Perusing Perez:
How do taste hierarchies, leisure preferences and social status interact among visitors to Perez Hilton's celebrity gossip blog?

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ABSTRACT

This research explores relationships among taste hierarchies, leisure preferences and social status, framed in the context of a contemporary leisure media phenomenon: the online celebrity gossip blog. The investigation inquires into the interaction of status levels with leisure practices and attitudes among readers of a celebrity gossip blog, www.perezhilton.com. More fully, is online "trash" culture, represented by www.perezhilton.com, attracting high status (categorised as achievement of educational capital) readers? If so, how does this indulgence fit into an otherwise high status life? The investigation also tests the postulation that the accessibility and anonymity of new online leisure media promote a levelling of social status in the form of leisure *practices* while reinforcing or at least maintaining status hierarchies through *attitude* toward the content.

A self-administered survey was conducted of self-selecting visitors to www.perezhilton.com over a 72-hour period in March 2008. The resulting 2,499 completed survey questionnaires and 103 more in-depth responses to a follow-up question reveal a young (80.36 % under 30), female (88.41%) readership. Most respondents (80.31%) of all ages access the website "at least daily." Among all respondents, 64.21% were high status. Responses suggest readers whose tastes defy easy categorization due to the juxtaposition of clearly maintained highbrow attitudes alongside rampant indulgence in a lowbrow cultural product. Accessibility was valued by high status respondents, but anonymity was not. For these respondents, the practice of indulgence in Perez Hilton's blog is virtually blind to status level, yet the attitudes that accompany this indulgence reinforce a status hierarchy. Results also suggest that standard methods of measuring website traffic are inadequate: More sophisticated assessment of who accesses an online blog and (perhaps most notably) what attitudes those consumers display would contribute to a fuller understanding of this new and growing online culture. The combined practices and attitudes of the predominantly female, high status audience respondents to this survey lead to the introduction of a new term: "Internet slummers."

1. INTRODUCTION

"To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about" (Waters, 2005: p. 2)

I chose this topic to examine and potentially synthesise two areas of communications research: 1) taste hierarchies, social status and culture, and 2) contemporary entertainment and leisure preferences, specifically the use of a new medium: the online celebrity gossip blog. I seek to revisit, re-frame, and extend the claims made in the historical body of work concerning indulgence in "escapist" or "trash" culture (Rojek, 2000), particularly Ien Ang's seminal piece "Watching Dallas" (1985) and Charlotte Brunsdon's "Screen Tastes: Soap Operas to Satellite Dishes" (1997).

In its examination of the role of social status and educational capital in taste hierarchies and leisure preferences, this research is informed largely by the work of eminent French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1993). Following Bourdieu, my research examines "educational capital" as a predictor of "cultural practices" (1984: p. 13) and explores the notion that "denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile – in a word, natural – enjoyment" is associated with those of a higher social status (1984: p. 7). As Bourdieu explains, this denial

> *"implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences"* (Bourdieu, 1984: p. 7).

The second area, that of contemporary entertainment and leisure preferences and the attitudes people have toward their own choices, focuses specifically on how the online format influences the choices people make to spend spare time, escape, and keep up to date with popular culture. I elected to examine a case I find particularly intriguing for its potential to illuminate shifting trends in popular culture-focused entertainment and leisure preferences within the hyper-connected, on-demand age of new media. This case centres around who uses a popular and controversial celebrity gossip blog, www.perezhilton.com, and why they do so.

Using the work of Bourdieu (1984), Ang (1985), and Brunsdon (1979), among others, as a theoretical and conceptual baseline, this investigation centres around the practices and attitudes

of readers of www.perezhilton.com, a "lowbrow" blog that reportedly receives 10-12 million hits per day (Boorstin, 2008) and has transcended its meagre beginnings to become a massively influential Hollywood commentary (Navarro, 2007).

The blog is run by Mario Lavandeira, a second-generation Cuban émigré living in Los Angeles, California. Mr. Lavandeira adopted the deliberately irreverent pseudonym "Perez Hilton" (a play on the name of the noted/notorious "actress" Paris Hilton). Perez Hilton is famous for his unapologetically bold and vulgar blog commentary on the Hollywood elite.

Perez Hilton emerges as an appropriate choice for my research focus in part due to his remarkable transformation over four years from one fan representing marginalised demographic categories (Latino, openly homosexual) into Number 16 on Time Magazine's list of the 100 Most Influential People (Time Magazine, 2007). He now runs a multimedia empire with a cult-like international following and consumer attention that makes advertisers vie for his favour. While the influence and power wielded by Perez Hilton's blog influenced my decision to focus on perezhilton.com readers as subjects, my interest in the success of the blog is secondary to my interest in the practices and attitudes of its readers.

Substantial attention has been paid to the separate but overlapping fields of leisure preferences, taste hierarchies and social status; however, the bulk of existing work is somewhat outdated as it focuses on long-established media and continually refer back to the same examples when discussing taste hierarchies [namely, soap operas (Modleski, 1988 and Ang, 1985) and romance novels (Radway, 1991) for those identified as "low status" versus operas and classic literature for their "high status" counterparts]. I reexamine the relationships between status and leisure practices given the current climate of hyper-connectivity and increased, on-demand access to information and entertainment in order to ascertain whether the anonymity and accessibility of the online format may have promoted blurring of the lines between status and leisure preferences. I also assess whether the online blog is associated with a levelling of taste hierarchies or whether the lines are still drawn. Furthermore, I look beyond a superficial examination of whether or not there is a mixing of taste preferences among different status levels (as evidenced in the actual exercise of specific leisure and entertainment choices) and examine whether celebrity blog readers' *attitudes* toward various taste preferences perhaps reveal more about status level than do the readers' actual practices.

These two areas of research are independently salient, but it does not appear that their

relationship has yet been adequately explored through a contemporary lens. Ultimately I aim to update, albeit on a very limited scale, the existing body of research on entertainment and leisure practices as it relates to status, by incorporating consideration of so-called 'lowbrow' content in a new medium that is most accessible to those with at least some economic and social status. By examining the usage of (and users' attitudes toward) a celebrity gossip blog through a theoretical framework that draws on a reputable tradition, I aspire to reconcile so-called 'lowbrow' culture with 'highbrow' media and cultural theory (Hunter, 2008: p. 3).

From an administrative research perspective (following Lazarsfeld, 1944), understanding the attitudes, practices and online leisure preferences of high status people is crucial to effective marketing campaigns; such insight is particularly relevant for an audience of this magnitude. As Rojek (2000) says, "the glamour and value of escape activity makes it an object of investment for entrepreneurs. Leisure activity which begins as a spontaneous attempt to deny social boundaries becomes commodified," (p. 95). From a more critical research perspective, while this paper does not subscribe to technological determinism a la Marshall McLuhan (1964), I believe it is crucial to keep pace with evolving communication media, particularly as they affect and are affected by the taste hierarchies, social status and culture of their audiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant literature can be grouped into two primary content areas. The first area encompasses the interaction of taste hierarchies, social status, and culture; the second area addresses entertainment-oriented leisure practices and corresponding attitudes of practitioners. Much pertinent literature exists. However, the literature contains one obvious gap: To date, academic discussions addressing leisure pursuits have not yet explored the impact of the online format, especially the celebrity gossip blog. Allowing for the possibility of researcher oversight, this paper does not attempt to claim that the subject has *never* been addressed; however, an extensive review of available literature suggests that this area offers substantial opportunity for further insight and investigation.

