

Would You Rather be a Celebrity or a Hero? Revisiting the Question

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Abstract: We administered a brief version of a measure of admiration for one's favorite celebrity, Celebrity Attitude Scale-7 (CAS-7; Zsila et al., 2024), and brief measures of either the desire to be a hero/heroine or the desire to be a celebrity to two rounds of college students assigned randomly to one of four groups. We used a two (desire to be a celebrity vs desire to be a hero) by two (wealthy or non-wealthy) ANOVA to determine which condition yielded the highest preference scores. Based on a previous study (Grabbe et al., 2024) we hypothesized and found that the desire to be a hero would be stronger than the desire to be a celebrity. Our second hypothesis was that the desire to be wealthy will be stronger than the desire to be non-wealthy. This was confirmed in round one, but disconfirmed in round two. The hypothesized interaction that the desire to be a hero, coupled with the added bonus of becoming wealthy, would result in stronger desire scores compared to the other three conditions, was disconfirmed. Those randomly assigned to the hero condition actually scored slightly higher on the desire to not become wealthy than those assigned to the hero condition who chose to be wealthy. We also hypothesized and found in both rounds that there would be a positive correlation between scores on the CAS-7 and scores on a measure of the desire to be a celebrity. Discussion focused on the possibility that non-celebrities have come to realize that many celebrities are rather ordinary persons who sometimes behave badly. Furthermore, our study lends additional reliability and validity to the CAS-7.

Key words: CAS-7, Celebrity, hero, wealth, ANOVA

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INTRODUCTION

Heroes are persons who are willing to make personal sacrifices in order to help others (Tronto, 2020). They sometimes take great risks in order to promote the welfare of others, though some experts believe that persons who habitually take minimal risks to be helpful to others (e.g. providing food and shelter to the poor) also deserve to be labeled heroes (Farley, 2012). Heroes do not necessarily become famous (Grabbe et al., 2024). What then are some reasons why a person might wish to be a hero? Answers include the desire to feel good about one's self, to enhance self-esteem, to be admired by others (Quora, n.d.). There is even a possibility that a heroic action might lead to monetary rewards. Given that large numbers of Americans seek psychological help because they do *not* feel good about themselves, do not feel appreciated, and lack financial resources, these related motives would seem to provide a strong foundation for wanting to be a hero.

The study of celebrities and those who admire them is important because celebrities are widely perceived as credible sources of information (Albawi et al., 2023). American celebrities are famous persons who become well-known for a variety of reasons, but typically because they can sing, act, or play a sport far better than the average individual. Research shows that celebrities who fall into one or more of these categories are chosen as favorites about 75% of the time (Hitlan et al., 2021; Mandli et al., 2022; McCutcheon, 2025). Even those who don't fall into those categories (e.g. politicians, talk show hosts, religious icons, newscasters) are sometimes prominently featured on television and other media. As a byproduct of their fame they often become very wealthy, and can afford a comfortable lifestyle. Some of them must deal with obnoxious fans (McCutcheon et al., 2016), but the life of most American celebrities is generally appealing, especially to those who have few financial and psychological resources. In fact, a few studies have shown that persons who strongly admire their favorite celebrity would also like to be celebrities themselves (Grabbe et al., 2024; Greenwood et al., 2018; Zsila et al., 2018; Zsila et al., 2019).

The answer to the question we raise here, namely, "Would most persons prefer to be a celebrity or a hero?" is more complicated than it would appear at first glance. To our knowledge there is only one study that has addressed this question (Grabbe et al., 2024). The authors administered a brief measure of the desire to be either a celebrity or a hero, along with a measure of the strength of admiration for one's favorite celebrity. As noted above, they found that attraction to one's favorite celebrity was correlated with the desire to be a celebrity (but not a hero). The description of a celebrity and the scale used to measure the desire to be a celebrity was carefully matched with the description of a hero and the scale used to measure the desire to be a hero. Results showed that the desire to be a hero was significantly stronger than the desire to be a celebrity.

However, the way that Grabbe et al. (2024) worded the celebrity description might well have influenced the results they obtained. They inserted the phrase "suppose that you would not become wealthy" for being a celebrity. This was done to level the playing field, so to speak, because many heroes are neither famous nor wealthy because of their heroic acts. As noted above, almost all celebrities become wealthy or at

least achieve a level of financial stability. This calls into question the reason why Grabbe et al. (2024) found that the desire to be a hero was significantly stronger than the desire to be a celebrity. Did some of the participants in the “desire to be a celebrity” condition think that there was little point in becoming famous if there was little money in it, and respond accordingly? In other words, is part of the desire to become a celebrity based on the assumption that celebrities typically become wealthy? If Grabbe et al. (2024) had included wealth vs. non-wealth as a second variable in a two-by-two ANOVA would it have erased the difference between the hero group and the celebrity group? What if the hero condition had included a phrase stating that the hero became wealthy as a byproduct of committing a heroic act?

