

# CELEBRITIES' QUEST FOR A BETTER WORLD

## UNDERSTANDING FLEMISH PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CELEBRITIES' SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT

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### Abstract

Although one of the main aims of celebrities' societal engagement is to grab the attention of a wide audience for a social cause, research about public perceptions of the phenomenon is scarce. This study wants to gain a theoretical and empirical insight into the possible influence of celebrities' engagements on the general population. An internet survey among a sample of one thousand Flemish adults was conducted to ascertain which celebrities are considered to support social causes and how the general population perceives this phenomenon. Results show a select group of celebrity supporters, i.e. those in a deeply engaged role or with a considerable track record of engagement, to be the most popular. While most respondents consider such celebrity engagements to make a significant contribution to social-profit organisations' goals, scepticism about the celebrities' motives is apparent. Young adults and celebrity news followers, traditionally less involved in social causes, demonstrate a more positive attitude towards celebrity engagement than older respondents. As such, celebrities' societal engagement might be advantageous in reaching thus far uninterested parts of society.

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## Introduction

In recent years, engaging celebrities to promote social causes and non-profit organisations has become a widespread practice, aimed at creating awareness, fundraising, and, most of all, reaching vast new sections of the general population. This phenomenon holds a certain history. Huliaras and Tzifakis (2011) see the 1953 appointment of US actor Danny Kaye as the United Nations' first Goodwill Ambassador as a key moment in celebrity engagement. Celebrities had engaged in social causes before, sporadically and on their own account, but Kaye's UN engagement marked the creation of the celebrity ambassador appointed by an institutionalised organisation (Huddart 2005). The concept has since been expanded within the UN, especially under Secretary-General Kofi Annan (Alleyne 2006; Huliaras and Tzifakis 2011; Wheeler 2011), and was adopted by many other non-profit organisations.

This eagerness of organisations to engage celebrities coincided with a growing autonomy of celebrities from employers, following the erosion of the Hollywood studios' star system, and from mainstream media through new, interactive media. This allowed them to manage their own brand and identity, and to speak out on all kinds of issues (Huliaras and Tzifakis 2011). Essentially a construct (Rojek 2001), resulting from communication between a person looking for exposure, the media and the general population, fame is a mediated interplay between a public persona or image based on public activities, a private persona based on the private life as it is presented to the world, and glimpses of the perceived real person behind the image (Holmes 2005). When a celebrity supports a social cause, he/she additionally creates a socio-political image or persona, either from personal conviction and a need for self-fulfilment, or from a utilitarian attempt at self-promotion (Street 2004; Cashmore 2006). This socio-political persona helps to fill the gap between a celebrity's public and private image (Corner 2000). This not only resulted in a boom in cooperations of celebrities with non-profit organisations, but also re-ignited the notion of celebrities creating their own initiatives, with Bob Geldof as the seminal example. Celebrity engagement in social causes and non-profit organisations has thus reached an unprecedented scale (Fain 2008; Littler 2008; Samman, Mc Auliffe and MacLachlan 2009; Marsh, 't Hart and Tindall 2010; Stohl, Stohl and Stohl 2011; Huliaras and Tzifakis 2011), causing Van den Bulck and Tambuyzer (2008) to consider the celebrity-without-a-cause as an anomaly and making the question of the general population's perception of this phenomenon urgent and topical. Research in this regard, however, is close to non-existent. This article therefore aims to provide a better understanding of the general population's perceptions of celebrities' societal engagement.

Celebrities' societal engagement is as widespread as it is diverse. For that reason, data analysis is preceded, first, by an analysis of the different types of celebrity engagement audiences are confronted with and, second, by an insight into reasons behind the growth of celebrities' societal engagement. Third, the text discusses the rare studies focusing on the audiences of celebrity-supported causes and organisations. This theoretical framework provides the necessary conceptual tools for the analysis and discussion of the primary data from the survey, the final sections of this article.

## Celebrities' Societal Engagement: A Broad and Diverse Phenomenon

Celebrities' societal engagement can be targeted at different actors in civil society, including policy makers, entrepreneurs, members of a particular non-profit organisation (e.g. field workers), the media, and, finally, the general population. The focal point of this article is the general population, although some of the issues mentioned below apply to other target groups as well.

The growth of the phenomenon led to an increased academic attention from different perspectives, resulting in a diverse terminology. Literature ranges from scholars who look at it from a marketing or advertising point of view ("endorsers in a non-profit context," Wheeler 2009) over a socio-philanthropic angle ("celebrity humanitarianism," Yrjölä 2011; "celebrity philanthropy," Nickel and Eikenberry 2009; "celebrity advocacy," Thrall et al. 2008) to a political focus ("celebrity diplomacy," Cooper 2008; Pleios 2011; "celebrity politics," West and Orman 2003). Acknowledging this multiplicity of celebrities' societal engagement, we suggest to use the broader terms "celebrity engagement" and "celebrity supporters," defining the latter as "individuals who enjoy public recognition, known primarily from areas other than that of their societal engagement, using their fame to advocate or lobby for, create awareness of, and/or help raise funds for a social cause or non-profit organisation."