CLASS AND STATUS: BEYOND THE BANK ACCOUNT

The work of Pierre Bourdieu offers several key concepts from which this research draws. Of particular value are Bourdieu's discussions of class and status. My research is particularly concerned with 'status' as the concept seems to permit notions of a hierarchy of cultural capital that encompasses qualifications beyond financial or material capital. Bourdieu asserts a strong relationship between *education level* and cultural capital (1984: p. 1). In looking beyond "material class background" to address "questions of distinction and taste", Bourdieu is joined by Hebdige (1979) whose work "suggests that social distinction is a function of the capacity to interpret and manipulate cultural codes. While material circumstances may be a factor in this, they are not the determining factor" (Rojek, 2000: p. 96). In other words, economics are not irrelevant in considerations of taste, but other factors may be even more significant

TIERED CULTURE

Historical discussions of class and status juxtapose claims of classlessness with observations of stringent dichotomies between high status and low status people and their activities. There are as many opinions as there are commentators on the subject (Rojek, 2000). While the work of Hebdiges and Bourdieu calls for a non-materialistic approach to discussions of class and status, the labels 'high' and 'low' have been frequently attached as qualifiers to 'status' and 'culture' with only casual regard to operationalising these terms. This lends an arbitrariness and subjectivity to discussions of status and culture that is evident in discussions spanning several decades.

Entwistle (1977) observes that high culture is a term "which is freely used, but which…is rarely

defined or given concrete reference; in particular, it is not clear what it is about high culture which makes it high" (p. 147). Rojek (2000) discusses Bourdieu's idea that "there is no 'pure' judgment of cultural value and no 'objective' means of prioritising one form of leisure practice over another" (p. 86).

HOGGART AND TELEVISION SLUMMERS

For every piece written in recent decades asserting a stringent dichotomy between the taste hierarchies and preferences of those identified as being "low status" versus their "high status" counterparts, another piece asserts that these hierarchies are crumbling (see for instance Strinati, 1995: pp. 29-30). Indeed, some authors manage to maintain a proverbial foot in both camps within the same piece: Hoggart (2004) notes that "some class habits have eroded and no doubt more will follow" (p. 74) whilst simultaneously providing his own outline of status hierarchies complete with Group A: "high level tastes" (p. 75), Group B: "the majority…do not have the necessary forms of advanced education [as group A]" (p. 76) and Group C, for which "there is likely to be little profit from a frontal advertising or P.R. assault on these lowest of people. They are hardly worth tempting. They are left to booze and drugs" (p. 76)

I offer no judgments on Hoggart's tiering; however, Hoggart's work references a valuable concept that may explain how it might be possible for erosion of "habits" (2004: p. 74) while still maintaining stringent status hierarchies (status as determined by educational level) through attitude: This is the concept of "television slummers" (p. 42). Hoggart describes this group:

> *"Particularly lax are some highly educated people – people who 'should know better'. Some enjoy exercising a mild nostalgie de la boue by watching television programmes which they admit are 'cretinous' just to show they are not precious, not out-of-touch highbrows, just ordinary chaps; and they do enjoy them"* (p. 42).

BRUNSDON AND JUSTIFICATION

In acknowledging the significance of attitudes toward leisure practices – not just the practices themselves – in reinforcing status levels, Hoggart joins Charlotte Brunsdon. Brunsdon identifies satellite dishes as "conspicuous leisure consumption" and describes consumers who know "what's *better* to like" (2007, p. 163, emphasis added) even if it does not match up with their authentic preferences. "To have preferences which run against the hierarchy," notes Brunsdon, "involves people in endless self-justification ('*I know it's rubbish, but…*)" (p. 132, emphasis in the original).

Even if the individual does not feel compelled to justify his or her own viewing habits, they may feel it necessary to assign value to (justify) the cultural product itself through "polemical assertions of other hierarchies" (p. 132).

Brunsdon's observations are reflected in the findings of Skeggs et al. (2008), who found that the subjects of their study on reality television (viewers who identified as "middleclass") were likely to "perform self-reflexively" whilst viewing reality television (p. 10) with "critical distance" (p. 9) from the subject, as evidenced in the case of one participant who "demonstrates that she is able to provide a contextualised and 'useful' educational reason for watching, while still being able to recognize the apparent flaws of the program type" (p. 10). Those participants who were willing to admit to occasionally "just slumping in front of the television" were careful to add that they did so "only when they had worked really hard, only because they wanted to know what was going on in popular culture" (pp. 10-11). This need to rationalise their leisure practices (by performing reflexively, justifying the cultural product itself, or asserting themselves as deserving of escape) was found by Skeggs et al. to be particularly characteristic of the middle-class respondents (the 'highest' social class they studied). Skeggs et al. concluded that these middle-class respondents "did not want to be attached to that which is a cultural display of working-class (low) taste. They needed to show not only cultural detachment, but cultural superiority to the bad object" (p. 11).

This self-conscious consumption of cultural products that fail to impress on hierarchies of traditional taste also encompasses a public versus private dimension. As Brunsdon says, "Erecting a satellite dish on the front of your house is partly a declaration of not being bothered 'to like what's better to like'" (1997: p. 163). However, for those who *are* bothered, Brunsdon offers the following observation on the decision to place a satellite dish prominently on the outside of one's house:

> *"This is the difference between a private and public taste. An indoor slippers and dressing gown and a Sunday best of taste. The invocation of a known hierarchy of 'what's better to like', from which ordinary mortals fall awake. For this writer, the problem for those who like 'round-the-clock' rubbish from space is that **they can no longer indulge secretly**"* (1997: p. 152, my emphasis.).

The question remains, then, what does it mean to be able to indulge in one's "round-theclock rubbish" in private? What makes some experience shame in their practices and others (to use Brunsdon's example) proudly tack a satellite dish on their roof? Satellite dishes are now being replaced by high-tech receivers that do not require an external declaration of one's leisure

pursuit, but the example still holds explanatory value. The fact that online celebrity gossip blogs permit decidedly inconspicuous consumption is of great import to this research as it seeks to extend Brunsdon's work on self-conscious leisure into a new medium. Skeggs et al. go a long way to update the current body of literature and offer interesting insight into the recent phenomenon of 'reality' television, but fail to extend the debate into the burgeoning online realm.

ANG AND IRONIC DISTANCE

Blog visitors' behaviours are important, but their attitudes may be even more telling. One attitude of particular interest is that of "ironic distance," a concept utilised by Ien Ang in the influential 1985 piece *Watching Dallas*. While studying European viewers of the soap opera *Dallas*, Ang found viewers who knew that they "should" dislike *Dallas* as they perceived it as an "obviously inferior, Americanised, mass cultural product" (Strinati, 1995: p. 41) but reconciled their guilty affinity for the show through an "ironic viewing attitude" (Ang, 1985: p. 99) and "mocking commentary" (p. 98). Ang applied these viewers' attitudes to the "ideology of mass culture" which presents those who liked *Dallas* as "the opposite of 'persons of taste', [or] 'cultural experts'" (1985: p. 103). However, Ang's concept of "ironic distance" allows for a more nuanced interpretation of viewing habits that extends beyond whether someone views a cultural product or not and asks whether this person identifies him/herself as enjoying the product.

"Ironic distance" is also evident in both the middle-class reality television viewers described by Skeggs et al. (2008: p. 9 and also in Hoggart's "television slummers," (Hoggart, 2004: p. 42).