The present study is an attempt to address the weakness in the previous study by using four groups. We hypothesize that:

- 1) the desire to be a hero will be stronger than the desire to be a celebrity. This would partially replicate the result of Grabbe et al. (2024).
- 2) the desire to be wealthy will be stronger than the desire to be non-wealthy.
- 3) there will be an interaction effect, such that desire to be a hero, coupled with the added bonus of becoming wealthy, will result in stronger desire scores as compared to the other three conditions (hero-not wealthy, celeb-wealthy, celeb-not wealthy).
- 4) Scores on the Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS-7) will be positively related to scores on both of the desire-to-be-a-celebrity conditions, but not the desire-to-be-a hero conditions, thus partially replicating Grabbe et al. (2024).

METHOD

Participants

The first round of data gathering yielded 470 participants, of which 258 failed the attention check. This sample consisted of 137 Whites, 26 Hispanics, 17 Asians or Asian Americans, 16 African Americans, and smaller numbers of others. The mean age was 19.64 ($SD = 2.72$), and the sample was predominantly female ($n=160$, 75%). As compared to MTurk participants, university students usually pass attention checks (Aruguete et al., 2019). Further analysis of those who failed the attention check showed that the vast majority ($n= 175$) were in the celebrity-not-wealthy condition. This pattern suggested that participants who were randomly assigned to this condition, in spite of being told once that the celebrity did not become wealthy, had difficulty believing that. As noted above, in the real world almost all celebrities become wealthy or at least achieve a level of financial stability.

We decided to conduct a second round of data collection, using two modifications. We added the sentence to each of the four conditions which read “Remember that your hero (or celebrity) status would (or would not) make you a rich person.” We also used a different attention check, “Please answer this question by selecting the answer ‘four.’ Select a letter corresponding to the numerical answer you have chosen. a) One, b) Two, c) Three, d) Four.” The second round of data collection yielded 172 participants, of which only one failed the attention check and was removed from the study, resulting in 171 included for analysis. This final sample consisted of 109 Whites, 16 Hispanics, 4 Asians or Asian Americans, 19

African Americans, 2 American Indian or Alaska Native, 17 multi-racial, and 4 “other”. The mean age was 19.85 ($SD = 2.66$), and the sample was predominantly female ($n=132$, 77 %).

Measures

The *Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS)* measures the strength of one’s admiration for a favorite celebrity. It has been shown to have good psychometric properties over the past two decades (Abraham et al., 2020; Brooks, 2018; Griffith et al., 2013; Hitlan et al., 2021; Maltby et al., 2001; McCutcheon, 2025; McCutcheon et al., 2020; Zsila et al., 2018). We used a 7-item version of the *Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS-7)*, which enjoys the empirical support of research by Zsila et al., 2024. The CAS-7 retains seven of the psychometrically best items from the 23-item version. Sample items include “I share with my favorite celebrity a special bond that cannot be described in words,” and “It is enjoyable just to be with others who like my favorite celebrity.” High scores suggest a strong attachment to one’s favorite celebrity.” The CAS-7 had an alpha of .88 in the Zsila study and it predicted problematic Internet use, depression, anxiety and stress (Zsila et al., 2024). CAS-7 scores correlated moderately with a measure of parasocial relationships, and young adults scored higher than older adults (Zsila et al., 2024). Ahadi et al. (2025) also found that problematic Internet use correlated positively with CAS-7 scores and concluded that the CAS-7 is both reliable and valid. In the present study Cronbach’s alpha for CAS-7 in the first round of data collection was .86, and in the second round it was .87. These results are all consistent with previous research using the 23-item version (e.g. McCutcheon, 2025; Williams et al., 2024; Zsila et al., 2018).

