

# **Celebrity or just popular? Identifying the Zambian celebrity and their display of economic and political power**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The field of celebrity studies continues to generate a lot of interest and debate. Since becoming recognized as an area of academic study, firstly following the publication of *Star* in 1979 by Richard Dyer, the study of celebrity has grown and continues to attract more and more interest. This is perhaps due to the field's fascinating, multi-faceted, dynamic and interdisciplinary nature. While most scholars in the field, particularly those from the west, grapple with decriers that see this field as being irrelevant or as being a form of fixation or a 'guilty pleasure' (Marshall, 2006), the situation for poorer countries such as Zambia the situation is certainly different. Part of the challenge is in accepting what celebrity means in this part of the world.

For Zambia, the idea of celebrity has been in contention and is often left to interpretation. Whereas the understanding of who is and is not a celebrity is commonplace in the developed world as well as their role in media economy, and sometimes politics, the 'who?' and 'why' in Zambia is imprecise, and their role, if any, in the media economic and political landscape is largely unclear. This study asks questions such as: what in terms of characteristics qualifies one to be a celebrity in Zambia? What power (if any) do these individuals have in shaping public opinion? what role do celebrities play on the economic and political landscape? The study is part of an ongoing study and presents some preliminary results of initial survey work that is yet to be scaled.

Drawing from various ideas in celebrity studies and using quantitative and qualitative methods in data collection such as structured interviews, media monitoring and review of literature, this study seeks to provide the answers to the questions raised in the hope of identifying the Zambian celebrity and their display of economic and political power.

The study also wants to show if Zambian celebrities do demonstrate possessing political or economic power in Zambian society. The study, in addition to identifying and understanding this emerging social phenomenon, seeks to provide a sound foundation for future research in celebrity culture in Zambia and open doors to perhaps defining a unique brand of 'celebrity.'

## **2.0 Literature Review: Defining Celebrity**

There are indeed several ways of defining celebrity. A common definition by Boorstin (1971:58) says a celebrity is a person who is well known for their well knowness. This definition emerged as part of Boorstin a critique of contemporary American culture. Boorstin's account was first published in 1961 and showed that there has been significant culture change in western society. The celebrity is who they are due to the presence of a wide array of institutions and resources that exists for this purpose and maintaining it. They are a product of the various fame-generating institutions (Harmon, 2005: 102).

While there exist several approaches to the study of celebrity, there are some perspectives that have stood to explain this phenomenon for years and rest as a foundation to the modern perspectives. Among them is Richard Dyer who in the book *Stars* (1979) sought to develop this intellectual aspect to the study of celebrities from the study of film stars. Dyer, according to Turner (2004) describes the film stars he examines as socially grounded, over determined by the conditions within which they are produced, conversely, he also gives due weight to the contingency and specificity of the meanings generated by the particular star in relation to their audiences.

Another important perspective to our understanding of celebrity is that of P. David Marshall. In "Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture" (2007) Marshall contends with the power that celebrities have as institutions in structuring meaning, crystalizing ideology and providing interpretative tools for understanding culture (Harman, 2005: 100).

Marshall also makes a case for the need or importance of differentiating the different kinds of celebrity considering the media that reproduces them or from which they have done emerged. He also goes on to argue that these differences will also generate different meanings. This leads to one of his works profound implications. According to Turner (2004: 27), if Marshall's description of celebrity as one of the fundamental mechanisms for constructing and maintaining discursive linkages between consumer capitalism, democracy and individualism is right, then it has a very important ideological function.

### **Celebrity in Zambia**

Research into celebrity tends to focus on western perspective which are often based on the template forged by western media and celebrity creating institutions such as Hollywood and the recording industry. There is need for more research from the global south.

The concept in Zambia, and perhaps other parts of Africa, is one lost in interpretation. Whereas who the celebrity is or is not seems easier to define, and what their role is in the economy, in politics, or in society at large is seems to be well articulated in literature.

Celebrity in Zambia seems to be a problematic. Firstly, there is the very problem of defining it within the Zambian context. Secondly, those that some may consider to be celebrities in Zambia may themselves decline to be called as such. This is similar to the finding of Dan Brockington who in his work has found that many public figures would not want to call themselves as celebrities. Brockington's work examined the work of fame, celebrity and public figures in international development. Lastly, there exists very

little scholarly interest in the field, making the possibility of even better understanding what celebrity could mean in Zambia even more challenging.