ESCAPISM AND THE IDEOLOGY OF MASS CULTURE

Ang's "ideology of mass culture", which assumes that "mass culture is a denigrating term, which arouses definitely negative associations" (Ang, 1985: p. 94), is a second central concept. A semantically and figuratively broad term, "mass culture" is useful for its association with the effects of postmodernism (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2002: p. 11) and escapism (Strinati, 1995: p. 13). Strinati describes mass culture as a "a repetitive and superficial culture, one which celebrates trivial, sentimental, immediate and false pleasures at the expense of serious, intellectual, time-honored and authentic values" (1995: p. 12).

O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2002) note that "before postmodernism, aesthetic products could be classified into discrete areas…but postmodernism knows no such boundaries or rules; it delights in the blurring of cultural boundaries" (p. 311). The assumption, then, is that the tearing down of

hierarchies associated with postmodernism may have led to a levelling process (Hebdige, cited in Strinati, 1995: pp. 29-30). Bourdieu himself has implied that perhaps "culture is becoming less regimented and hierarchical and that canons of taste are more changeable and porous" (cited in Rojek, 2000: p. 88).

ESCAPE AS A FEMININE PURSUIT?

The escape inherent in so-called "trash" leisure traditionally associated with romance novels and soap operas (see for instance Gill, 2007) elicits questions of gender that continue to apply to the present research on celebrity gossip blogs. While my research is more concerned with status than gender, the associations between female-centred leisure pursuits and that culture which deems those pursuits as 'low status' is impossible to ignore. Charlotte Brunsdon, for example, has "always been conscious of the way in which what women and girls like is somehow worse than the equivalent masculine pleasures" (1997: p. 2). Myra MacDonald similarly notes that "differentiation by gender filters through into judgments about media genres, with soap operas and women's magazines regarded as 'trivial' and 'gossipy'; news and even sports commentaries as occasions for 'serious' talk" (1995: p. 45).

Janice Radway (1991) notably addressed the value of escapism for readers of romance novels, of whom she said "reading romances provides the women relief from the seemingly endless demands on them as nurturers" (cited in Seiter et al, 1989: p. 139). While no one is willing to claim that pursuit of escapism is exclusively a female domain, it is clear that leisure practices historically constituted as feminine are particularly vulnerable to criticism. That the asserted 'lowbrow' or 'trashy' nature of these practices is continual grounds for this criticism necessitates examination. According to Chris Rojek (2000: p. 41),

> *"one major reason for the critical dismissal of mass culture arises from its allegedly 'feminine' qualities. For example, mass culture, such as cinema or the soap opera, is denigrated because it is sentimental and plays on people's emotions [… and] the language used in some accounts of mass culture refers to its seductive power to conquer a passive and vulnerable audience through fantasies of romance and escape"*

Ultimately it appears that "the denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile – in a word, natural – enjoyment" (Bourdieu, 1984: p. 7) is positioned in opposition to mass culture in the current body of literature, but the divide appears to be at least as much about gender as it is about status

level (see for instance Radway, 1991).

THE NEED FOR AN UPDATE

Rosalind Gill reinterprets Jean Grimshaw (1999) in asserting that it is "perfectly possible to derive significant pleasure from representations that politically one may wish to critique" (2007: p. 16). This sentiment, which invokes both Ang's (1985) "ironic distance" and Brunsdon's (1997) justification, addresses the area of "media pleasures" which has its academic origins in the 1980s-era "desire to democratize what was seen by some as a white, male, elitist notion of culture" (Gill, 2007: p. 13).

We have established that the current body of literature on media pleasures devotes substantial focus to romance novels and soap operas, both of which have been framed as simultaneously feminine and lowbrow. While much of the research discussed to this point has its origins in the 1980s, "media pleasures" are still being discussed, albeit still in reference to the same media as in previous decades. Moreover, any historical emphasis on class or status as in relation to media pleasures has "slipped from the research agenda in recent years" (Skeggs et al., 2008: p. 6). Consequently, accepted notions of the relationship between status and leisure practices (specifically the pleasure-oriented media discussed here) can be considered outdated. This is evident in Conrad Loziak's (1986) assertions in "The Power of Television: A Critical Appraisal" which elicited the following summary from Charlotte Brunsdon: "Crudely, the people who watch the most television are those who can't afford to do anything else" (2007: p. 127).

The Internet is not immune to associations of the kind posited by Loziak, but it is also increasingly being used in the workplace (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008) and in educational settings (Rainie & Hitlin, 2005). Early critical consideration of the Internet viewed it as an "egalitarian utopia" with a "uniquely bottom-up, non-hierarchical, seamless form of global communication" (Foroohar, 2006: para. 1-2). This rather elitist notion of the Internet fails to consider that, even today, "media access is not yet global" (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2002: p. 3). However, for those with the ability to access the Internet, the Internet allows for anonymous, easily accessible indulgence in a variety of cultural practices that could theoretically extend (in either direction) beyond one's social status.

INTRODUCING THE BLOG

Web logs, popularly known as blogs, are "frequently modified webpages containing dated entries listed in reverse chronological sequence." Blogs are rapidly growing, both in overall popularity and in the attention gained from academic circles (Herring et al, 2004: p. 3). When blogs first began to accelerate in popularity, the demographic associated with them was relatively narrow: "mostly male, more highly educated than average and with above-average incomes" (Tremayne, 2007: p. 266). While the demographics of producers and users of blogs have evolved since the early days of the phenomenon, research on blogs appears to be arrested in the early phase; it is overwhelmingly focused on the political blogs that continue to be associated with the aforementioned demographic (see for instance Lovink, 2008 and Tremayne, 2007).

Political blogging (and, increasingly, personal blogging) may still dominate the buzz around the blogosphere. Nevertheless, the very format of blogs is perfectly suited to the subject of gossip, as Lovink (2008) observes: "Through blogging, news is being transformed from a lecture into a conversation. Blogs echo rumor and gossip, conversations in cafes and bars, on squares and in corridors" (p. 10). However, academic attention has lagged behind the recent rise in prominence of the gossip blog[1].

An increasing percentage of the industrialised world is now online. 75% of American adults according to a December 2007 study (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008). More than one quarter of Americans access the Internet for leisure purposes on any given day (Ibid). Thus, the time is ripe for this discussion. With reportedly 10 to 12 million hits per day (Boorstin, 2008) and an unapologetically lowbrow tone (Navarro, 2007: para. 22), Perez Hilton's website provides a prime example of the variety of cultural artefacts instantly available online.

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[1] A JSTOR search revealed four *pages* of journal articles with the phrase "political blog" and only one story with the phrase "gossip blog," (www.jstor.org). Similarly, Harvard University's online library catalogue, HOLLIS, reveals no hits for "gossip blog" and several for "political blog" (President and Fellows of Harvard University, 2008).

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research builds on the existing body of research surrounding the areas of taste hierarchies, social status, leisure preferences and culture, viewed through the lens of an online celebrity gossip blog. Given these broad topics, it is essential to anchor them in a conceptual framework that both limits and clarifies the scope of this research. In framing my research, I draw from three particularly useful concepts: Bourdieu's emphasis on the importance of educational capital (1979; 1984), Ang's "ideology of mass culture" and Ang's "ironic distance" (Ang, 1985). This framework allows the analysis to establish status level of practitioners and then consider the ways in which practitioners' attitudes may interact with status.