We used a scenario and two-item measure of the desire to be a celebrity that was developed for use in the Grabbe study. The wording was: “Suppose you had a chance to be a celebrity, defined here as a person who becomes very famous for appearing on television numerous times as an entertainer or athlete of some kind. Further suppose that you would (or would not) become wealthy for doing so. Under these conditions please answer these questions using the scale below. “How much would you sacrifice to be a celebrity, as defined above?” Answers ranged from 1(almost nothing) to 7 (almost everything). The second item was worded “If you lived your entire life and never became a celebrity, as defined above, how much would that bother you?” We added a third item, “How much would you like to be a celebrity?” Answers ranged from 1 (very little) to 7 (very much) for the second and third items. The third item was added as an attempt to improve the weak alphas for this scale in the Grabbe study. Scores from these three items were averaged to yield a “desire to become a celebrity” scale. Cronbach’s alpha for these three items was .763 in the first round of the present study, and .812 in the second round.

We used a scenario and two-item measure of the desire to be a hero that was developed for use in the Grabbe study. The wording was: “Suppose you had a chance to be a hero, defined here as a person who goes out of one’s way to perform a very helpful act that might benefit others, while taking a large personal risk to do so. Further suppose that you would (or would not) become wealthy as a byproduct for doing so. Under these

conditions please answer these questions using the scale below. “How much would you sacrifice to be a hero, as defined above?” Answers ranged from 1 (almost nothing) to 7 (almost everything). The second item was worded “If you lived your entire life and never became a hero, as defined above, how much would that bother you?” We added a third item, “How much would you like to be a hero.” Answers ranged from 1 (very little) to 7 (very much) for the second and third items. The third item was added as an attempt to improve the weak alphas for this scale in the Grabbe study. Scores from these three items were averaged to yield a “desire to become a hero” scale. Cronbach’s alpha for this three-item scale was .687 in the first round of the present study. Cronbach’s alpha is improved to an acceptable level of 0.739 if the first question is excluded (sacrifice), although then the scale only consists of two items. In the second round, the three-item scale was reliable with a Cronbach’s alpha of .807.

The wording that preceded the three-item measures of desire to be a hero and desire to be a celebrity was carefully chosen such that they were closely matched on the length of the scenarios and the wording of the measures of desire to be a hero and desire to be a celebrity.

Procedure

We first obtained permission to conduct the study from our respective Institutional Review Boards. Participants from psychology courses at each institution had the opportunity to participate for credit in their respective courses. We provided potential participants with a link that took them to Qualtrics survey software, where they first read the informed consent document. If they agreed to participate, they completed the remainder of the study within Qualtrics, in a fully online manner. Immediately after the consent form, we used the randomizer function in Qualtrics to randomly assign participants to complete one or another of the four scenarios/conditions, all of which began with some basic demographic information. Participants also responded to the CAS-7. We added a question at the end of the study as an attention check to make certain that participants had carefully read the scenario to which they had been randomly assigned, and deleted participants who answered this question incorrectly. It was as follows: “I read a scenario in which I was given the description of a hero (or celebrity) and asked three questions about how much I would like to be a hero (or celebrity). The hero (or celebrity) was described as: a) not intelligent, b) not wealthy, c) wealthy, d) intelligent. Data from participants who gave incorrect answers to this question were deleted. As noted above, a very large number of participants failed the attention check, so we decided to conduct a second round of data gathering using the alterations mentioned above. Upon completion of the study, participants were thanked for their participation and exited the program.

RESULTS

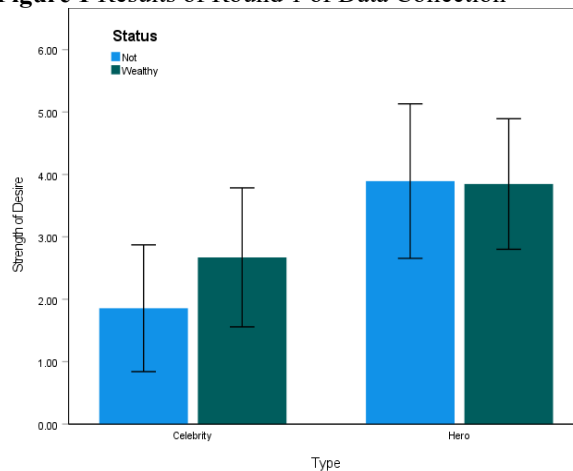
Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each of the four conditions in the first round of the study, with strength of desire to be a hero or celebrity as the dependent variable.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for each of the four conditions with strength of desire as dependent variable

	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>N</i>
Hero – wealthy	3.85 (1.05)	59
Hero – not wealthy	3.89 (1.24)	47
Celebrity - wealthy	2.67 (1.11)	64
Celebrity – not wealthy	1.86 (1.02)	42