Celebrity engagement can range from an optional, one time photo shoot for a non-profit campaign, over a lengthy engagement as celebrity ambassador for a particular organisation, to political lobbying for urgent issues and causes. Huddart (2005) distinguishes between three types of celebrity engagement: advocating a cause, creating public awareness for it, and calling upon the audience to raise funds. In each case, celebrities can demonstrate a low, medium, high, or transformational level of commitment (Huddart 2005). The latter level applies to celebrities that alter the face of celebrity engagement, such as Bob Geldof or Bono. This results in the first research question (RQ1): which celebrities does the general population think of when asked to name celebrity supporters, and more specifically (RQ1a) do these celebrities engage in an intense role or not?

Finlay (2011) and Pleios (2011) further distinguish between celebrities who act on their own account and those forming an alliance with an established organisation. The former is considered by Finlay (2011) an individually controlled approach, in which the engagement is strongly identified with a celebrity's personality and the celebrity is accountable for the cause and campaign's legitimacy in the eyes of the general population. The latter stands for a multilateral approach in which legitimacy towards the general population is backed by an established non-profit organisation. Both authors name Bono and Geldof as examples of the former, and Angelina Jolie's engagement as Goodwill Ambassador for the UNHCR as prototypical of the latter type of celebrity supporter. This leads to the next research question (RQ1b): when asked to name celebrity supporters, does the general population think of celebrities acting on their own account or celebrities teaming up with a non-profit organisation?

The engagement of celebrities is further characterised by the variety of issues they support. While academic literature often focuses on public promotion of de-

velopment aid (Duvall 2007; Fain 2008; Samman, Mc Auliffe and MacLachlan 2009; Finlay 2011), the range of topics supported by celebrities is much wider, including among others climate change (Boykoff and Goodman 2009), health issues (Larson et al. 2005) and animal welfare (Simonson 2001). The resulting research question (RQ1c) investigates if the general population thinks of celebrities supporting certain types of causes more than others.

The diversity in celebrity engagement is further caused by changes in the concept of fame itself. While this predominantly used to be an ascribed or achieved status of recognition, in today's contemporary culture, it is mainly attributed by the media (Rojek 2001). Shifts in the entertainment industry and ICT have brought it within reach of "ordinary" people (reality television and YouTube stars), generating stardom of a more temporary, artificial and unstable nature. What is more, public fame is increasingly generated in other sectors of society than the entertainment industry, creating a very heterogeneous group of celebrities (Jackson and Darrow 2005). This diversity is reflected in the celebrities supporting social causes as well (Stohl, Stohl and Stohl 2011), resulting in the following research question (RQ1d): when the general population is asked to name celebrity supporters, do the answers reflect the diversity in types of celebrity and fame? 't Hart and Tindall (2009) hypothesise that celebrities' societal activities will be seen as more significant and successful by the general population; (a) the more merit-based the source of their initial fame; (b) the higher the prestige of the cultural sphere in which the celebrity gained fame; (c) the more enduring the fame; and (d) the broader (geographical and numerical) and wider (across social strata and cultural groups) the scope of their fame.

The latter hypothesis of 't Hart and Tindall, on the geographical scope of fame, illustrates how it has been equally integrated on local and global as well as on mainstream and subcultural levels (Ferris 2010). In Flanders, the Dutch speaking community of Belgium, the concept "Bekende Vlaming" (Famous Fleming) is used to refer to local media personalities (Van Gestel and De Meyer 2002). While their fame is often limited to a specific geo-cultural setting, local celebrities as much as their global counterparts are seen to support many social causes. Therefore, RQ1e looks at the extent to which the general Flemish public thinks of local rather than global celebrity supporters.

## Reasons and Motivations for Celebrity Engagement and Public Perceptions of the Phenomenon

Following Huliaras and Tzifakis (2011), we distinguish several reasons and motivations behind the omnipresence of celebrities' societal engagement. First, with shifting media selection criteria that favour soft news over hard news issues (Evans and Hesmondhalgh 2005), non-profit organisations increasingly turn to marketing techniques such as the use of celebrities to promote and create awareness of their cause, in an attempt to deal with the growing number of such organisations (Liao, Foreman and Sargeant 2001). Celebrities are able to grab the media's attention and as such create public visibility and thus awareness for a cause or organisation (Meyer and Gamson 1995; West and Orman 2003; Alleyne 2005; Duvall 2007). In Samman, Mc Auliffe and MacLachlan's (2009) and Scompany's (2005) empirical studies almost half of the respondents claim they became more aware of a non-profit organisation's cause through celebrity engagement. Acknowledging the issue of

self-reporting in these studies, the second main research question builds on these findings (RQ2): is the general population aware of the causes and/or organisations that are supported by the celebrities named?