BOURDIEU, STATUS, AND EDUCATIONAL CAPITAL

While occupation and financial capital are frequently relied on to determine status level, I find these factors less relevant when addressing a population that includes a large subset too young to have established a foothold in the workforce [Table 1.4]. Current financial and occupational statuses are misleading in terms of the current (and potential) capital of adolescents and young adults, which skews perception of their status. This research thus follows Bourdieu in considering educational capital as a key definer of status. In his study of taste hierarchies, Bourdieu identified "the very close relationship linking cultural practices (or the corresponding opinions) to educational capital (measured by qualifications) and, secondarily, to social origin (measured by father's occupation)" (1984: p. 13). He found a "clear relation between taste and education" (1979: p. 1). Bourdieu notes that the level at which educational capital affects distinctions of taste varies depending on the cultural product or practice in question, but specifies that the "the relationship [of taste] with educational capital is just as strong in areas which the educational system does not teach" (1984: pp. 11-12). Bourdieu stops short of equating educational capital and status level. In my research, I use status level exclusively as an expression of educational capital; in doing so, I am inspired by – but certainly extend – Bourdieu's observations and contentions.

ANG: RECONCILING DISTANCE AND DEVOTION

Leisure practices are central to this research, yet blog visitors' literal behaviours may well be secondary in significance to their attitudes. One attitude this research is prepared to detect is "ironic distance," the concept utilised by Ang in her influential 1985 piece *Watching Dallas*. Viewers who knew that they "should" dislike *Dallas* reconciled their guilty affinity for the show through an "ironic viewing attitude" (Ang, 1985: p. 99) and "mocking commentary" (p. 98). Ang's concept of "ironic distance" allows for a more nuanced interpretation of viewing habits that extends beyond whether someone views a cultural product or not. "Ironic distance" asks whether the viewers identify themselves as *enjoying* the product.

"Ironic distance" is particularly useful in explaining why even people with identical consumption habits should be categorised very differently as consumers. This concept provides a framework for examining the interaction between the attitudes and social status of Perez Hilton readers. "Ironic distance" as a concept is also evident in the middle-class reality television viewers described by Skeggs et al. (2008: p. 9 and in Hoggart's description of "television slummers," (Hoggart, 2004: p. 42).

THE IDEOLOGY OF MASS CULTURE

Ang's "ideology of mass culture" is the third central concept. It assumes that "mass culture is a denigrating term, which arouses definitely negative associations" (Ang, 1985: p. 94) A semantically and figuratively broad term, "mass culture" is useful for its association with the effects of postmodernism (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2002: p. 11) and escapism (Strinati, 1995: p. 13). The online medium of celebrity gossip blog is not (yet) as intrinsically associated with mass culture as television or movies, so by categorising perezhilton.com as mass culture I am inviting argument. Yet if one applies Strinati's description of mass culture (1995: p. 12), it is difficult to imagine a celebrity gossip blog as anything else.

Soap operas and romance novels have traditionally taken the brunt of critical judgment on mass culture escapism (see for instance Gill, 2007). However, the anonymity and accessibility of the online format, and of celebrity gossip blogs in particular, are ripe for examination and provide a logical progression in the body of work conducted on leisure preferences.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

This research seeks to capitalise on a gap in the current body of research on taste hierarchies, social status, and culture as they relate to leisure preferences. The literature examines taste hierarchies, social status, and culture, and (in the case of Ang, Brunsdon, etc.) relates these areas to leisure preferences. However, the debate has stalled on "legacy media" (Tremayne, 2007: p. 261) and has not yet adequately explored the role of online formats. Concurrently, the online format, and blogging in particular, is garnering increased attention in academic circles, but research has focused on political and personal blogs (Lovink, 2008). The possibility of a hierarchy of culture *within* the online formats has not been fully explored.

This research presents an opportunity to apply the frequently studied arena of escapist or "trash" leisure to the new medium of a celebrity gossip blog. By combining an extensive self-selected survey with a limited, more in-depth interview exploring attitudes, I aim to first shed light on *who* accesses Perez Hilton and then explore *how* this leisure practice interacts with the lives of the respondents. This research ultimately seeks to explore how indulgence in a celebrity gossip blog (so-called "trash" culture) fits into an otherwise high status life.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

Question 1: How does status level interact with leisure practices and preferences in the case of Perez Hilton's readers? More fully, is online "trash" culture, represented by www.perezhilton.com, attracting high status readers? If so, how does this indulgence fit into an otherwise high status life?

Question 2: How relevant is the medium (an online gossip blog), compared to historical notions of the relationship between status and leisure preferences? How (if at all) do the anonymity and accessibility of the online format affect the interaction?

The hypothesis: The accessibility and anonymity of new online leisure media promotes a levelling of social status in the form of leisure *practices* while reinforcing or at least maintaining status hierarchies through *attitude* toward the content. In other words, this research explores the assumption that the accessibility and anonymity of the online format appeal to "high status" individuals who use www.perezhilton.com as escapism, despite the fact that they may not be identified as a demographic group prone to indulgence in trash culture.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

OUTLINE OF RESEARCH STRATEGY

The methodology enlisted to explore these research questions is a self-selected, self-completed online survey. Addressing the research questions appropriately required the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Needed quantitative data included usage statistics plus demographic and related information about users. Qualitative data were collected to allow insight into the attitudes of respondents about their leisure practices.

Four considerations helped determine the method most suitable for the aims of this research. First, since the objective is to explore social status, leisure preferences, and taste hierarchies of individuals, the method needed to focus not on the content of the blog itself but on the blog's readers.

Second, "readers of Perez Hilton's blog" represent a relatively large population. Due to the online format, the population of readers fluctuates. Moreover, that population is theoretically limited only by the Internet medium and the English language. The combination of a large population and a focus on human elements does not absolutely require a survey. However, as Don Dillman observes, "the ability to estimate with considerable precision the percentage of a population that has a particular attribute by obtaining data from only a small fraction of the total population is what distinguishes surveys from all other research methods" (2000: p. 9).

Third, I needed to collect not only potentially sensitive demographic details but also attitudes and practices pertaining to a leisure activity that evoked an element of shame in pre-pilot testing. Because the collection of sensitive information was vital to the success of this research, an anonymous, self-completed survey presented itself as a desirable option. It allows respondents to distance themselves from the researcher; it also encourages (though cannot guarantee) candid responses.

Fourth, an online survey was a logical choice, not only for reasons of anonymity and candidness but also because it would minimise costs and transcend geographic boundaries, both 'pros' of Internet surveys cited by Dillman (2000: p. 341). An online survey posted on the website of interest would reach the target population, allow potential respondents to use a medium familiar to them, and be easy and quick to complete while users were on the website.

Drawbacks to this approach are obvious. Online surveys are inherently biased towards those who have Internet access and who have some reason to behave in a way that leads them to the survey link (see for instance De Vaus, 2002: p. 77). Therefore, results can rarely be generalised to the overall population. However, my interest in hearing from and investigating the attributes of active users of one specific website negates the concern about generalisability to the total population.

Aside from the primary disadvantage of the potential for sample bias, Crano and Brewer identify a primary disadvantage of surveys, i.e. "the advantages are bought at the cost of a lack of control over nonsystematic variation in the variables of interest. The inability to exert control over critical variables can result in an interesting, but scientifically inconclusive, investigation" (1986: p. 20). Research on methodological options produced pros and cons that were weighed while deciding whether or not to attempt an online survey. However, Aldridge and Levine summarise the compelling advantages of an online, self-completed survey, including potential for "large samples," "low cost" and wide-ranging "geographics," "no interviewer effects," and relative ease of "handling sensitive topics" (2001: pp. 51-52).