Table 2 shows the tests of between participants effects from the first round of the study. A 2 x 2 ANOVA was conducted to test whether the desire to be someone varied based on type (hero or celebrity) and /or status (wealthy or not). Our first hypothesis, namely that the desire to be a hero will be stronger than the desire to be a celebrity, was confirmed by the main effect of type [$F(1, 208) = 108.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = .34$]. Our second hypothesis, namely that the desire to be wealthy will be stronger than the desire to be non-wealthy was also confirmed by the main effect of status [$F(1, 208) = 6.22, p = .013, \eta^2 = .03$]. Our third hypothesis was that there will be an interaction effect, such that desire to be a hero, coupled with the added bonus of becoming wealthy, will result in greater desire as compared to all of the other three conditions. This hypothesis was disconfirmed, although the interaction was significant [$F(1, 208) = 7.81, p = .006, \eta^2 = .04$]. As shown in Figure 1, the desire to be a hero

Figure 1 Results of Round 1 of Data Collection



Note. Error bars represent +/- 1 standard deviation.

was about the same regardless of desire for wealth; the desire to be a celebrity was increased when coupled with the bonus of becoming a

Table 2 Results From the first round: two by two ANOVA with strength of desire to be a hero (or a celebrity) as dependent variable

Source	Sum of squares	<i>df</i>	Mean square	<i>F</i>	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Corrected model	139.157	3	46.386	37.950	<.001	.354
Intercept	1938.638	1	1938.638	1586.071	<.001	.884

Hero-Celeb	132.852	1	132.852	108.691	<.001	.343
Wealth-Not	7.606	1	7.606	6.223	.013	.029
H-C x W-N	9.543	1	9.543	7.808	.006	.036
Error	254.236	208	1.222			
Total	2441.889	212				
Corrected total	393.394	211				

wealthy person because of lower desire scores in the two celebrity conditions. Our fourth hypothesis, not shown in Table 2, that scores on the *Celebrity Attitude Scale* (CAS-7) will be positively related to scores on the desire-to-be-a-celebrity conditions but not the desire-to-be-a hero conditions, was examined using two Pearson's r correlations. This was partially supported, as celebrity attitude scores were significantly related to wanting to be a celebrity $r(104) = .282, p = .003$, but celebrity attitude scores were also positively related to wanting to be a hero $r(104) = .202, p = .038$.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for each of the four conditions in the second round of the study, with strength of desire as the dependent variable.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for each of the four conditions in round two with strength of desire as dependent variable

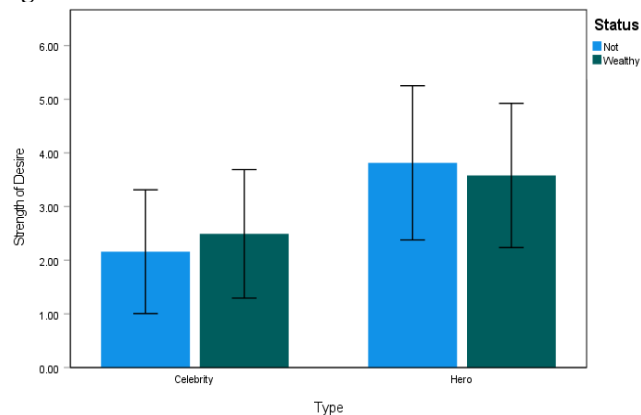
	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>N</i>
Hero – wealthy	3.58 (1.44)	35
Hero – not wealthy	3.82 (1.44)	38
Celebrity – wealthy	2.49 (1.20)	44
Celebrity – not wealthy	2.16 (1.15)	52

Table 4 shows the tests of between participants effects from the second round of the study. A 2 x 2 ANOVA was conducted to test whether the desire to be someone varied based on type (hero or celebrity) and /or status (wealthy or not). Our first hypothesis, namely that the desire to be a hero will be stronger than the desire to be a celebrity, was confirmed by the main effect of type [$F(1, 165) = 47.99, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$]. Our second hypothesis, namely that the desire to be wealthy will be stronger than the desire to be non-wealthy was not confirmed by the main effect of status [$F(1, 165) = 0.06, p = .806, \eta^2 = .00$]. Our third hypothesis was that there will be an interaction effect, such that desire to be a hero, coupled with the added bonus of becoming wealthy, will result in greater desire as compared to the other three conditions, was disconfirmed [$F(1, 165) = 2.05, p = .154, \eta^2 = .01$]. As shown in Figure 2, the desire to become a wealthy hero was actually slightly less than the desire to be a hero without becoming wealthy. Our fourth hypothesis, not shown in Table 2, that scores on the *Celebrity Attitude Scale* (CAS-7) will be positively related to scores on the desire-to-be-a-celebrity conditions but not the desire-to-be-a hero conditions, was examined using two Pearson's r correlations. This was supported, as celebrity attitude scores were significantly related to wanting to be a celebrity $r(94) = .304, p = .003$, but celebrity attitude scores were not related to wanting to be a hero $r(71) = .128, p = .279$.