According to Wheeler (2002), creating awareness is of particular interest to small or new organisations that do not have an established position with the media and public yet. Here celebrities can help to increase the perceived public legitimacy and credibility of an organisation (Meyer and Gamson 1995; Alleyne 2005). Both the Samman, Mc Auliffe and MacLachlan (2009) and Scompany (2005) studies found that audiences believe celebrity engagement can help to raise the profile of a non-profit organisation. Our third research question is therefore (RQ3): how does the general population perceive celebrity engagement, first (RQ3a) in relation to the organisations' motivations and benefits?

Second, celebrities are seen to engage in social causes in order to retain (or reclaim) their fame (Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos and Huliaras 2011). Celebrity engagement could be a suitable way to do that, particularly since, following Huliaras and Tzifakis (2011), it can be argued that the phenomenon's omnipresence has created a perception that it has become a standard feature of being a celebrity. This can stimulate other celebrities to join in, even if they are not suitable or do it for the wrong reasons. However, these ulterior motives could lead to public scepticism, questioning a celebrity's legitimate stance and sincerity (West and Orman 2003; Street 2004; Huddart 2005). Samman, Mc Auliffe and MacLachlan's (2009) study indeed points at a level of scepticism, since thirty percent of their respondents spontaneously named "self-promotion" as celebrities' main motive to get involved in international development aid. Street (2002), however, argues that celebrity engagement requires effort, and therefore cannot (always) be considered as a mere career move. Indeed, Van den Bulck and Tambuyzer (2008) also point out that a celebrity can have a sincere sense of commitment, or feel his/her engagement gives meaning to an otherwise empty existence. Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos and Huliaras (2011, 11) argue that, although audiences may be well-aware of the artificiality of fame, "they may see beyond this artificial image construction and understand the sincerity and gravity of the plight." Earlier research indicates that the general population sees celebrities as more genuine when they appear knowledgeable about the issue, keep a low profile about their commitment, and engage in a long-term relationship with a cause or organisation (Samman, Mc Auliffe and MacLachlan 2009). This results in the research question (RQ3b): how does the general population perceive celebrity engagement in relation to the celebrities' motivations and benefits?

A main aim of celebrities' societal engagement is to reach new sections of the general population beyond an organisation's traditional target audience (Payne, Hanlon and Twomey 2007). Academic research (for an overview see Shlegelmilch, Love and Diamantopoulos 1997; Bekkers and Wiepking 2007) has analysed traditional non-profit supporters, looking at their characteristics and their relation to different actions (donating, volunteering, membership, etc.), and found positive relations with educational level and age – although some studies indicate a decrease at a higher age –, tendencies that hold true for Flanders (Mortelmans, Damen and Sinardet 2005). Results for gender are neither unanimous nor significant. So, if organisations want to reach other than traditional contributors, they have to target younger and less highly educated groups. Celebrity support could be a suitable

technique to do so, as celebrities are important in young people's lives (Giles and Maltby 2004). Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, for instance, believed UN celebrity Goodwill Ambassadors could “help instil in *young people* the values of understanding, solidarity, respect and communication across” (in Yrjölä 2011, 177; emphasis added). Some empirical research supports this thesis, as both Scompany's survey (2005) and the British Synergy Youth Engagement Monitor (2010) show that the probability of supporting a charity based on a celebrity endorsing it, rises when the respondent is younger. In line with this, Van den Bulck et al.'s (2011) study found that younger respondents were more able to recall celebrity based non-profit campaigns and to name the organisation behind it, and were more supportive of the celebrity-supported cause. Our final main research question is therefore (RQ4): are celebrity supporters able to reach beyond the traditional non-profit organisations' audiences, in particular to (RQ4a) youngsters?

Additionally, Coudry and Markham (2007) found that those who “consider celebrity culture as an important part of their life,” are less likely to be involved in organisations or volunteer work, and less politically engaged. However, they looked at these two aspects separately, and did not mention how celebrity supporters might encourage these people to take part in social causes. Research by Van den Bulck et al. (2011) demonstrated that people with a more positive attitude towards celebrity engagement recognised celebrity-based non-profit campaigns better and were more able to name the organisation behind the campaign. This leads to the next research question (RQ4b): are celebrity supporters able to reach a wider audience than traditional non-profit organisations' audiences, in particular celebrity followers?

Finally, Cooper (2008) argues that a non-profit organisation engaging a celebrity supporter may lead to scepticism among its field workers and volunteers, creating the feeling that their efforts are undervalued. Furthermore, engaging a celebrity supporter may lead non-profit organisations to simplify or de-radicalise their message (Meyer and Gamson 1995), possibly alienating more radical and loyal members (Dieter and Kumar 2008). Our final research question is therefore (RQ4c): do volunteers and members of non-profit organisations perceive celebrity engagement different than the general population?