To delve deeper into the attitudes of the respondents, the online survey offered all respondents the option to provide an email address for a potential follow-up question. One open-ended question was subsequently emailed to that subset of respondents. This question was intentionally vague, broad, and was intended to be provocative in eliciting opinions about how accessing www.perezhilton.com fit into the respondents' lives. The open-ended nature of the question follows the theory that "open-ended items do provide an effective avenue for catharsis" which "allow respondents to answer in their own words" and "provide the survey practitioner with rich data" (Church & Waclawski, 1998: p. 49).

Two other approaches were considered and rejected.

◈ A face-to-face interview format might allow for in-depth examination of attitudes, practices and preferences. However, it would provide a very limited sample size, lose the advantage of geography and diversity, and—based on the shame and embarrassment encountered in pre-pilot testing—might well discourage candidness.

◈ An emailed survey was also considered, using Facebook and/or other social networking

sites to spread the word and request completion. However, this approach would not target users of www.perezhilton.com and would, like the face-to-face method, concentrate responses in the researcher's social circle or the social circles of friends and colleagues of the researcher. In both of these approaches, the researcher would be known to at least some respondents; thus social desirability bias could well skew results (see for instance Dwight & Feigelson, 2000).

Two rounds of pilot studies were conducted. The first round was categorically sidelined by a technical mishap that prevented potential respondents from accessing the survey website. The second pilot made an appeal for respondents utilizing several celebrity gossip blogs other than www.perezhilton.com in an effort to produce results more representative of the general online gossip-reading community. However, since the blogs themselves were secondary in significance to the attitudes and practices of the respondents, I chose to concentrate on a single website, thus simultaneously limiting spurious factors and streamlining data.

Given the population of interest, the timeframe, a limited budget, and the sensitivity of topics, the advantages of a self-completed, online survey clearly outweighed the disadvantages and also offered superior advantages over the other options considered and/or piloted.

SUMMARY OF METHODS AND PROCEDURES ADOPTED

Sampling and population

The population of interest is individuals who are active readers of the online celebrity gossip blog www.perezhilton.com. For purposes of this research, the potential pool of respondents was limited to individuals who visited www.perezhilton.com over the 72hour period from 10 March through 13 March 2008.

The ideal strategy…

Ideally, this research would have been conducted in cooperation with www.perezhilton.com. Six attempts were made to contact Mr. Hilton, none of which elicited a response. Official demographic data could have proved illuminating. Moreover, had Perez Hilton mentioned this research effort in a blog post, it certainly would have increased the pool of potential respondents and probably the number of actual respondents. However, given the lack of official cooperation,

receiving completed responses from 2,499 individuals in a 72-hour timeframe was very satisfying.

Actual method employed

To establish that the respondents were indeed active readers (i.e. they engaged in at least one visit during this 72-hour period[2]), the survey was accessible via a link placed in the "comments" section of the blog. To reach this section, visitors to www.perezhilton.com clicked on an individual story (or blog post), which directed them to a secondary webpage housing readers' comments on that particular post.

In the absence of official cooperation, every posting on www.perezhilton.com for the 72hour period during which the survey was conducted (approximately 90 postings in total) included a comment in the corresponding "comments" section (all individually posted by me) with an invitation to participate in a brief survey and a link to the survey website. The survey was constructed through www.questionpro.com, a site recommended by PhD student Deborah Finding of the London School of Economics.

Limits of generalisability

Despite specifically targeting readers of www.perezhilton.com, the research cannot make claims of generalisability to all www.perezhilton.com readers for two primary reasons. First, only those visiting the website within the 72-hour window during which the survey was posted and accessible were in the potential pool of respondents. Second, not all blog readers choose to access the "comments" section of any given posting (Tremayne, 2007: p. xiii). Since the survey link was accessible only via this secondary section, the potential pool of respondents is again narrowed. Third, those who chose to respond may or may not be representative of the entire population of website visitors. Finally, those electing to respond may also be more likely to be heavy visitors which could impact results.

The first and third limitations would have applied regardless of whether or not official cooperation had been received. The second limitation is a necessary byproduct of posting the survey on the site without cooperation. While the strategy employed negates the ability of this research to

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[2] There was no way to prevent the link from being passed on to non-readers that may have elected to complete the survey. Only the responses of those who indicated that he or she found the link on www.perezhilton.com (per a question on the survey) were used in the results, but – as with responses to all the survey questions – the authenticity is subject to the honesty of the respondent.

make specific claims about www.perezhilton.com readers with statistical backing, the methodology employed yielded a response magnitude and resulting data pool rich in its capacity for *descriptive* results.

Research design

A multi-step process was undertaken to identify a set of survey questions that could most appropriately address the research questions. First, informal discussions with friends and classmates revealed areas of particular salience and sensitivity with regards to this subject. With this input in mind, a 14-question survey was constructed with both open-and close-ended questions. The questions addressed the following areas:

1. Basic demographics of the respondents
2. Status level of the respondents
3. Leisure practices and preferences of the respondents
4. Attitudes toward the subject of the gossip blog

Respondent attitudes were more fully addressed (albeit in a more limited capacity) by the optional follow-up question, which was emailed out to voluntary participants two weeks after the survey closed.

6. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The scale of the response to the survey reflects the magnitude of the blog itself. I received 2,499 fully completed surveys within a 72-hour period. The follow-up question, emailed to the 438 respondents who provided an email address, yielded 103 emailed responses. The information gleaned from this wealth of data provides insight into a contemporary phenomenon. This section elaborates upon the details of the analytical process, presents and discusses salient findings, and considers the respective relevance of those findings to my hypothesis and two research questions.

DETAILS OF ANALYSIS

The raw data from the survey questionnaire were analysed as follows: The questionnaire responses questions were downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Cross-referencing between questions and responses was performed by entering the data into a professional-grade SQL server under the guidance of a software consultant.

The open-ended, interview-style question offered following the conclusion of the survey questionnaire asked: "Given how much (or how little) time you spend on Perez Hilton's website, what do you feel that you get out of it? What role does it play in your life, and how does it fit in with the rest of your life?" Responses were received in a prose-style email format and ranged from one sentence to several paragraphs. Each response was read carefully, and the attitudes expressed were consolidated into seven "attitude categories" which were recorded in a spreadsheet. All responses were then re-read and the attitudes expressed in each response were recorded onto the spreadsheet along with the survey ID number of the respondent. The attitude categories were assigned completely independently of the remainder of the survey data, including the respondents' status level, in an attempt to combat conscious or subconscious researcher bias. Seven attitude categories became evident after reading all responses[3]: Escapism, Superiority, Social benefit, Entertainment value, Devotion to the subject, Guilt, and Justification/Rationalisation.

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[3] Each response could apply to any number and combination of the seven "attitude" categories.

This research extends Bourdieu's (1984) assertion of the significance educational capital by operationalising status in terms of level of education achieved. One question asked respondents to select a radial button indicating "the highest level of education you have achieved or are currently enrolled in". The options were: elementary/grammar school, secondary/high school, technical/vocational school, Bachelor's degree, and graduate/professional degree. For purposes of analysis, every other question on the survey was cross-referenced against the respondent's educational level. For clarity and consistency of analysis, these educational levels were further grouped into two sections that will, crudely, be referred to as "high status" and "low status" groups.[4] Those respondents who indicate being currently enrolled in or having completed a Bachelor's degree or graduate/professional degree are designated as "high status"; all other respondents were coded as "low status"[5].

