



# Admiring Celebrities: A Critique of the Celebrity Attitude Scale and the Absorption-addiction Model

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**Abstract:** I described the 23-item Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS) and cited several studies that attest to its reliability and validity. Research with the CAS has led to the Absorption-addiction model, which holds that the vast majority of celebrity admirers do so primarily for entertainment and social reasons (CAS-ES; level one). A minority become intensely involved with their favorite celebrities, closely identifying with their personal lives (CAS-IP; level two). An even smaller minority becomes so involved with their favorite celebrity that they would condone stalking and consider illegal behaviors directed toward their favorite celebrity (CAS-BP; level three). The Absorption-addiction model could be conceptualized as a part of the broader theory of Extremism. Extremism holds that attitudes and behaviors stem from a motivational imbalance whereby a particular need becomes so dominant that it overwhelms other basic needs (Aruguete et al., 2024). A small percentage of celebrity worshipers become so attached to their favorite celebrity that they tend to neglect other important needs. I present considerable empirical evidence to support the Absorption-addiction model and point out that there are indeed many “serious fans” who do not meet any criteria for pathology. I debunk the claim that those who obsess about celebrities become stalkers of celebrities, by presenting evidence that only a tiny minority of celebrity worshipers become celebrity stalkers. Finally, I propose a change to the Absorption-addiction model. Based on an accumulation of years of evidence and two recent studies, CAS-IP and CAS-BP are now merged into one level that should be labeled as unhealthy.

**Keywords:** Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS), Absorption-Addiction Model, Celebrity Worship, Extremism Theory, Psychological Involvement, Stalking Behavior, Fan Pathology.

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## What is the Celebrity Attitude Scale?

Celebrity worship has been defined as an excessive interest in the life of a famous person (see McCutcheon et al., 2002; McCutcheon et al., 2004). McCutcheon and colleagues set out to measure interest in and worship of celebrities, in terms of degrees of admiration for a favorite celebrity (McCutcheon et al., 2004). Scale items measured the extent to which celebrities were admired. They tested their items, discarded some based on psychometric properties, and wrote new ones. Using Rasch analysis and factor analysis, they developed the *Celebrity Attitude Scale* (CAS) and found three levels of celebrity admiration: entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological (McCutcheon et al., 2002). Entertainment-social (ES, 10 items) is reflected in agreement with items like “I love to talk with others who admire my favorite celebrity.” A second level of celebrity worship is characterized by more intense-personal (IP, 9 items) feelings, defined by items like “I have frequent thoughts about my celebrity,

even when I don’t want to.” The third level, labeled borderline-pathological (BP, 4 items), is exemplified in items like: “If I were lucky enough to meet my favorite celebrity, and he/she asked me to do something illegal as a favor I would probably do it.” The response format for the CAS is a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). High scores indicate a strong attachment to one’s favorite celebrity. Previous studies have established the reliability and validity of the scale (e.g., see Greenwood et al., 2018; Griffith et al., 2013, Hitlan et al., 2021; & see Brooks, 2018, for a review). Typical alphas for the total scale range from .84 to .94, although alphas for the BP are sometimes at .70 or lower (Zsila et al., 2025).

A pattern of research findings has emerged over two decades, linking excessive celebrity admiration with several psychologically unhealthy attitudes and behaviors. Scores on the CAS indicate a tendency for those who show excessive admiration for a favorite celebrity (usually high scores on levels two and three) to also

exhibit irresponsible attitudes (McCutcheon et al., 2014), neuroticism and its facets (Maltby et al., 2003, 2011), social anxiety (Jia et al., 2023) poor psychological well-being (Maltby et al., 2001), compulsive buying (Reeves et al., 2012), compulsive gambling (Lian et al., 2019), eating disorders in men (Aruguete et al., 2014), poor body image in adolescent girls (Maltby et al., 2005), a tendency to condone the stalking of celebrities (McCutcheon et al., 2016; McCutcheon et al., 2006), problematic internet use (Mauli & Agustina, 2022) maladaptive daydreaming (Mandli et al., 2022; Zsila et al., 2018), intentional self-injury and suicide attempts (Zsila et al., 2020) and impulsivity (Aruguete et al., 2019).