While the few existing studies into the general population's attitudes towards celebrity engagement suggest certain trends, they have a number of shortcomings, inhibiting us from formulating hypotheses. Samman, Mc Auliffe and MacLachlan (2009) used a small sample of one hundred respondents and limited their focus to international development aid, while celebrity engagement has a much broader spectrum. The Scompany (2005) study focused only on the role of celebrity ambassadors and its sample showed an overrepresentation of young adults and women. The nfpSynergy (2010) study focused exclusively on youngsters. The current study wishes to overcome these shortcomings by broadening the scope. It uses a large sample of participants and does not limit the scope to one celebrity role or one type of social cause.

## Research Design

The research was conducted in August 2010 by means of an online questionnaire. A sample of respondents was drawn from an existing Belgian panel database

of more than 100.000 registrants, frequently used in other studies. The database's size allowed to strategically target a wide range of the Flemish population. One thousand respondents participated in the survey. While we acknowledge that self selection is always an issue in online surveys – people had to register for this database in the past, and had to decide whether to participate in the current survey – the study's sample can be considered representative for the Flemish population in terms of gender and age. Gender distribution of the participants was 50.1 percent male and 49.9 percent female. Age ranged from 18 to 76 years, with a mean of 46. Comparison between the age distribution in the study's sample and official population figures of the Flemish government (Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering 2010) indicate that age distribution of the sample is fairly representative, except for a slight overrepresentation in the 45-49 category, and a minor underrepresentation among the 30-34 and 70-74 ones.

To investigate RQ1 and RQ2, the first part of the questionnaire examined which celebrities are associated with celebrity engagement. Respondents were asked which celebrities (both local and global) they could spontaneously link to non-profit organisations or social causes. They were allowed to give up to three names. Subsequently, respondents were asked to name the non-profit organisation supported by the celebrity/ies they mentioned. We acknowledge that, given the online context of the survey, some respondents may have searched the web to answer the question, yet they were encouraged to answer spontaneously. These open answers were afterwards recoded by the authors as correct cause; correct organisation; or wrong/no answer. In case of doubt, an internet search was conducted to check if the celebrity was linked to the named cause or organisation. Organisations or causes for which even a small link with the celebrity could be found, were coded as correct answers. For instance, in the case of Angelina Jolie, this meant that not only the UNHCR, but also UNICEF was coded as a correct answer.

To answer RQ3, the second part measured general attitude towards celebrity engagement using twenty six statements on five-point Likert scales. These statements were based on the existing literature and on previous research by Van den Bulck et al. (2011). While a number of these statements assessed the respondent's attitude rather directly and might have triggered a third-person effect (Davison 1983), the majority of statements however used indirect expressions. Statements were presented randomly to sort out order effects. Through principal component analysis this list was reduced to fifteen statements, resulting in four components, accounting for 61.52 percent of the variance. The four components were labelled *benefits for the celebrity*, *benefits for the organisation*, *personal influence* and *sincerity of the celebrity*. The statements are presented in table 1.

Background variables were measured to answer RQ4 and include the socio-demographics gender, age, and educational level. The respondents' charitable behaviour was measured by asking them how often they supported a charitable cause in the past year (never, once, several times a years, several times a month) and if they were a member or volunteer of a non-profit organisation. Four items (climate and environment, animals, development aid, healthcare and welfare) using a five-point Likert scale measured the importance the respondents assign to specific causes. Principal component analysis revealed this to be one component (49.21 percent of the variance,  $\alpha=.627$ ). Finally, the respondents' attitude to celebrity culture in general was measured using six statements on a five-point Likert scale,

Table 1: Principal Component Analysis on Celebrities' Societal Engagement Statements

	1	2	3	4
<b>Benefits for the celebrity (<math>\alpha=.816</math>)</b>				
The collaboration between celebrities and non-profit organisations mainly benefits the celebrity (reversed scores)	.789			
Celebrities get involved mainly to boost their own image (reversed scores)	.846			
Celebrities get involved mainly to boost their fame (reversed scores)	.818			
A celebrity should rather donate money him/herself than call upon the general population to do so (reversed scores)	.703			
<b>Benefits for the organisation (<math>\alpha=.707</math>)</b>				
A celebrity provides a positive contribution to a non-profit organisation		.765		
By using a celebrity, an organisation can strengthen its position		.794		
Smaller, lesser-known non-profit organisations will benefit more from a celebrity supporting them		.596		
Celebrities should support non-profit organisations more often		.658		
<b>Personal influence (<math>\alpha=.818</math>)</b>				
I feel more involved with an organisation when a celebrity supports it			.855	
I support an organisation more easily when I sympathise with the celebrity supporting it			.812	
Because a celebrity asks for it, I am more likely to donate money			.835	
<b>Sincerity of the celebrity (<math>\alpha=.667</math>)</b>				
I have more trust in a celebrity that has been supporting an organisation for years than a celebrity that just started its support				.758
The commitment of a celebrity is more sincere when he or she has a personal connection with the non-profit organisation				.614
The commitment of a celebrity is more sincere when he or she engages in long-term commitment				.573
A celebrity should remain loyal to one organisation				.659

The statements in the survey were presented in Dutch. Translation for this article was done by translating the statements to English and using a back translation to Dutch by two independent researchers. The English translations proved to be solid.

resulting in one component (59.73 percent of the variance,  $\alpha=.861$ ). These items included statements such as “I actively look for celebrity news” and “celebrities are important to me.”

