

**Theses of Doctoral (PhD) dissertation**

**Phenomena of Stardom in (Late) Modern Popular Culture  
(An analysis of Hungarian women's weekly magazines)**

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## Subject matters and aims

The aim of this dissertation is to show and to analyze selected phenomena of stardom in (late) modern popular culture based on media texts in the written press, with a special focus on the roles of stars, on the continuous shift towards their private sphere, and on how the textual content is supplemented or contradicted by press photos. The paper discusses questions such as: How are foreign and Hungarian celebrities portrayed in selected Hungarian women's weekly magazines? What similarities and differences can be observed in the representation of these celebrities regarding the socio-historical context which determined their appearance and popularity? How do media texts change after the death or retirement of famous people? What are the differences and similarities between the various domains of stardom? What formal aspects and what means of content determination are required in order that a celebrity sells copies and remains a phenomenon in women's weekly magazines? What identity patterns are provided by certain articles, celebrities and domains of stardom? What is the definition of stars and celebrities in Hungary? Does a universally applicable definition exist at all?

The findings of this work may help to support the argument that it is necessary to discuss entertainment media in the scholarly discourse, since these forms of mass media reflect the characteristics of society and even confront us with specific issues; even though some intellectual approaches still consider this type of journalism to be "lowbrow".

Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of stardom is one of the most interesting, most complex and most controversial issues in today's mass culture. Consequently, it is essential to discuss this phenomenon in today's modern media environment for several reasons. Firstly, stars are part of our lives, as they appear in magazine columns, on television, on the radio, in online media; furthermore, in commercials and on billboards. Even if we do not consume mass media on a regular basis, and we sometimes condemn the stars who appear in these contexts, we are able to be "addicted" to them and to incorporate news about them into our social interactions. For example, the reality show about the Hungarian Roma singer Gáspár Győző and his family was widely criticized, but the show was ranked nine times among the twenty most popular Hungarian television shows. (IMRE, 2009)

Secondly, the complexity of stardom is also illustrated by the fact that "in the illusory realm of media, they [stars and celebrities] are also only mass products: there is always a new cult icon under the sun" (VÁRHEGYI, 2009, translation mine). Consequently, like ideals of beauty, images of stars and celebrities also change from time to time – but how does this change take place? Thirdly, stardom is not necessarily associated with talent today, since

thanks to technical advancement everyone can be world-famous for 15 minutes, as Andy Warhol claimed long ago. In the Hungarian language there is a difference between a star and a celebrity; however, this distinction is not necessarily observed in the public discourse. More precisely, such a distinction did not emerge during my study. Is it possible or necessary to differentiate between these terms at all? Fourthly, while a vast number of scholarly texts have been published in the field of celebrity studies in Anglo-Saxon cultural sociology, this area has received little attention in Hungary so far, although readership rankings and audience rating statistics show that tabloid journalism and stardom are very much present. Moreover, people still have negative prejudices towards stars and people do not accept media studies approaches which focus on why audiences are so passionate about stars and celebrities, how the news about them attracts attention, and why women's weekly magazines are able to sell so many copies. Consequently, this dissertation can encourage further research in this field.

### **Methods and Approaches**

Stardom can be investigated from a large variety of scholarly approaches, this project discusses this phenomenon only from the point of view of media studies, since a comprehensive study would go beyond the constraints of this project. In this work I have examined five domains of stardom: singers, actresses, television hosts, members of royal families and sportswomen. This project focuses on 15 famous women, each case study is restricted to selected women's weekly magazines including *Nők Lapja*, *Kiskegyed* and *Meglepetés*. The project deliberately ignores any political and economic considerations.

According to Niklas LUHMANN (2001), the question is not whether the media distorts reality, but: "how reality is constructed by the media?" (translation mine). To answer this question, several methods of data collection were used in this research project: First, Hungarian and international research results were assessed and summarized. Second, in 2012 structured interviews were conducted with Andrea Vékási, editor-in-chief of *Nők Lapja*, Péter Hídváry, managing editor of *Kiskegyed*, and Noémi Hegedűs, editor-in-chief of *Meglepetés*. Third, the research project is primarily based on the data and content analysis of selected articles published in these three magazines, since a critical look at media texts is crucial in the analysis of any cultural phenomenon.