Typically accompanying the CAS are a varying number of demographic items depending on the goals of a particular study. Respondents are nearly always asked to identify a favorite celebrity and choose from among 14 categories to describe why that celebrity is famous. Several studies have shown that musicians (about 30%), actors (about 30%), and athletes (about 15%) are the most popular choices. Choices of a favorite celebrity stem from one of these three categories about 70 to 80 percent of the time (Aruguete et al., 2018; Griffith et al., 2013; McCutcheon et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2007; Zsila, et al., 2018). Most studies have shown no gender difference (Brooks, 2018). Black Americans tend to score slightly higher than White Americans, with Asian and Latinx Americans in between (McCutcheon et al., 2016). The small number of studies that have reported on age as a demographic variable have tended to show either no relationship to CAS scores or weak tendencies for age to be inversely related to CAS scores (Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001; Maltby et al., 2003; Zsila et al., 2018).

### **The Theoretical Foundation of the Celebrity Attitude Scale**

The theoretical framework for the study of celebrity admiration/worship, labeled the Absorption-addiction model, evolved from the work of McCutcheon and colleagues (Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001; Griffith et al., 2013; Maltby et al., 2002; Maltby & McCutcheon, 2001; McCutcheon et al., 2002; 2004). In science that is the logical flow of ideas. That body of research using the CAS has grown to about 125 published studies, many of which are discussed in a review paper by Brooks (2018).

According to the Absorption-addiction model, most people who become strongly attracted to a favorite celebrity do so because they admire the skill of that celebrity, are entertained by that celebrity, and enjoy talking about that person with others. This is a relatively benign level that includes the majority of those who greatly admire a certain celebrity (Maltby et al., 2003). A small minority of those who are attracted to celebrities for entertainment-social reasons, eventually move on to the second level, labeled intense-personal. This second level is marked by a strong absorption in the personal life of the favorite celebrity, with frequent thoughts about the celebrity and an obsession with details of his or her life. Level two persons lack a sense of identity so they compensate by bonding with a favorite celebrity. From level two, a minority of persons, perhaps deserving of the term “worshippers,” progress to level three and become truly addicted. These borderline pathological persons are likely to condone the stalking of celebrities (McCutcheon et al., 2006, 2016) and would consider doing something illegal if asked by their favorite celebrity (Item 17 from the *Celebrity Attitude Scale*). It is primarily the two higher levels

that are associated with problematic attitudes and behaviors (Maltby et al., 2003; McCutcheon et al., 2014).

Aruguete et al (2024) attempted to relate Absorption-addiction to three broader social psychological theories. Scores on the CAS, as a proxy for the Absorption-addiction model, were found to be positively related to measures of all three theories: Sense of Emptiness (Cushman, 1990), the Dualistic Model of Passion (Vallerand et al. 2003) and Extremism theory (Kruglanski et al. 2021). Of these three, Extremism theory was the best predictor of CAS scores. Extremism holds that attitudes and behaviors stem from a motivational imbalance whereby a particular need or goal becomes so dominant that it overwhelms other basic needs. For example, a man becomes so enamored with Taylor Swift that he neglects his wife and children. Extremism often has negative consequences. Extremists often become so neglectful of other important needs that it causes troubled relationships and troubling behaviors, such as the ones described above. Extremists, who are usually law-abiding citizens, may consider performing morally objectionable and illegal behaviors if obsessed with their favorite celebrity (Aruguete et al., 2024; McCutcheon et al., 2016).

### **Criticisms of and Evidence Relating to the Absorption-addiction Model**

No psychological scale or test is perfect, so it follows that any theory in psychology based on a single measure would also be imperfect. One criticism leveled at the Absorption-addiction model is that it “leaves little room for empirical assessment, particularly in terms of nonclinical contexts” (Maltby & Day, 2017, p. 104). Similar criticisms have been leveled by Stever (2011) and Vinney et al. (2019).

Any scientific model should leave room for empirical assessment. In fact, there is considerable empirical evidence that lends credence to the theory. One piece of evidence stems from a study by Griffith et al. (2013). The Absorption-addiction model holds that persons who score high on the two problematic subscales of the CAS, namely Intense-Personal (I-P) and Borderline Pathological (B-P), have become absorbed and/or obsessed with their favorite celebrities. If that is true, then we would expect high scorers on these subscales to be less likely to adopt a new favorite celebrity over a three-month interval, as compared to those with lower scores on these two subscales. In fact, among those who scored higher than the mean on the CAS Intense-Personal and Borderline Pathological subscales at one point in time, the percentage who chose the same favorite celebrity three months later was 79.2%, as compared with 63.9% for those who scored below the mean on these two subscales (Griffith, et al., 2013). The difference was statistically significant and suggests a greater level of commitment to a favorite celebrity among those who have moved beyond the relatively benign level one, just as the model predicts.