## Results

To answer the first research question, respondents were asked to name up to three celebrities they spontaneously associated with a non-profit organisation or social cause. Table 2 shows that 68.9 percent of the respondents could name at least one celebrity, while 33.9 percent could name two and 17.8 percent could name three.

Linear regression analysis (adj.  $R^2=.022$ ), including the background variables, shows that younger people are more likely to name a larger number of celebrities ( $\beta=-.128$ ;  $p=.001$ ). Those that attach more importance to social causes ( $\beta=.087$ ;  $p=.029$ ) are also able to name more celebrities.



Table 2: The Ability to Name a Celebrity Supporter

Number of celebrities named	%	Cumulative %
One	17.8	17.8
Two	16.1	33.9
Three	35.0	68.9
None	31.1	100.0

N=1000

Out of a possible 3000 (1000x3) names, respondents gave 1549 names in total, accounting for 257 different celebrities. Despite this wide variety in names, there is a limited number of frequently named celebrities. Table 3 shows the top 20 of most often named celebrities. The first four celebrities account for more than one third (35.8 percent) of all names given. The first eight names make up more than half (50.2 percent) and the first twenty more than two third (68.2 percent) of the total, indicating that the majority of respondents only recalls a select group of celebrity supporters top of mind.

Table 3: Top 20 Most Named Celebrity Supporters

			#	%	Cum. %
1	Koen Wauters	BE, singer and TV presenter, ambassador for "Plan België"	162	10.5	10.5
2	Bono	IE, U2 front man, activist for Africa	155	10.0	20.5
3	Angelina Jolie	US, actress, ambassador for "UNHCR"	140	9.0	29.5
4	Goedele Liekens	BE, television presenter and magazine publisher, ambassador for "UNFPA"	98	6.3	35.8
5	Helmut Lotti	BE, singer, ambassador for "UNICEF"	79	5.1	40.9
6	Kim Gevaert	BE, former athlete, ambassador for "SOS Kinderdorpen" and "Autisme Centraal"	55	3.6	44.5
7	Kim Clijsters	BE, tennis player, ambassador for "SOS Kinderdorpen"	52	3.4	47.9
8	Justine Henin	BE, former tennis player, ambassador for "UNICEF"	46	3.0	50.8
9	Bill Gates	US, former Microsoft CEO, founder of the "Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation"	33	2.1	53.0
10	Axelle Red	BE, singer, ambassador for "UNICEF"	31	2.0	55.0
11	Bob Geldof	IE, Band Aid and Live Aid organiser, activist for Africa	27	1.7	56.7
12	Brigitte Bardot	FR, former model, actress and singer, animal rights activist	26	1.7	58.4
13	Carry Goossens	BE, actor, ambassador for "Greyhounds in Nood"	23	1.5	59.9
14	Madonna	US, singer and actress, founder of "Raising Malawi"	23	1.5	61.4
15	George Clooney	US, actor and film director, activist for human rights in Darfur, founder of "Not on Our Watch"	20	1.3	62.7
16	Brad Pitt	US, actor and film producer, supporter of different causes	19	1.2	63.9
17	Eddy Merckx	BE, former cyclist, ambassador for "Damiaanactie"	17	1.1	65.0
18	Nic Balthazar	BE, film director, climate activist	17	1.1	66.1
19	Sabine De Vos	BE, writer and former TV presenter, Ambassador for "Cunina"	17	1.1	67.2
20	Frank Deboosere	BE, weatherman, chairman of "Kom op tegen Kanker"	16	1.0	68.2

Table 3 shows that the list of named celebrities contains a distinct mix of local and global celebrities (RQ4e). In general, local celebrities were named somewhat more (57.7 percent versus 42.3 percent global celebrities). Binary logistic analysis ( $R^2=.045$ ) including the background variables shows that local celebrities are named more by older respondents ( $\text{exp}(B)=1.026$ ;  $\text{Wald}=42.341$ ;  $p<.001$ ) and women ( $\text{exp}(B)=.780$ ;  $\text{Wald}=5.383$ ;  $p=.020$ ). Put differently, men and young people are somewhat more oriented towards global celebrities.

Further, and with regard to RQ1d, the top 20 largely consists of celebrities from the entertainment industry, but is not limited to it as some sport figures (e.g. Gevaert, Clijsters) and one business man (Gates) are featured as well.