Knowing full well the different cultural dynamics this part of the world, it becomes important that perhaps a better and localised understanding of the concept is formed.

### **3.0 Objectives and Research Questions**

The objectives of the preliminary study are as follows:

- To understand who in the Zambian context is a celebrity and examine the rise of celebrity culture in Zambia
- To understand the power that these celebrities have in the economic and political spaces in Zambian society.

Drawing from the objectives of the paper, the following are the key questions for the study:

- What makes one to be a celebrity in the Zambian context?
- What power do these celebrities have in the economic and political spaces in Zambian society?

### **4.0 Methodology**

The study draws from various concepts in celebrity studies and will employ various methods for data collection. A sample of about 150 respondents is targeted for a survey with semi-structured questions. A total of 20 mostly students from the University of Zambia have so far been surveyed. Much of the data in this presentation is based on the results so far. Further, I continue to conduct reflexive media monitoring and review of literature.

### **5.0 Research Findings**

#### **5.1 What makes a celebrity in Zambia?**

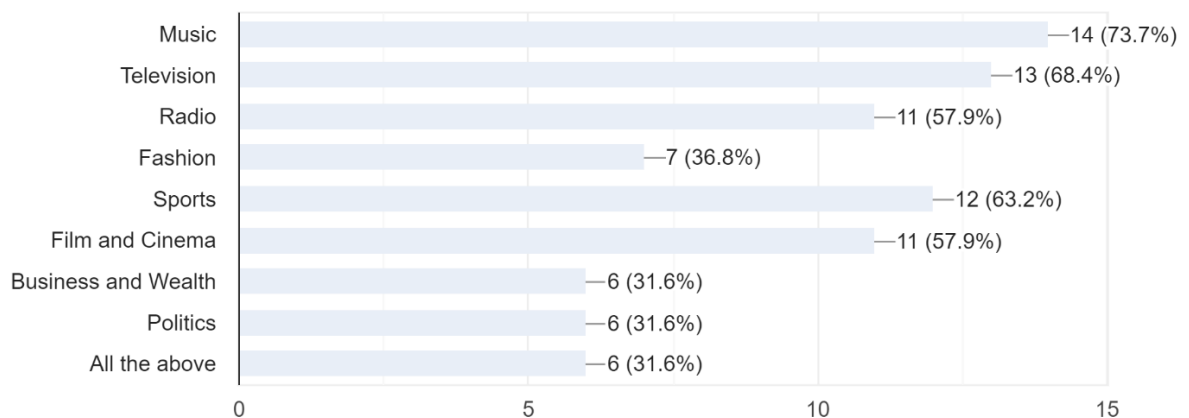
The respondents gave various responses on who they thought a celebrity was. The following are examples of the responses:

- R1 An outstanding person who has excelled in one or more areas/fields and are out in the public for everyone to see and learn from either by themselves or by their fans.
- R2 A person whose famous due to not only one particular thing they do but other things that also contribute to their popularity. Or in short someone who is both popular and famous.
- R4 Somebody who can acquire audience or be noticed in more in more than two continents
- R4 Famous individual who is accomplished and recognised internationally or nationally especially in the entertainment circles.

- R5 A celebrity is an individual who is recognized as a role model in society due to popularity gained over a period of time. This can be based on various aspects such as fashion, movies and even the not so nice manner such as sex tapes and nude pictures.
- R6 Someone who is famous for doing good or bad things.
- R7 A celebrity is a person who has achieve something in life either past or present and is an inspiration to people. Someone who has direct influence over people and maybe a social figure, a mentor or an icon.

This is reflective of the fact that celebrity is not a fixed concept like many fields in the social sciences. It is a multidimensional idea that is dynamic and evolving. While there are common themes and elucidations from literature and the survey, how celebrity is understood is also influenced by context and personal inclinations. The common themes of what constitutes celebrity from the interviews were that of fame and recognisable accomplishment.