In total, over 3,000 issues were analysed: 1,198 issues and 219 articles from *Nők Lapja*, 1,094 issues and 235 articles from *Kiskegyed*, and 880 issues and 143 articles from *Meglepetés*. The research encompasses 20 years of press material. All articles published about the selected

celebrities and stars were examined as follows: in *Nők Lapja* starting from 1990 and in the other two magazines from the first issue to 2012. Each article included in this large corpus was analysed based on specific criteria. First, form and content were examined along with press photos. Second, after the quantitative analysis, results were assessed and summarized in order to provide answers to the initial questions of the project.

To find out how frequently the selected stars and celebrities appeared between 1990 and 2012, and how the texts changed after their death or retirement, following aspects were analyzed in each case: the time of publication, page number, length and the position on the page. Subsequently, a content analysis was conducted, and in each article an overall theme was identified which in my view was predominant. Following a contextual analysis of this theme, the selected articles were divided into genres and further figures, the relationships between them, their activities, and their attributes and features were scrutinized. Visual information plays a decisive role in today's press products, which justifies the examination of the visual elements, therefore images in the selected articles and magazine covers, if there were any, were considered as well. Cover images were categorized based on which celebrities and stars were portrayed, as this reveals a lot about the content of the issue as well as about the image of women which the magazine aims to showcase. Another important aspect was the proportion between texts and images, since this relationship shows whether editors prefer images to texts or texts are dominant. The analysis focused on captions and the relationship between photos and captions, i.e. who and how are depicted in the pictures.

## **Overview of Research Results**

### **Introduction and research context**

Chapter 2 and 3 provide an overview of previous research in the field and contextualize stars, celebrities and famous people in terms of the Hungarian and international scholarly approaches. Although the phenomenon of stardom is a product of modernism and is closely linked to the emergence of the mass media, famous people existed way back in history. Moreover, the cult of celebrity should not be confused with the ancient hero cult. While nowadays anyone can be famous at any time, prior to the emergence of mass communication, heroes were so-called self-made men who embodied community values and became known through sacred texts and history books. This literature survey revealed that celebrities play a complex role in popular culture and in our daily lives of which they have become intimate

participants as well. Not only do they become role models for us, but they also function as a point of reference and shape our interactions. Furthermore, they also provide a variety of stories with their „functions” they have in media.

Although Western societies started to study the phenomena of stardom in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such scholarly approaches became widespread in Hungary in the last few decades. István POVEDÁK (2009), who discussed the contemporary cult of singers, athletes and politicians in his dissertation, was one of the Hungarian media scholars who followed this line of research. In her dissertation Andrea GÁLDINÉ GÁL (2007) conducted a content analysis and explored gender images in the sports section of Hungarian daily papers from the point of view of sports sociology. As for women’s magazines, Adrienn HARASZTI and Ágnes TÖMÖR (2013) published the results of a content analysis based on data from 2012. Other notable research results were published by the Hungarian psychiatrist Béla BUDA (1986), who outlined the phenomena of stardom in his study about “figurative” imaginary communication; and by Elemér HANKISS (2000), who had a sociological approach.

### **Research methods**

In Chapter 4 the methodology of the research project is presented including some remarks on its challenges. Firstly, it is impossible to describe and to discuss every single contemporary phenomenon of stardom. Secondly, the research project focused on a limited period of time, i.e. the corpus included articles which were published between 1990 and 2012. Consequently, the project cannot explain how long celebrities and stars (can) feature articles in women’s magazines. Thirdly, I cannot observe these phenomena from an objective point of view, as they are contemporary, which makes me part of the whole mechanism, i.e. I read these articles and incorporate them into my social interactions as well. Nevertheless, I hope that my work will be able to provide comprehensive as well as credible answers to the questions posed in my dissertation.

### **Content analysis of selected media texts**

The novelty of the dissertation lies in the content analysis of selected media texts which were published about 15 female public figures in Hungarian women’s weekly magazines. At an early stage of this project it was revealed that various types of media interact with and have an impact on each other. Furthermore, television plays a decisive role in this respect, as it

determines the content published in print media. As a result, print media are assigned a secondary function, stars and celebrities are perceived to be copies.