Regarding the intensity of the role of the most popular celebrity supporters (RQ1a), a closer look at table 3 shows that those mentioned most frequently, can almost all be considered celebrities in a high level of engagement role such as an ambassador (e.g. Jolie, Clijsters, Gevaert) or a transformational role (e.g. Bono, Geldof), as identified in Huddart's (2005) typology. The list further includes (RQ1b) a mix of what Finlay (2011) identified as the individual approach (e.g. Bono, Geldof, Balthazar) and the multilateral approach in association with an organisation (e.g. Wauters, Jolie, Liekens). A strong tie with a (single) specific cause or organisation (e.g. Wauters, who makes a statement of only supporting Plan België) or a long term record of engagement (e.g. De Vos who is an ambassador for Cunina for more than 20 years; Bono and Geldof whose engagements go back for over three decades) seem to improve the audience's ability to spontaneously recall the celebrity's engagement.

't Hart and Tindall (2009) hypothesised regarding RQ1d that celebrity supporters would be more successful the more merit-based the source of their initial fame and the higher the social prestige of the cultural sphere in which the celebrity gained fame. Yet, table 3 does not allow us to make any bold statements in that regard, as this is a subjective matter that needs to be measured amongst the respondents. However, the results to some extent confirm 't Hart and Tindall's proposition that celebrity supporters with a more enduring and wider scope of fame are more successful. For instance, most of the named global celebrities can be found in Forbes Celeb top 100 of 2010 (e.g. Bono, Jolie, Madonna, Clooney, Pitt) (Forbes 2010). Similarly, most of the local celebrities have a reputation that surpasses the country's borders as is the case for former number one tennis players Clijsters and Henin, or singers Lotti and Red.

Looking at the organisations involved, most of them are organisations with an established reputation that often operate transnationally (e.g. Plan België is the local division of Plan International, SOS Kinderdorpen of SOS Children's Villages). United Nations agencies such as UNICEF, UNHCR and UNFPA are featured five times in the top twenty, and three of the top five named celebrities are involved in them. When asked spontaneously, the general population thus seems to think of celebrities linked to the more established organisations first, rather than to smaller and lesser-known organisations. While these results are no indication of the general population's overall awareness or visibility of any organisation (and their celebrity supporter) in particular, Wheeler's (2002) contention that smaller and lesser-known organisations profit more from the celebrity spotlight is challenged as these celebrities are not recalled top of mind.

With regard to the issues these celebrities support (RQ1c), a variety can be observed including health issues (Gevaert, Deboosere), animal welfare (Goossens), and climate change (Balthazar). However, emphasis is clearly on topics relating to development aid, poverty reduction, and human rights. Most of the top 20 celebrity supporters can be connected to these issues.

The second research question investigates whether respondents are able to name the cause or organisation supported by the celebrity / celebrities they mentioned. Overall figures show that 37.3 percent of the respondents can link a celebrity to the according organisation. While an additional 26.4 percent could name the wider cause, 36.2 percent could not (correctly) name cause nor organisation. Linear regression (adj.  $R^2=.072$ ) – in which the ability to name the organisation was ranked higher than being able to name the cause – shows that those who more often support social causes ( $\beta=.163$ ;  $p<.001$ ) are better able to associate a celebrity with the right cause or organisation. Socio-demographics are relevant as well, since higher educated respondents ( $\beta=.122$ ;  $p<.001$ ), women ( $\beta=-.114$ ;  $p<.001$ ), and young people ( $\beta=-.085$ ;  $p=.001$ ) are better able to link the correct cause or organisation to the celebrities they named.

**Table 4: Top 20 of Most Named Celebrity Supporters Linked to the Right Cause or Organisation (in Percentages)**

	#	Correct cause	Correct organisation	Wrong or no answer
Koen Wauters	162	8.6	58.6	32.7
Bono	155	40.6	17.4	41.9
Angelina Jolie	140	20.7	52.1	27.1
Goedele Liekens	98	21.4	41.8	36.7
Helmut Lotti	79	7.6	68.4	24.1
Kim Gevaert	55	10.5	47.4	42.1
Kim Clijsters	52	43.1	5.9	51.0
Justine Henin	46	19.6	47.8	32.6
Bill Gates	33	33.3	18.2	48.5
Axelle Red	31	9.7	71.0	19.4
Bob Geldof	27	63.0	22.2	14.8
Brigitte Bardot	26	76.9	11.5	11.5
Carry Goossens	23	21.7	69.6	8.7
Madonna	23	30.4	21.7	47.8
George Clooney	20	45.0	5.0	50.0
Brad Pitt	19	10.5	31.6	57.9
Eddy Merckx	17	12.5	50.0	37.5
Nic Balthazar	17	76.5	17.6	5.9
Sabine De Vos	17	17.6	52.9	29.4
Frank Deboosere	16	6.2	75.0	18.8
All celebrities	1536	26.4	37.4	36.2
Local celebrities	833	20.5	44.7	34.8
Global celebrities	653	34.5	27.4	38.1

