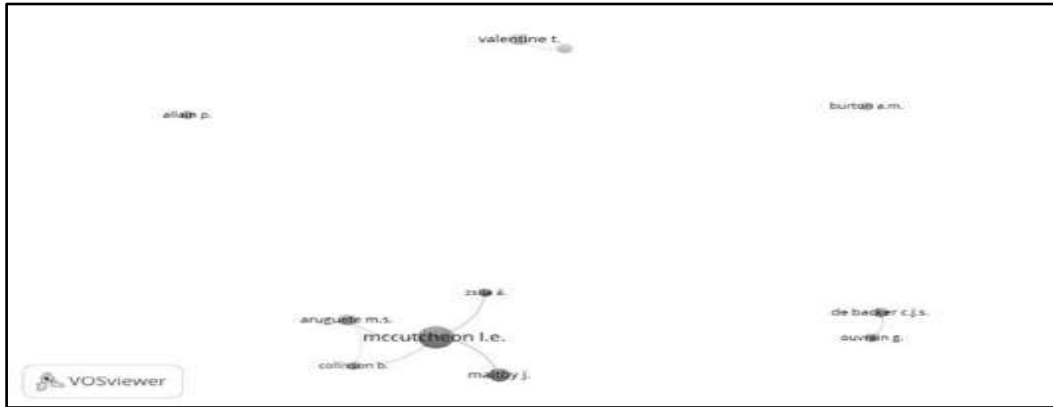
**Figure 3: The most prolific authors**



It is important to highlight that several prolific journals have published a significant number of manuscripts on celebrity and celebrity worship, including "Psychology of Marketing," "North American Journal of Psychology," "Frontiers in Psychology," "Body Image," and "Computers in Human Behavior," in chronological order from the past to the present.

Figure 5 represents the collaborative ties among authors who have published at least seven manuscripts. The clusters represent the largest collaboration networks, featuring prominent scholars such as McCutcheon, Maltby, and Zsila, as well as McCutcheon, Aruguete, and Collisson, who are based in the USA, the UK, and Hungary. Additionally, two other clusters depict other collaborative networks within this field.

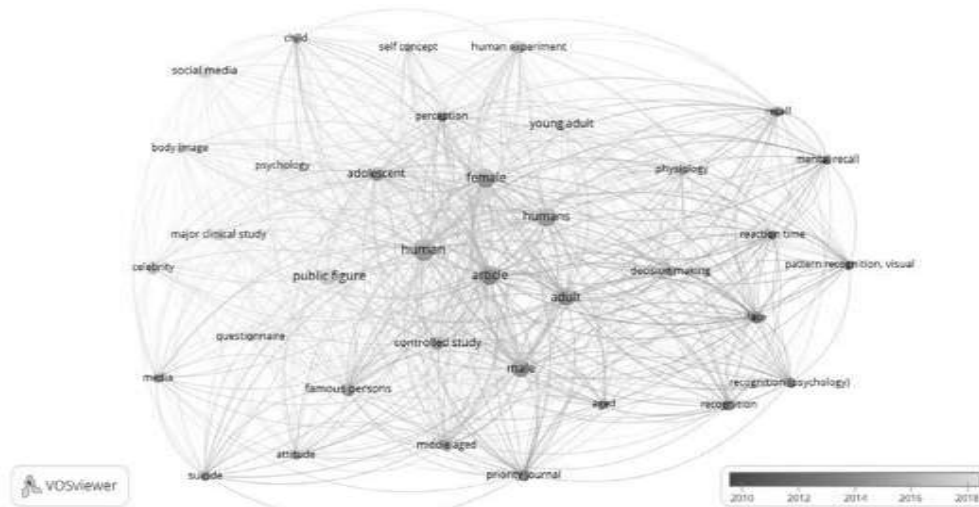
**Figure 4: Collaborative research networks between researchers**



For conceptual structure, this study addresses the topical foci through the common keywords used in research publications. Figure 6 presents, common keywords explored in the subject area of celebrity worship. Older keywords more closely related to cognitive psychology and neuroscience, such as "recall," "reaction time," and "pattern recognition" were noted. Over time, the influence of social and personality psychology has been increasingly evident, leading to the emergence of keywords like "public figure," "social media," and "self-concept."

Another influence of psychology has been the focus on psychopathology (e.g., keywords related to "major clinical studies", "body image", and even "questionnaires" designed to evaluate its dimensions).