According to the Absorption-addiction model and Extremism theory persons who are highly attached to their favorite celebrity are likely to be neglectful of other competing needs and behaviors. As noted above, this can lead to trouble for highly addicted persons. Consequently, we might expect such persons to be unhappy and somewhat dysfunctional. Compulsive buying (Chen et al., 2022; Hwang et al., submitted; Reeves et al., 2012) intentional self-injury and suicidal attempts (Zsila et al., 2020), neuroticism and its facets (Maltby et al., 2003), poor psychological well-being (Fauziah & Chusairi, 2022; Kusumawardani & Agustina, 2022; Maltby et al., 2001), low self-esteem (Dianito et

al., 2023; Kusuma & Yuliawati, 2013), loneliness (Krismana et al., 2023), and dissociation (Maltby et al., 2005) have all been found to be correlated with CAS scores.

Maltby and Day (2017) administered the CAS to a large number of undergraduates, along with the Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988), two brief instruments that measure positive affect and negative affect. Positive words like “excited,” “interested,” and “attentive” are words that would be associated with the entertainment-social level (CAS-ES). Words like “nervous,” “upset,” and “distressed,” are negative words associated with the anxiety and neuroticism previously linked to levels two and three of the Absorption-addiction Model (Maltby et al., 2003; Maltby et al., 2011). In fact, Maltby and Day (2017) showed that positive affect correlated .17 ( $p < .01$ ) with scores on the entertainment-social level, and negative affect scores correlated .22 and .28 (both  $p < .01$ ) with the two problematic levels of celebrity admiration, as the Absorption-addiction model predicts.

A celebrity stalking study (McCutcheon et al., 2016) offered further confirmation for the validity of the Absorption-addiction model. The “threat” subscale of a measure of celebrity stalking contains items such as one that describes a sexual act that the fictional stalker would like to perform on the celebrity. In addition, there was a measure of obnoxious fan behavior that described acts that were far beyond normal fan behavior. The Absorption-addiction model predicts that level one admirers, who are attracted to their favorite celebrity mostly for entertainment reasons (CAS-ES), would be much less likely to score high on threat and obnoxious fan behavior as compared to those who are addicted or obsessed. In fact, CAS-ES did not correlate with the threat subscale, but CAS IP and CAS BP were both significant with threat at the .01 level. CAS-ES did correlate positively at the .05 level with obnoxious fan behavior, but CAS-IP and CAS- BP both did at the .01 level.

The argument has been made that persons who score high on measures of intelligence would not be expected to score high on the CAS, especially the two more problematic levels (McCutcheon et al., 2012). There are several possible reasons for this, including the possibility that smart persons would be more likely to understand that the celebrity system is largely designed to manipulate people into buying products. Bright persons might also be more interested in ideas than people and may perceive themselves as being smarter than many celebrities, thus “looking down” on them rather than “looking up.” Why put someone on a pedestal who is no more talented or intelligent than you? (McCutcheon, et al., 2012, pp. 383-384). The reasons why greater intellect is associated with less admiration for celebrities are less than clear, but the data supporting the argument are reasonably consistent across several studies and several measures of intellect, including scores on critical thinking, vocabulary, cognitive flexibility, creativity, crystallized intelligence, and level of academic achievement (Aruguete et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2003; McCutcheon et al., 2012; McCutcheon et al., 2004; McCutcheon et al., 2003; McCutcheon et al., 2014; McCutcheon et al., 2021).

Religious skeptics are persons who doubt the existence of God. It seems reasonable to think that religious skeptics would also be reluctant to believe in the celebrities that many persons think have achieved near God-like status. In fact, a comparison of strong believers versus religious skeptics showed that the skeptics scored significantly lower than the believers on the CAS (McCutcheon et

al., 2015), providing additional support for the Absorption-addiction model. Thus, it would appear that there is ample empirical support for the Absorption-addiction Model.