There are, however, differences between the celebrities, as can be seen in table 4. In general, the local celebrities can be better linked to the correct organisation (44.7 percent compared to 27.4 percent for the global celebrities). Looking at individual celebrities, the ambassadors in the multilateral approach (e.g. Wauters, Lotti, Goossens) can mostly be linked easily to the correct organisation. A second category consists of those taking the individual approach (e.g. Bardot, Geldof, Balthazar) in which they do not necessarily link themselves to an organisation. The results in table 4 reflect this, as the respondents seem to know for which cause they stand, but cannot really link these celebrities to a particular organisation. Third, there appears to be a category of celebrities that are known for their engagement, but cannot easily be linked to a cause or organisation (e.g. Gates, Pitt and Clijsters).

The third research question looks at the public perceptions of celebrity engagement. As explained in the research design, four components could be distinguished in the principal component analysis. Mean scores were calculated for each component and are presented in table 5. A first distinct tendency is the large “disagree nor agree” group. For three out of the four categories, this group consists of more than one third of the respondents. This could indicate that many people do not really care about celebrities’ engagement, or that they do not really understand its dynamics.

Table 5: Public Opinion towards Celebrities’ Societal Engagement  
(in Percentages)

	Disagree	Agree nor disagree	Agree
Benefits celebrity	21.8	34.9	43.3
Benefits organisation	3.7	19.7	76.6
Personal influence	53.0	35.9	11.1
Sincerity celebrity	9.2	34.0	56.8

N=1000. Based on five-point Likert scales measures, ranging from 1 to 5. Mean scores were calculated for each component. The disagree category consists of scores lower than 2.66, the agree category those higher than 3.33. Agree nor disagree are the scores between 2.66 and 3.33.

It further transpires that 76.6 percent of the respondents believe non-profit organisations gain from using a celebrity (RQ3a). There is, however, more scepticism with regard to the celebrities’ altruistic motives (RQ3b), as 43.3 percent of the respondents agree that celebrities engage for their own benefit. Celebrity supporters’ sincerity is highly valued by respondents, as 56.8 percent agreed with the statement.

A majority of respondents (53.0 percent) state they are not personally influenced by celebrities’ societal engagement. Nevertheless, this could be due to the self-reporting nature of the statement, which may lead to a third-person effect (Davison 1983) in which respondents believe that something can affect others, but not themselves. It is more fruitful and in line with our fourth research question to look at some background variables to ascertain if celebrity engagement reaches a broad(er) public. To this end, the component scores are used in linear regression to determine how they are influenced by background variables (table 6).

Table 6: Background Variables' Influence on Principal Components

	Benefits celebrity		Benefits organisation		Personal influence		Sincerity celebrity	
	$\beta$		$\beta$		$\beta$		$\beta$	
Gender	-.026		-.004		-.005		.015	
Age	-.078	*	-.047		-.063		-.090	*
Education level	.100	*	.021		-.072	*	.051	
Frequency supporting a charity	.063		.134	**	-.051		.104	*
Member or volunteer	.038		-.017		.016		-.006	
Importance social causes	.008		.191	***	.042		.017	
Importance celebrities	.014		.124	***	.418	**	.053	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.020		.069		.189		.016	

N=1000. Linear regression. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

First, there are indications that allow for a positive answer to RQ4a about reaching a younger public. Younger respondents think less than the average respondent that celebrities' motivations for engagement are image driven, and they value sincere celebrities more. As mentioned above, young people are also able to name more celebrity supporters and to correctly link them to the cause or organisation.

Second, it was argued that celebrity engagement would reach socially less-engaged celebrity news followers. Indeed, respondents that are more involved with celebrity news, indicate to be personally influenced by celebrity engagement more often than the average respondent. They also agree more than average that it benefits the non-profit organisations. This supports a positive answer to RQ4b.

Being a member or volunteer does not significantly influence any of the components, indicating that non-profit organisations' members or volunteers do not differ in their attitude towards celebrities' societal engagement, compared to non-volunteers (RQ4c). Finally, respondents that attach more importance to social causes do more often than the average respondent believe that organisations benefit from using celebrities and, as mentioned above, are better able to name celebrity supporters.

## Discussion

The use of celebrities to promote social causes or non-profit organisations has become a widespread practice. However, academic treatment of the topic so far has been rather theoretical. Our study aims at an empirical contribution to this field of investigation. The results shed a new light on the existing theoretical insights, validating certain assumptions (more famous celebrities are more successful, a more intensive role is more effective, a certain scepticism exists among the general population, celebrity supporters have the ability to influence particularly young adults and celebrity followers) and questioning others (the fact that smaller and lesser-known organisations gain more benefit, and that volunteers are not more sceptical towards celebrity engagement than the general population).

Our study reveals that there is a small group of celebrity supporters that is associated by the general population with doing good. While the large variety of

different names mentioned by the respondents illustrates the widespread character of celebrity engagement, some celebrities stand out as they are more (easily) associated with social causes and non-profit organisations than others.