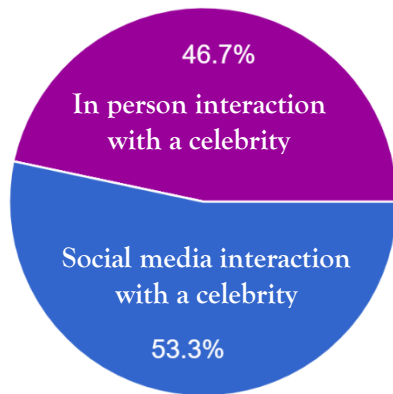
When asked what line of work they think produced the most celebrity, work in music and television scored higher. Political and business did not rank as highly. See table below.



### 5.2 What has given rise to celebrity culture in Zambia?

There are a few factors affecting the rise of celebrity culture in Zambia. Preliminary analysis from interviews and literature, one of the key factors has to do with is the growing media landscape and entertainment media. Due to current media development policies, there are more media houses, and these are key in the creation of celebrity (Makungu, 2003; Banda, 2006a; Banda, 2006b;)

Additionally, celebrity culture has been on the rise due to increased access to the world through the internet. More and more Zambians are accessing the internet and are able to connect with the celebrities on social media platforms (Mambwe, 2014). Social media platforms have also contributed to the creation of celebrity. For example, other than through directed interaction (46%), many of the respondents, (53.3 %) admitted that they had communicated or interacted with a celebrity via social media.



### 5.3 *Display of Economic Power:*

The influence of celebrities in the economy is on the rise. There now more celebrity endorsements and entrepreneurial celebrities than ever before. Despite this, only 10 percent of the respondents have stated that they had bought products or services because of the influence of a celebrity. This shows that while celebrity endorsements are becoming widespread, people seem to make decisions on purchases independent of who appears in the advertising.

From the respondent’s views, the wealth or economic value of a celebrity appears not to be a problem. This is mostly because the financial standing of Zambian celebrities is not public knowledge as it would be in the United States or United Kingdom.

Zambia is seeing an increase in ‘celebrepreneurship’ as more celebs diversify or venture in business sectors. This is observable in the West as well and speaks to the need for diversification on income sources. Some have nigh clubs, media production companies, creative studios, retail outlets, and many others.

### 5.4 *Display of Political Power:*

Just as there has been an increase in economic activity, more and more celebs are being using their fame and notoriety to influence. Interestingly, 12 of the respondents stated that celebrities have had not had an influence on their views on any matter, and 8 said that celebrities had influence them. This is all an indication of the potential for political influence that celebrities could have. For example, musicians have become popular features at campaign rallies. Some politicians have co-opted popular musicians in their parties and given then opportunities to write songs that reflect the cause. The 2011 general elections in Zambia are an example of how musicians are brought into the political arena because of their songs. The then opposition Patriotic Front (PF), led by populist Michael Sata, used the song by musician Wesley Chibambo, popularly known as Dandy Krazy, to rally audience towards its messages (Mususa, 2012; Kasoma, 2013). The PF were victorious in that election year. President Sata rewarded Krazy with a national medal the following

More and more Zambian celebrities are using their social media platforms to give commentaries on many issues, including politics. Social media posts are ways that some

political themes are expressed. Social media will most likely continue to be a platform where celebs engage in activism and other civic engagement. It will be interesting to see just how platforms such as Facebook and Twitter will be used for such engagement.

## **6.0 Discussion and Conclusion**

The idea of celebrity, while it exists, cannot be viewed in the same way as it is generally seen in most other places around the world.

Defining who a celebrity is in Zambia is still complicated as it is generally influenced by many factors such as context of the person being asked and their personal preferences. The definition of who the celebrity will most likely include a perception related aspect based on the persons moral disposition and the nature of influence they exert, mostly positive.

In the future, it will be important to increase the scope for such a study to make it more generalisable to address more issues of concern for celebrity scholarship in Zambia. It will also become increasingly important to understand the celebrity creation processes in Zambia and perhaps crucially and urgently, to interrogate the role that social media has played in celebrity-fan relations in Zambia.

There is need for more research in this area in Africa so as to establish regional framings of the concept and better understand its spatial implications on social, economic and political power.

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