The comprehensive corpus analysis delivered following results:

- Even though visual elements are essential in print media as well, there was an equal number of images and texts about 12 of the 15 selected female stars and celebrities. In *Nők Lapja*, *Meglepetés* and *Kiskegyed* career, marriage, relationships, appearance and death were central issues. Despite the fact that all the magazines feature elements of tabloid journalism, values such as family life, happiness, appearance, or social recognition also appeared in these articles. The most important insight is that the type of woman these magazines create and circulate is the so-called self-made woman who is able to achieve tremendous success on her own.
- 6 of the selected famous women became well-known not in Hungary, i.e. they are from a completely different cultural environment; however, the analysis proved that the editors were able to create a popular and well-known image of them as if they were Hungarian celebrities as well. Altogether 597 texts and images were analyzed; most of the articles were about Princess Diana (194), Marilyn Monroe (64), Kata Dobó (49), Nóra Ördög (45), and Whitney Houston (44) - three international and two Hungarian celebrities. The conclusion is that international and Hungarian stars and celebrities are presented to be a homogeneous group in Hungarian women's magazines. Even though international stars and celebrities are strongly associated with the environment they come from (i.e. they are repeatedly labelled as "world stars"), this does not affect their role and the temporal extent of their appearance in the magazines, as they are contextualized according to the expectations of Hungarian readers.
- Sportswomen constitute the most special domain of stardom in the present analysis. Like singers, sportswomen become famous primarily due to their talent. However, the images of singers undoubtedly focus more and more on the private self. This shift of attention is only attempted but never fulfilled in the case of sportswomen. Magazines present their private lives, but their functional activities remain in the focus. There is

no self-reflection and there are hardly any events which attract significant attention. Their presence cannot be interpreted in the long run, sportswomen constitute a closed group. Like for other celebrities, visual aesthetics is important in the representation sportswomen. However, everything refers to sports including activities and other people in the photos. These representations suggest that neither sportswomen, nor editors are willing to highlight anything else than performance and sport talent. Though references to appearances are common, sport remains a paramount activity.

- Singers must engage in events which have a long-term impact and evoke a strong response in order to attract attention and to reactivate public interest. It is not enough to be talented. This why the phenomenon of Whitney Houston and Zsuzsa Cserhádi lost public attention. With the partial exception of the Hungarian singer Magdolna Rúzsá, women's magazines usually emphasize the private lives of the singers, which is a clear exploitation of our interest in other's lives. However, these famous women are also represented as „singers”, and the other elements associated with them are most often linked to their careers. In this domain of stardom, enduring popularity has two components: intentional appearance in media plus media interest in the particular singer.
- In contrast to singers, the representation of television hosts does not focus on functionality and is not bound to specific events. Personality traits prove to be sufficient for their representation. Magazine editors take advantage of the fact that television hosts have a greater impact with their statements, therefore these public figures are often used for special purposes as well. What is important in this respect is to what extent readers can identify with a television host, and how well a celebrity was able to meet the expectations of the Hungarian audience of tabloid journalism or if she failed to do so, what other characteristics attracted public attention. Most representations are related to their private life, but their various roles refer back to their professional activities. If there is no self-reflection or a first-person narrative (e.g. in the case of the television host Nóra Ördög), media attention is concentrated on appearance, provided the famous person is considered to be attractive.

Actresses have the most powerful representation. The roles identified with all three selected actresses are linked to their professional achievements. They are represented

as actresses or movie stars, i.e. their public appearance is central, even though their personal life attracts some attention as well. In general, actresses are overrepresented. In their photos we can hardly identify any activity, their predominant function is to emphasize femininity and sexuality. While in the portrayal of female singers, death represents a single moment of increased attention, and afterwards these celebrities completely vanish from magazines, the representation of actresses is characterized by a different approach. For example, Marilyn Monroe appeared 65 times in the selected issues, although she died several decades ago.