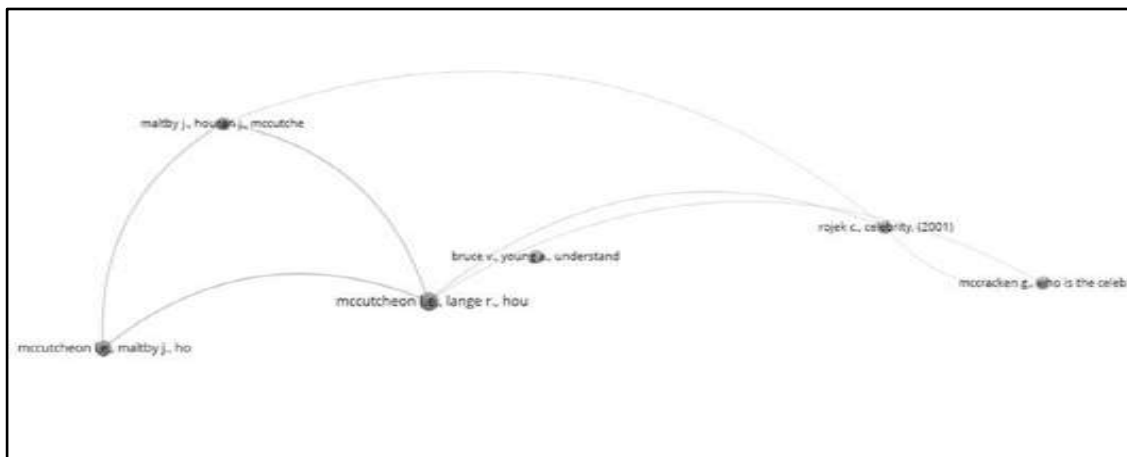
**Figure 5: Timeline of Common Keywords**



- Only keywords with 30 or more occurrences were considered in the analysis

One of the most prevalent methods in bibliometric analysis is co-citation analysis (Ding et al., 2001). Co-citation refers to the occurrence of two publications being cited together within a single article. This analytical approach is employed to uncover the intellectual structure of scientific research (Leung et al., 2017). According to this, Figure 6 illustrates the co-citation analysis within this field. This map highlights the most significant articles that have been frequently cited together. At the top of the list is "Conceptualization and Measurement of Celebrity Worship," authored by McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002).

**Figure 6: Co-citation analysis of most frequently cited articles**



### Discussion:

The findings of this investigation confirm that the number of celebrity worship publications has been on the rise, with a significant increase in the number of citations in this field. In 2024, a total of 74 documents were published, accumulating 4,482 citations, resulting in an average of 61.40 citations per document (noting that data collection occurred prior to the conclusion of the year). When compared to other disciplines, such as neuroscience, which has an average of 187 citations per article, experimental psychology at 67 citations, and clinical psychology at 68 citations (Patience et al., 2017), it is evident that the field of celebrity psychology and celebrity worship is experiencing significant growth. The increase in the number of publications and citations indicates that the importance of this topic in psychological literature is steadily rising. Several Asian countries, in addition to American and European nations, have substantially contributed to this field of study. The majority of the leading authors in this field are from the United States and the United Kingdom.

As evidenced by analysis of the most prolific journals in the field, the topics of celebrity and celebrity worship have been closely linked to marketing psychology since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. These phenomena have gradually evolved into important issues in other areas of psychology, even extending into clinical domains, with the journal "Body Image" becoming notably active in this area. In examining the network of authors in this field, the largest share attributed to the leading author in this area (L.E. McCutcheon). This illustrative map indicates that multi-authorship collaborations are relatively uncommon among authors with at least seven articles in this field, potentially due to the discipline's relatively nascent status. However, this research review indicated that multi-authored papers can reduce individual authors' workloads and increase overall publication rates (Anglada-Tort & Sanfilippo, 2019), which can contribute to a greater volume of research on this select topic. The present analysis can serve to assist new researchers in the field identify authors with whom to collaborate.

The keyword map generally illustrates which keywords have been frequently used in research studies, with the size of each circle indicating the frequency of each keyword, while the lines between words showed their co-occurrence. The terms "human," "female," and "humans" are the most common expressions. Over time, certain keywords have become more significant and prevalent; for instance, the term "social media" has gained prominence due to the increasing importance of social media. Indeed, studies indicate that social media has a deep, significant relationship with celebrity worship (Britt, 2015; Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Griffiths, 2024). The keyword map shows the significance of clinical fields, as research has presented a model for pathological indicators of celebrity worship (Aruguete et al., 2024; McCutcheon et al., 2002), with studies exploring the relationship between celebrity worship and other psychological disorders (Lian et al., 2019; Maltby et al., 2011; Maltby & Day, 2015; McCutcheon, Rich, et al., 2016).

Co-citation analysis indicated that the most significant paper in this field (McCutcheon et al., 2002) is the one that first proposed a hierarchical model for celebrity worship, differentiating between healthy and problematic levels of celebrity admiration. This study has established a network for co-citation analysis. Since co-citation analysis is an important tool for identifying the structure and evolution of a specific scientific domain (Liao et al., 2018; Zupic & Čater, 2014), this map illustrates that the trajectory of research in this field has increasingly focused on psychological problems associated with the phenomenon of celebrity worship.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates an increase in the rate of publications on celebrity worship. This aligns with other research, suggesting that celebrity worship has been primarily examined by psychologists from the perspective of psychological pathology. For future research, it may be beneficial to investigate specific features of celebrity worship further and develop new therapeutic methods. One limitation of the current study is that our documents were sourced from a single database (Scopus), which may not fully represent extant scholarship indexed in other academic databases. Such investigations would expand bibliometric overviews of this emerging field.

## Declarations

### Availability of data and materials

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on *reasonable request*.

### Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare relevant to the content of this article.

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