Further, it appears that when it comes to being recognised by the general population as a celebrity supporter, the more famous the better. On both the global and the local level, the most often named celebrity supporters in our study are, in general, well-known celebrities that have been around for some time. In that respect, the results seem to support 't Hart and Tindall's (2009) assumption that the general population will perceive more famous celebrities as more successful in their engagement. For non-profit organisations this implies that lesser-known celebrities are less interesting as supporters. The general population might be more sceptic about a lesser-known celebrity's motives to team up with an (established) organisation, and the media attention for the collaboration will probably be smaller. Thrall et al.'s (2008) analysis indicates that half of all celebrity supporters do not get any media attention for their societal engagement, and that media attention decreases if a celebrity is less well-known, i.e. has less "star power."

However, it appears hard for smaller and less institutionalised organisations to attract a top celebrity, as our results indicate that this select group of (most named) celebrities is mainly engaged with larger, institutionalised organisations, such as UN agencies. As these celebrities may gain more media coverage, this may reinforce the existing media attention gap between well and less institutionalised non-profit organisations (Verhulst and Walgrave 2005), at least when it comes to top of mind recall. Wheeler's (2002) contention that a celebrity supporter is particularly efficient for smaller, less institutionalised, and lesser-known organisations should be treated with caution.

The impact on the general population's recognition of a celebrity's level of fame could be countered by involving in a long-term engagement with a(n) (even lesser-known) celebrity. The top of mind celebrity supporters in our study all have a long track record of engagement or strong ties with the (single) organisation they support, for instance in the role of ambassador. Establishing such a long term relationship, however, takes time, and a strong, long-term connection between celebrity and organisation or cause increases not only possible advantages, such as visibility and credibility, but also potential pitfalls such as the celebrity supporter starting to overshadow the organisation, or the risk that the once "squeaky clean" celebrity becomes involved in a scandal (Van den Bulck and Tambuyzer 2008).

One way of avoiding these pitfalls is for organisations to choose celebrities that are perceived by the general population as sincere in their engagement. Our results show that the general population appreciates celebrities having a personal connection to the cause, linking themselves to a single organisation, and showing a long-term engagement. Alternatively, a sense of scepticism may arise in which the general population suspects celebrities to engage in causes primarily to enhance their image and fame. Results further indicate that the general population believes that non-profit organisations gain from espousing celebrities but that they are not personally influenced by it, although this could be due to a third person effect. Nevertheless, background measures reveal some interesting trends. The more the respondents value celebrity news, the more they indicate to be personally influenced by celebrity engagement. Building on Couldry and Markham's (2007) finding

that people following celebrity news are less socially and politically engaged, our results suggest that if social causes and non-profit organisations manage to enter the celebrity news section, and hence its audience's sphere of interest, it might have the potential to catch the attention of these soft news readers.

Payne, Hanlon and Twomey's (2007) argument that using a celebrity allows an organisation to reach new sections of the general population, seems to be supported by our results. Traditionally, younger and lower educated people support social causes less than other sections of the population. With regard to young people, this is unfortunate as they would be the future donors, members, and volunteers of an organisation. It therefore makes sense for non-profit organisations to engage celebrity supporters to reach out to these groups. It is rather promising that our results indicate young people having a more positive attitude towards celebrity supporters. The findings for educational level, however, are less straightforward. Lower-educated respondents could name fewer celebrity supporters, but perceived the motivations of celebrities to engage in social causes as image driven less than the average respondent, and they more readily indicated to be personally influenced by it. This result may indicate that less-educated groups in society are less aware of the constructed nature and therefore "the artificiality of the constructed nature of celebrityhood" (Frangonikolopoulos and Huliaras 2011, 11), which might be brought back to differences in the cultural background between lower and higher educated respondents (Bourdieu 1984).

Volunteers and members of a non-profit organisation do not differ in their attitude towards celebrity engagement compared to the rest of the sample. As such, Cooper's assumption (2008) that volunteers might be more sceptical towards celebrity engagement because it overshadows their own efforts, is not supported. We must point out, however, that we measured the general attitude towards celebrity engagement and did not ask the respondents' (including those that are members or volunteers of a non-profit organisation) view on specific celebrities that support the organisation they are a member of. This is a point on which future research might focus.

A second methodological remark is that this study measured views of respondents towards celebrity engagement in general. In that sense, it ignored Jackson and Darrow's (2005) contention that celebrities cannot be treated as an homogeneous group. It is likely that, when evaluating general statements, respondents base their opinion on only a number of specific celebrities they have in mind. By first asking respondents to name specific celebrities (as supporters), this might have been triggered even more. Samman, Mc Auliffe and MacLachlan's (2009) study indeed shows that perceptions of sincerity, knowledge, and influence can differ between specific celebrities. In future research it would be interesting to apply the celebrity engagement statements to particular celebrities.

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