RESULTS

This section first presents respondents' demographic data and then displays results from the 15 survey questions that were most germane.

Demographic details

Respondents differ markedly by status, gender and age. Nearly two thirds of all respondents are high status, i.e. at least enrolled in a Bachelor's degree program [Table 1.1]. As expected, most respondents are female (88%), a result that varied only slightly among low status and high status groups [Table 1.2]. Respondents represented 69 countries [Table 1.3]. Respondents tend to be young: three quarters of all respondents are under age 30 [Table 1.4].

The interaction of age and status is discussed further in the following section.

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[4] This paper acknowledges the controversy and elitism involved in designating a group or individual as "low status" exclusively on the basis of not having enrolled in at least a Bachelor's degree program. "Status" is acknowledged as a highly subjective term and is used in this paper only as an expression of educational capital.

[5] This question was complicated by the "other" option which a small percentage of the respondents selected. For consistency, the "other" category was considered separately from the "high" and "low" status categories.

Table 1.1: Status level of respondents, as expressed by educational capital[6]

STATUS	High status n=1,604	Low status n=791
Total[6]	**64.21%**	**31.67%**
Elementary/Grammar	-	0.36%
Secondary	-	23.62%
Technical/Vocational	-	7.69%
Bachelor's degree	46.28%	-
Graduate school	17.93%	-

Table 1.2: Gender of respondents

GENDER	Overall n=2,499	High status	Low status
Female	88.41%	86.47%	89.25%
Male	9.85%	11.10%	7.59%
Declined response	1.74%	2.43%	3.16%

Table 1.3: Geography of respondents

GEOGRAPHY	Facts and Figures
# of countries represented	69
# of continents represented	6
# of U. S. states represented	50 (plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico)
% of responses from the United States	63.8%
% of no response	0.7%
% from the U.S., U.K. & Ireland, Australia, and Canada combined	88.5%

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[6] Total does not add up to 100% due to the 4.12% of respondents who selected "other"

Table 1.4: Age of respondents

AGE RANGE	Overall	High status	Low status
Under 14	0.56%	-	1.77%
14-17	12.85%	0.25%	38.94%
18-21	27.81%	30.30%	22.76%
22-25	25.05%	30.74%	13.78%
26-29	14.09%	17.52%	6.57%
30-33	8.00%	9.04%	6.57%
34-37	4.56%	5.24%	3.03%
38-41	3.12%	3.12%	2.91%
42+	3.96%	3.80%	3.67%

Survey questionnaire results[7]

Table 2.1: Frequency of visits to www.perezhilton.com

USAGE	Overall	High status	Low status
Perez Who?	0.28%	0.37%	-
At least once/day	80.31%	79.43	82.17%
A few times/week	15.29%	16.40%	13.27%
A few times/month	3.00%	2.56%	3.67%
Less than once/month	1.12%	1.25%	0.88%

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[7] High status respondents total 1,604 and the low status respondents total 791. Overall response percentages reflect all 2,499 responses, including the 104 respondents not accounted for in the status-level breakdown due to failure to select a level of educational capital.

Table 2.2: Attitudes towards the Hollywood scene, based on what the respondent reads on www.perezhilton.com

ATTITUDE	Overall	High status	Low status
Glamorous/exotic (love to be a part of it)	6.72	5.80%	8.47%
Glamorous/exotic (prefer to enjoy from afar)	9.04%	8.54%	10.11%
Crazy/trashy (and I'd fit right in)	12.89%	10.85%	17.07%
Crazy/trashy (but fun to laugh about)	62.63%	66.08%	56.26%
Other	8.72%	8.73%	8.09%

Table 2.3: Which pair of websites best represents the online sources visited most often by the respondent in order to keep up with current events?

SOURCE	Overall	High status	Low status
People, UsWeekly online	10.92%	9.16%	14.41%
CNN, BBC	32.93%	39.78%	19.60%
MySpace, Facebook	20.29%	15.71%	29.33%
Google or Yahoo News	27.89%	28.80%	25.92%
Only use offline sources	7.96%	6.55%	10.75%

Table 2.4: Whether or not respondents would read Perez Hilton if it were a magazine instead of a blog

PEREZ AS A MAGAZINE?	Overall	High status	Low status
Yes, absolutely!	22.53%	18.08%	31.98%
Yes, but only if it was cheap	28.21%	27.62%	29.58%
Yes, but probably in private	3.44%	3.49%	3.54%
Probably/definitely not	34.85%	40.09%	24.40%
Not sure	10.96%	10.72%	10.49%

Table 2.5: Respondent's choice of reading material for a long train ride

READING MATERIAL	Overall	High status	Low status
The latest gossip magazine	38.34%	33.98%	46.27%
Novel from best-seller list	30.65%	32.17%	28.82%
One of the classics	16.53%	17.39%	14.41%
The newspaper	11.24%	13.22%	7.33%
Nothing unless assigned	3.24%	3.24%	3.16%

Follow-up question results

Table 3.1: The percentage of each emailed response to the follow-up question that expressed the corresponding attitude[8]

ATTITUDE	Overall	High status	Low status
Superiority	28.16%	32.43%	17.24%
Guilt	17.48%	20.27%	10.34%
Devotion	20.39%	17.57%	27.59%
Entertainment	22.33%	18.92%	31.03%
Escapism	34.95%	40.54%	20.69%
Justification	14.56%	12.16%	20.69%
Social benefit	26.21%	28.38%	20.69%

STATUS AND AGE

The research questions and hypothesis all illustrate an interest in the interaction between status levels and leisure preferences/practices. Given the question of levelling between status levels introduced in the hypothesis, it was important to explore the responses of the low status group as well as the high status group. However, the approach of this research presupposes that the data hold the most power for insightful descriptive analysis when simply evaluated as reflections of the attitudes and preferences of one status level rather than attempting to coerce the data into making comparative claims about differing status levels. Therefore, the responses of the low status group are offered periodically as context, but the research questions and hypotheses and subsequently the analysis are primarily concerned with the findings related to the high status group.

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[8] For the emailed follow-up questions, n=103 and the percentages do not add up to 100% because each email could conceivably correspond to any combination of the seven attitude categories

While educational capital is used throughout this research as the sole determinant of status level, it would be irresponsible to ignore the role played by age which emerged as a factor of more relevance than had been initially anticipated. The low status group is notably younger than the high status group (specifically, 61.7% of the low status group is aged 21 or younger compared to only 30.5% of the high status group). However, the large percentage of current students (57% among all respondents) skews both status levels towards a younger age group. This factor emerged as relevant at various points, most notably in questions regarding leisure preferences in which common sense suggests that certain responses would be associated with age (e.g., a reliance on social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook to keep up with current events).

While the older age trend of the high status group lessens the impact of this factor slightly, age still needs to be addressed. To mitigate the influence of age, the second round of analysis limited the respondent pool to those who were at least 30 years of age *and* who indicated that they were not current students. This age cut-off was selected because it is reasonable to assume that a substantial portion of them have made a permanent exit from academia. These non-student 30+ year-olds were also grouped into "low status" and "high status" groups following the same criteria as the overall respondents, and their status level groups were also cross-referenced against all of the other questions. The results of this second round of analysis will be considered alongside the initial results.