Table 4 Results From the second round: two by two ANOVA with strength of desire to be a hero (or a celebrity) as dependent variable

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Corrected model	83.834	3	27.945	17.247	<.001	.239
Intercept	1499.181	1	1499.181	925.290	<.001	.849
Hero-Celeb	77.752	1	77.752	47.988	<.001	.225
Wealth-Not	0.098	1	0.098	0.060	.806	.000
H-C x W-N	3.320	1	3.320	2.049	.154	.012
Error	267.338	165	1.620			
Total	1785.444	169				
Corrected total	351.172	168				

Figure 2 Results of Round 2 of Data Collection



Note. Error bars represent +/- 1 standard deviation.

DISCUSSION

The current study further examined preferences for being a hero rather than a celebrity, and further explored the relationship between CAS-7 scores and the desire to be a celebrity. Our first hypothesis is that the desire to be a hero will be stronger than the desire to be a celebrity. Our results did replicate the result of Grabbe et al. (2024) in both rounds. Given the large amount of research on celebrity admiration over more than two decades (McCutcheon, 2025; McCutcheon & Aruguete, 2021), and the finding that many celebrity worshipers would also like to be celebrities themselves (Grabbe et al., 2024; Greenwood et al., 2018; Zsila et al., 2018; Zsila et al., 2019), it is somewhat reassuring to find that many persons would still rather be heroes than celebrities. Our research suggests that the general public recognizes that celebrities are sometimes shallow persons who are little more than individuals who can sing, act, or play a sport better than most humans. Perhaps non-celebrities have come to recognize that many celebrities are rather ordinary persons who sometimes behave badly.

Our second hypothesis was that the desire to be wealthy will be stronger than the desire to be non-wealthy. This was confirmed in round one, but disconfirmed in round two, where those randomly assigned to the hero condition actually scored slightly higher on the desire to not become wealthy than those assigned to the hero condition who chose to be wealthy. Further research is needed to understand why the results of hypothesis two were mixed.

Our third hypothesis was that there will be an interaction effect, such that desire to be a hero, coupled with the added bonus of becoming wealthy, will result in the strongest desire scores among the four groups. Both figures show that the desire to be a hero when coupled with being wealthy was not significantly stronger than desire scores for all three of the other groups, thus disconfirming hypothesis three. Both figures show a relatively strong desire to be a hero by the hero-not wealthy group. Why might someone wish to be a hero without getting monetary compensation? Possibly the desire to feel good about one's self, to enhance one's self-esteem, to be admired by others (Quora, n.d.). Persons who have learned to care about others, persons with a strong sense of empathy and morality, also might want to do something heroic, simply because they believe it is the right thing to do (Allison & Goethals, 2010).

Our fourth hypothesis, that there will be a positive correlation between scores on a measure of admiration for one's favorite celebrity and scores on a measure of the desire to be a celebrity, was confirmed for both rounds. This is consistent with previous research using the 23-item version of the CAS (Greenwood et al., 2018; Zsila et al., 2018; Zsila et al., 2019). Since the CAS-7 is relatively new (Zsila et al., 2024) our results, along with the strong alphas for the CAS-7 that we obtained, serve as additional validation for the CAS-7.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Cronbach alpha for the "desire to become a hero" scale in the first round was .687. This is slightly lower than the recommended cutoff point of .70. Our data are derived from self-reports, with the limitations that are inherent in such an approach to data gathering. For example, participants may be motivated to give answers that they think we expect them to give, and we have no way to check on the validity of their answers. The large number of persons whose data were deleted from round one suggests that they were either not paying sufficient attention and/or that the instructions were ambiguous. However, data from round two largely confirmed the results from round one. We suggest that our results should be replicated with samples other than college students. It seems possible that older persons, who often score a bit lower on the CAS (Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001; Maltby et al., 2003), might respond differently. Finally, our results suggests that future research should distinguish between celebrities, who are seemingly manufactured in Hollywood, and heroes, who often take large personal risks in order to help others, frequently with little reward.

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