- The female members of royal families are represented in a different manner as well. First and foremost, these women are well-known due to their ancestry, i.e. they do not have to excel in any field or have other qualities such as an attractive appearance to receive media coverage. However, they must act like any other celebrity in order to receive permanent attention. Consequently, both the Duchess of Cambridge and the Princess of Wales are well-known and popular not only due to their ancestry but they also attracted public attention by their activities. In contrast to this, Duchess Eilika of Oldenburg disappeared, since she was only known due to her family background.
- The analysis of 597 articles revealed that Hungarian celebrities are not prioritized in these magazines at all. Their coverage does not depend on whether they are still alive or dead, as most pieces were published about Princess Diana and Marilyn Monroe. The princess died in 1997 and Monroe in 1962, so there were hardly any events in their lives which took place in the selected period of time. Still, more than one third of all articles featured them. Furthermore, most articles about 6 of the selected 15 female celebrities were published in *Nők Lapja* and *Kiskegyed*. There were only three female public figures (Duchess Eilika of Oldenburg, Anna Kournikova and Magdi Rúzsa) who had a larger number of representations in *Meglepetés* than in the two other magazines. It is also visible that Oprah Winfrey, Duchess Eilika, Anna Kournikova, Zsuzsa Cserhádi and Anita Kulcsár only had a limited impact on readers and their phenomena completely disappeared. The other 10 female celebrities were represented over and over again. Three of them received more and more attention over time, 7 of them were constantly present in these magazines, which required events capable of generating public interest. These events were usually related to career, death or marriage/love. In addition, female celebrities had to appear in lengthy articles in order

to show a variety of roles; for example, Princess Diana featured in 20, Kata Dobó in 11 and Marilyn Monroe in 8 different roles. It was equally important that readers could identify with these celebrities as much as possible because only celebrities who disclose some parts of their private life are able to receive wide coverage in Hungarian women's magazines in the long run. Personal life was the most frequent topic (8 times), followed by career issues (3 times), love and marriage (3 times) and appearances (twice) and death (once).

- After this analysis, the selected 15 female celebrities and stars were divided into four categories: stars, celebrities, legends and public figures exploited by tabloid journalism. However, these categories are only valid for the present investigation. We could have a quite different representation of these famous people in other media; consequently, these categories might not be applicable in other contexts. The following classification is therefore not generally applicable, since these categories are based on how these famous people were represented in the selected Hungarian women's magazines and how they attracted public attention (more precisely, how magazine editors framed these celebrities).

According to my interpretation, *stars* were propelled into public life because they have a well-defined ability and have achieved something. They attract the attention of consumers with their spectacular performance. *Celebrities* are public figures who receive publicity not primarily due to their achievements, but rather due to their outstanding characteristics. *Legends* are extremely famous in a field of public life, attract attention for several decades and are considered to be role models. The fourth category is labelled *public figures exploited by tabloid journalism* and it includes famous people who barely shaped their representation in the media because they were reluctant to do so and were not interested in their public image. However, as they happened to be famous for some reason, they were portrayed and discussed in the public. The media exploited therefore their phenomena.

**Stars:**

- 1) *Magdolna Rózsa* (a Hungarian pop singer)
- 2) *Kata Dobó* (a Hungarian actress)
- 3) *Catherine – Duchess of Cambridge*

**Celebrities:**

- 1) *Zsuzsa Cserháti* (a Hungarian pop singer)
- 2) *Whitney Houston*
- 3) *Nóra Ördög* (a Hungarian talk show host)
- 4) *Oprah Winfrey*
- 5) *Györgyi Albert* (a Hungarian journalist)
- 6) *Anna Kournikova*

**Legends:**

- 1) *Mari Törőcsik* (a Hungarian actress)
- 2) *Marilyn Monroe*
- 3) *Diana – Princess of Wales*

**Public figures exploited by tabloid journalism:**

- 1) *Krisztina Egerszegi* (a Hungarian world record holding swimmer)
- 2) *Anita Kulcsár* (a Hungarian handball player)
- 3) *Duchess Eilika of Oldenburg*

The research project revealed that stories about famous people are highly intricate. Although further research is needed and it would be worth extending the scope of the present analysis, I hope to have managed to prove with my project that stars and celebrities have a crucial impact on our life, as they are reflections and “symptoms” of our society. Consequently, these phenomena should be discussed in scholarly discourses.

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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian books (1)

1. **Bruszel, D.:** Rúzsza Magdolna megjelenítése a Magyar női magazinokban. GlobeEdit, Beau Bassin, 52 p., 2018. ISBN: 9786138244868

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2. **Bruszel, D.:** Sztár vagy Celeb?: A hírnév vizsgálata a populáris kultúrában. *Szabolcs-Szatmár-Beregi Szle.* 50 (1), 143-149, 2015. ISSN: 1216-092X.
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