FINDINGS

Analysis of both the survey responses as well as the follow-up question resulted in findings in three primary areas. Results are presented here and are discussed more thoroughly in the subsequent segment. For those individuals who chose to participate in and complete the survey (and, if applicable, the follow-up question), three variables interact with status level in ways relevant to this research: leisure practices, attitudes toward the content, and respondents' attitudes toward their own practices.

Finding #1: Take one Perez per day and then diversify

The first variable is leisure *practices*, as expressed by self-proclaimed preferences for specific cultural products. Research Question 1 asked if "trash" culture, represented by www.perezhilton.com, attracts "high status" readers. The responses to this survey provide a resounding "yes" [Table 1.1]. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents (64.21%) fell into the "high

status" category. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2000, only 25% of the adult population of the United States (the country of almost two-thirds of respondents) held a Bachelor's degree or higher (www.census.gov). The percentage of those in the high status category rises to 70.2% among respondents who are at least 30 years of age.

Respondents provided intriguing information about their leisure preferences in terms of their use of cultural products outside of Perez Hilton's blog. Respondents were asked, "Which pair is closest to the type of websites you go to most often to keep up with current events?" [Table 2.3]. Two steps were taken to combat the possibility of influencing the results: First, the survey software was programmed to randomise the order in which the answer options appeared, in hopes of lessening any suggestion of a hierarchy to the answers. Therefore, each respondent had a theoretically equal chance of having each option listed first. Second, I worded the question in a particularly conscious way. Instead of asking which pair of websites the respondent went to most often to keep up with "news," I asked which pair of websites the respondent went to most often to keep up with "current events." This wording allowed respondents to create their own internal definition of "current events." Clearly, some respondents conceptualized "current events" in a global sense and others interpreted it as specific to their own social network. CNN.com and BBC.co.uk were the most frequent pair in the high status group (39.78% compared to 19.60% in the low status group). The strength of this response could be attributable to the age disparity among the groups, yet the disparity was sustained among respondents age 30 and older (47.59% among high status and 31.71% among low status).

Nearly 80% of these high status respondents also access Perez Hilton's blog "at least daily" (79.43%, dropping only slightly to 74.31% for the 30+ high status respondents). This is particularly interesting juxtaposed with the high status group's expressed preference for more highbrow, "online broadsheet"-type news websites. The low status respondents access Perez Hilton's blog with similar frequency (82.17%), and results are unaffected when isolating for older respondents (82.40%).

Another question aimed at exploring leisure practices asked respondents what they would select to read if they had a long train ride. [Table 2.5]. The gossip magazine was chosen most frequently by both status level groups (33.98% for high status and 46.27% for low status). Though the frequency of visits to www.perezhilton.com remained largely constant when isolating for age, off-line leisure reading responses did differ by age. Among the age 30+ respondents "a

novel from the bestseller list" emerged as the most common response for both status levels (34.14% for the high status group and 39.84% for the low status group).

The primary finding regarding leisure preferences, thus, is that Perez Hilton's blog, as a representative of "trash" culture, attracts high status readers of all ages, but this affinity for "trash" culture does not categorically extend to off-line leisure preferences.

Finding #2: It's crazy and trashy – and I'm just going to check it again.

The second variable that interacts with status level in ways relevant to this research is the respondents' attitudes towards celebrity-focused trash culture. The primary evidence for an interaction between status level and this variable stems from a question that asked respondents "From what you read on www.perezhilton.com, which of these best describes how you feel about the Hollywood scene?" [Table 2.2].

Overall, 62.63% of respondents selected "Crazy and trashy, but fun to laugh about," by far the most popular answer. When controlling for status, it was still the most popular option for both groups, but 66.08% of the "high status" group selected this option, whereas 56.26% of the "low status" group did so. This disparity was also reflected when examining the popularity of the response "Crazy and trashy, but who cares? I'd fit right in and have a great time!" which was selected by 17.07% of the low status group, compared to 10.85% of high status respondents. A desire to participate in the Hollywood culture is likely influenced by age, with a higher willingness to participate among a younger subset of the respondents (thereby skewing the "low status" result).

When isolating the high status, non-student respondents of at least 30 years of age, the percentage of those who view Hollywood as "Crazy and trashy, but fun to laugh about" rises to 69.66%. The overwhelming tendency for older high status respondents to select this choice, which juxtaposes a critical judgment of the culture in question with an expression of enjoyment in observation of this culture, is intriguing.

Finding #3: High status respondents say 'It's my escape'

The third variable is self-reflexivity and attitude toward the respondents' own practice of indulgence in celebrity-focused trash culture (with Perez Hilton's blog itself serving as an embodiment of the trash culture that it seeks to document). Respondents' attitudes toward their own practice of indulgence in trash culture emerged in the data as even more salient than their attitudes toward the culture itself. This insight emerged primarily as a result of the 103 emailed responses to the follow-up question. The findings are also supported by data gathered in the initial survey

Of the seven attitude categories expressed throughout the emailed responses to the follow-up question, the attitude that emerged most frequently was that of escapism (34% overall). Broken down by status level, a disparity is evident: 40.54% of the high status email respondents indicated that www.perezhilton.com offered escapism for them. (Only 20.69% of low status email respondents mentioned escapism).

Perhaps most interesting, high status respondents expressed attitudes resoundingly different from their younger and/or less educated counterparts. The high status group was most likely to cite "escapism" in the description of their relationship with www.perezhilton.com (40.54%). The second attitude most frequently expressed by the high status group was a sense of superiority over the blog, the subject material of the blog and/or other readers of the blog. Expression of superiority emerged from 32.43% of the high status respondents, compared to only 17.24% of the low status respondents.

Low status respondents were most likely (31.03%) to express the attitude that www.perezhilton.com simply served as a form of entertainment. While this may seem like an obvious function of the website, it is interesting that this attitude was specified in only 18.92% of responses from the high status group. The second most common attitude expressed by the low status group was unapologetic devotion (27.59%) for Perez Hilton, his blog, and/or the culture documented in the blog. Only 17.57% of high status respondents expressed a sense of devotion.

REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS

The methodology employed granted access to a respondent pool larger than could have possibly been conceived of at the beginning of this process. The sheer volume of responses lend authenticity to the data; however, the sampling strategy also means that the findings can extend no further than the respondent pool itself, with the exception of cautious suggestions regarding the relationship between educational capital and online-based trash culture. Though the online nature of the survey integrated seamlessly into the subject material and may well have encouraged candidness, the data may suffer to some extent for the lack of anecdotal, and open-ended information characteristic of a face-to-face interview-style method.

Aside from the lack of generalisability, the one factor that skewed the data to some extent is the relatively young age of many respondents and the substantial disparity in the age range of the respective status level groups. I stand by my decision to utilize educational capital rather than the respondents' financial capital or occupational/vocational situation to determine status level, as I assert that either of the latter would have produced an even more porous set of comparative data. If there does exist a flawless method for measuring the status of a young population via an Internet survey, this method remains elusive for this researcher.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Revisiting my initial assumptions, hypothesis, and research questions in light of survey results reveals a combination of corroboration and contradiction. This section reflects on two pertinent findings: first, why attitude may be not only the most important factor in the interaction between status level and leisure preferences but also the key element in explaining how indulgence in "trash" culture can fit into an otherwise high status life; and second, why this research overestimated the importance of the anonymity of the online format.