A second criticism of the Absorption-addiction Model is that there are a number of “serious fans who do not meet any criteria for pathology related to celebrity worship” (Maltby & Day, 2017, p. 104). This criticism reflects a misunderstanding of the Absorption-addiction Model. According to research supporting the model, only about 36% of the total respondents in one study (Maltby, et al., 2003) were labeled as celebrity worshipers, and almost none of them were on level three (CAS-BP). According to the model, most would never move on to the more problematic levels. Thus, we should not be surprised to find that many persons who are fans do not meet any criteria for pathology, because such a claim was simply not made in the Absorption-addiction model. According to the Absorption-addiction model normal attitudes and behaviors should be associated with level one (CAS-ES) because it is normal to admire a celebrity who is entertaining and whose performances promote socializing with like-minded friends. It seems quite possible to be a serious fan of a great athlete, a fine actor, or a popular singer without necessarily being obsessed with that person’s personal life.

In some of the more recent publications involving the CAS, the phrase ‘excessive admiration’ has been used instead of ‘worship’ as a means of recognizing that ‘worship’ is too strong a term to describe many persons who score just above the midpoint of the CAS, especially those who score high only on CAS ES/level one (Aruguete, Huynh, Collisson, et al., 2019; Aruguete, Huynh, McCutcheon et al., 2019; McCutcheon et al., 2016, Price et al., 2014).

A study by McCutcheon and Aruguete (2021) provides further insight bearing on this criticism. They looked closely at 34 studies conducted in the United States over a 20-year span in which the CAS was used. They documented for each study the percentage of persons whose scores were above the mean for each of the three subscales. If there are many serious fans who do not meet any criteria for pathology, we might expect to find higher percentages in level one (CAS-ES) than in the other two more problematic/pathological levels. In 28 of the 34 studies the percentages for CAS-ES were higher than the percentages for CAS-IP and CAS-BP combined. In 32 of the 34 studies the percentages for CAS-ES were higher than the percentages for either of the two problematic levels. A study done in the Philippines also showed higher mean scores for CAS-ES as compared to the other two subscales for both males and females (Vega et al., 2013). Studies conducted in Hungary (Zsila et al., 2018) and India (Sekar et al., 2024) also revealed higher mean scores for CAS-ES.

Further evidence that many serious fans do not meet the criteria for pathology can be found in a few studies that showed “normal” attitudes and behaviors associated with scores on CAS-ES, level one (Aruguete et al., 2019; Maltby, et al., 2011; Maltby et al., 2004). Aruguete and colleagues found that scores on CAS-ES were unrelated to a lack of gratitude toward those who had been helpful, although lack of gratitude did characterize those who scored high on CAS-I-P (2019). Maltby and colleagues (2004) found that CAS-ES scores were associated with extraversion, but CAS-IP and CAS-BP scores were both associated with poor mental health. Maltby and colleagues (2011) also found that extraversion, one of

the “Big Five” personality traits, was associated with scores on CAS-ES (level one), but not with levels two or three. On the other hand, neuroticism and all of its facets were associated with level two, but not level one. Flint et al. (2022) found that those who scored high on CAS-ES tended to make rational decisions, but they found no relationship between rational decision-making and scores on CAS-IP and CAS-BP. On the other hand, they found high scores on CAS-BP were significantly associated with a tendency to avoid making decisions. That tendency was not present in those who scored high on CAS-ES.

Stever (2017) claimed that researchers have argued that those who obsess about celebrities become stalkers of celebrities. The statement is misleading because it creates the impression that it is rather common for celebrity worshipers to become celebrity stalkers. Stever cited an article by Ferris (2001) and one by McCutcheon and his colleagues (2006) in support of this claim. Ferris told me (personal communication, April 24, 2019) that his data actually showed that fans try to differentiate themselves from celebrity stalkers. A careful reading of Ferris’ paper indicates that when fans unexpectedly encounter celebrities in the real world and attempt to approach them, they make an effort to reassure the celebrities that they are *not* stalkers, and therefore not dangerous.

McCutcheon and his colleagues (2006) developed a scale to measure the extent to which college students condoned 11 types of behaviors that could be construed as celebrity stalking. For example, one item reads “A fan somehow found out the private phone number of the fan’s favorite celebrity, and called four times in two days, making obscene comments each time.” Scores can range from 11 to 77, with high scores indicating that such behaviors are acceptable. The mean score was 23.4, considerably below the midpoint of the scale. There were significant positive correlations between scores on this scale and scores on the three subscales of the CAS (CAS-ES =.25, CAS-IP =.35, & CAS-BP =.25), indicating that as the level of celebrity admiration increased so did the tendency to condone celebrity stalking. Note, however, that condoning the stalking of celebrities was rare, and none of the correlation coefficients were high, suggesting that there were many individual exceptions to the trend for high CAS scores to be associated with the condoning of celebrity stalking. Most importantly, the *condoning* of celebrity stalking is not the same thing as *becoming* a celebrity stalker.

Stever did not cite the follow-up study by McCutcheon, et al. (2016), one which successfully replicated the results of the 2006 study. In addition, an 18-item scale of obnoxious fan activities was developed. A sample item involved a request for sex with the celebrity. This scale, with a possible range of 18 to 90, asked the 145 college student participants how often, if ever, they had ever actually engaged in one or more of the 18 obnoxious fan behaviors. The mean score was 19.63, suggesting that most of the students had *never* engaged in any of the obnoxious fan behaviors. Scores on this scale did correlate positively (ES =.17, IP = .31, BP = .22) with each of the three CAS subscale scores. However, none of these coefficients is very high. In other words, very few of the participants who had high scores on the CAS had ever actually frequently engaged in many of the obnoxious behaviors that characterize celebrity stalkers.

To this point in the discussion I have focused on criticisms that I believe are false or greatly exaggerated. There is at least one legitimate criticism that I have not addressed.

As noted above, Absorption-addiction theory holds that most celebrity admirers never move on to levels two or three. Those that do, move first to CAS-IP. A few of those who reach the CAS-IP level move on to the even more serious CAS-BP level. When the model was first constructed, based on the first few available studies, this appeared to be true (McCutcheon et al., 2002). If the theoretical model is valid, we would expect that mean scores per subscale item would be highest for CAS-ES, followed by CAS-IP, then CAS-BP. However, other studies provide only minimal support, so the Absorption-addiction model is only partially supported by the evidence. CAS-ES mean scores are almost always higher than mean scores for the two problematic subscales, but the order is usually reversed between CAS-IP and CAS-BP. For example, McCutcheon and Aruguete (2021) examined 34 studies using the CAS in the United States in which data were available for all three subscales. They found that CAS-BP had higher means than CAS-IP 20 times with two ties. Furthermore, mean scores for CAS-ES are almost always *considerably* higher than scores for CAS-IP and CAS-BP, which are usually close together. For example, mean scores per item in the study by McCutcheon, Lowinger et al., (2014) were 2.5 for CAS-ES, 1.64 for CAS-IP, and 1.79 for CAS-BP. The four-item CAS-BP has also habitually been plagued by low or marginal alphas (see Aruguete et al., 2014; Maltby & Day, 2011; McCutcheon et al., 2006; Reeves et al., 2012; Zsila et al., 2018).

Consequently, I am proposing a change to the Absorption-addiction model. Thus CAS-ES, which combines entertainment and social reasons for the admiration of a favorite celebrity, should still be conceptualized as a largely healthy form of celebrity admiration, but CAS-IP and CAS-BP are now merged into one level that should be labeled as unhealthy. This proposed change enjoys the empirical support of research by Zsila et al., 2024. That study resulted in an excellent fit for a two-factor model. The CAS-7 retains seven of the psychometrically best items from the 23-item version. Three items were chosen from CAS-ES, two from CAS-IP, and two from CAS-BP. The CAS-7 had an alpha of .88. It also showed that problematic Internet use, depression, anxiety and stress were more strongly linked to the unhealthy subscale. 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. Hwang et al. (submitted) found that high CAS-7 scores were predictive of compulsive buying. These results are all consistent with previous research using the 23-item version.

## Conclusion

Several criticisms of the Celebrity Attitude Scale and the Absorption-addiction model have been leveled. The first (1) claim is that the absorption-addiction model does not lend itself to empirical assessment. Another (2) is that researchers have claimed that all or nearly all “serious fans” develop pathological symptoms. Yet another (3) is that researchers have argued that those who obsess about celebrities become stalkers of celebrities. I presented considerable empirical evidence that generally supports the Absorption-addiction model, thus debunking the first claim. I showed that the second claim is simply untrue. A careful reading of the relevant research literature shows that the overwhelming majority of celebrity admirers do not score high on the psychologically unhealthy levels of the Celebrity Attitude Scale. I

also showed evidence that only a tiny minority of celebrity worshipers actually become celebrity stalkers. Finally, I am proposing a change to the Absorption-addiction model. Based on an accumulation of years of evidence and three recent studies, CAS-IP and CAS-BP are now merged into one level that should be labeled as unhealthy.

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