Research Question 1 asked how status level interacts with leisure practices and preferences in the case of Perez Hilton's readers. Logically, this question would be initially conceptualized with the assumption that leisure *preferences* would primarily be expressed in terms of actual leisure *practices*. However, the work of Ang (1985) and Skeggs et al. (2008), among others, suggests that *attitudes* towards the subject may likewise prove salient. Survey results indeed provide some evidence to suggest a relationship between status and leisure *practices*. However, the data documenting *attitudes* toward these practices (and the cultural products that they involve)

appear to be more illuminating and perhaps reflect an even clearer relationship with status level than do the practices themselves. Even more telling than the attitudes expressed toward the subject material of the blog are the attitudes expressed by respondents regarding their own indulgence in the blog.

Evidence of the salience of both kinds of attitudes in interaction with status level is particularly visible in two instances. The first is the relationship between status level and respondents' attitude toward celebrity-focused trash culture as displayed in Perez Hilton's blog. As established, the high status group was very likely to assume a "mocking commentary" (Ang, 1985: pp. 98) in relation to Perez Hilton's version of the Hollywood scene by selecting the response "Crazy and trashy, but fun to laugh about." Adopting this "ironic viewing attitude" allows blog readers to take pleasure in the blog while still "creating distance" and ascribing to the ideology of mass culture which dictates that they must find a lowbrow cultural product such as Perez Hilton's blog to be "bad" (Ang, 1985: p. 99).

Second, the significance of attitudes is corroborated in the primacy of a "superior" attitude expressed by the high status responses in the emailed follow-up question. My assertion that the dividing line of note between status levels is on lines of attitude, rather than practice, reflects Ang's description of the ideology of mass culture, which divides "between the 'person of taste,' the 'cultural expert,' etc. and those who, according to this ideology, are not such" (1985: p. 102). In Ang's case, this specifically refers to the line "between those who do recognize *Dallas* as 'bad mass culture' and those who do not" (p. 102). In the case of the research presented here, the ideology of mass culture permits an exception only to those who attempt to distance themselves from Perez Hilton's blog by exhibiting superiority over the cultural product and declaring their own awareness of the lowbrow nature of the cultural product (p. 103). Skeggs et al.'s findings presage the results presented here even more closely by specifically identifying their *higher class* respondents as the ones who "needed to show not only cultural detachment, but also cultural superiority to the bad object" (2008: p. 11). My findings of both an expression of superiority over www.perezhilton.com and the simultaneous classification of Hollywood as "crazy and trashy, but fun to laugh about" were particularly prevalent among the high status respondents.

Thus I suggest that Ang's and Skeggs et al.'s findings may be applicable to the newer medium of celebrity gossip blogs. Ultimately, expression of this carefully cultivated distance and sense of superiority allows a respondent with an otherwise high status life to indulge relatively seamlessly in "trash" culture such as Perez Hilton's blog.

Given that the methodology was a survey rather than an ethnography or observation-based study, it is important to consider that all data on leisure *practices* merely reflect the activities that the respondent *chose* to claim for him or herself rather than a practice observed in person by a researcher. Therefore, while the discussion to date has made a clear distinction between *attitudes toward* cultural products and *practice of* accessing and using the cultural products, the attitudes toward the cultural products may have actually influenced responses to the *practice*-based questions. For example, as established, nearly 40% of the high status respondents identified CNN.com and BBC.co.uk as the pair of websites that best reflect the online sources they use in order to keep up with current events. It is certainly feasible that these responses are accurate. However, the possibility exists that the responses reflect a combination of actual practices along with, perhaps, compensation on the part of the high status group, some of whom may have seized an opportunity to ascribe legitimacy to themselves and depict themselves as more than simply readers of a celebrity gossip blog.

While the findings discussed to date offer a reasonable extension of those found by Ang and Skeggs et al., both Ang and Skeggs et al. conducted their work in relation to television, a "legacy" medium (Tremayne, 2007: p. 261). A key component of my research is the inquiry into the role played by new media, specifically online celebrity gossip blogs, represented by www.perezhilton.com. Research Question 2 specifically addresses the relevancy of the medium. Two elements of the research design were formulated to address the significance of the online format. Question #7 asked if respondents would be likely to read a hard-copy magazine version of www.perezhilton.com. Second, the attitudes expressed in the follow-up question were re-reviewed for further evidence of whether or not the anonymity and accessibility of an online format influenced respondents' willingness to use the medium.

The hypothesis posited that the accessibility and anonymity of the online format would appeal to high status respondents. Accessibility was valued, often by those who indicated that they checked www.perezhilton.com repeatedly while already on the computer for work or school purposes, and they benefited from the quick and inexpensive nature of the site. One respondent explains, "I don't have to spend money to receive this info and it only takes about five to ten minutes per day for me to be the 'go to girl' for fashion, pop culture and entertainment" (ID 2817552, follow-up). It is conceivable that the instant availability of the online format may be particularly valuable for high status respondents; a large subset (40.09%) would not consider reading a magazine version of Hilton's blog, compared to 24.40% of low status respondents [Table 2.4].

A logical interpretation of the finding that a relatively low percentage of high status readers would consider reading a magazine version of Perez Hilton is that they are ashamed of their indulgence and wish to rely on the privacy and anonymity of the online format. However, the attribute of anonymity did not seem to carry as much weight as had been expected. The "anonymity" portion of the research question centred on my assumption that online trash culture would educe *in*conspicuous consumption[9]. However my theory was largely de-legitimized by the results. In the question regarding a magazine version of Perez Hilton's blog, only 3.44% of respondents said that their willingness to read it was contingent on the indulgence remaining private. This finding was consistent across status levels [Table 2.4]. Furthermore, the expression of "guilt" in the follow-up responses overwhelmingly was spurred by the notion that respondents felt that they should be doing something better with their time than reading www.perezhilton.com, and not (as expected) by fear or shame that other people might judge them if their indulgences were made public. As one respondent laments:

> *"I feel like I get nothing from Perez and I have no clue why I read it every day during my lunch break! I think it's all crap and I hate that I waste my time reading it"* (ID 2825563, follow-up)

Not only does there appear to be an unexpected lack of social shame-based guilt involved in indulgence in Perez Hilton's blog, respondents regard accessing the blog as a social asset. 26.21% of respondents indicated that they indulged in www.perezhilton.com to benefit socially. In comparison, only 17.48% expressed any shame-based guilt. This unexpected result remains true even when controlling for status and isolating the nonstudents aged 30 or over.

Shame/guilt and social benefit can co-exist as sentiments carried in the same person as long as that individual has mastered the ability to "perform self-reflexively" (to borrow the term used by Skeggs et al., 2008: p. 10) as necessary. Rojek (2000) discusses the ways in which self-reflexivity allows for a "switching of identities in different social contexts" (p. 100). Survey results suggest that some respondents may be exhibiting self-reflexivity. A respondent who is a self-described journalism student (part of the "high status" group) represents this trait well:

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[9] Inspired by Brunsdon's (1997) discussions of the *conspicuous* consumption produced by the emergence of television satellite dishes.

"While I'm sure many of the other students in my department probably view the Perez Hilton site as well, none of us would ever admit it. I think it's considered a pretty trashy and shallow site by most people" (ID 2824730, follow-up).

Another respondent, the self-described daughter of a sociology professor and another representative of the "high status" group, exhibits mastery of Rojek's (2000) identity switching through expression of self-reflexive guilt as well as the justification addressed by Brunsdon (1997):

"I generally like people to think of me as intelligent and worldly and such, so going to a gossip website several (and I mean several – on my blackberry also) times a day is not something that I want everyone to know about. However, it is a huge part of my life and I rationalize it in different ways to different people and to myself" (ID 2821931, follow-up)

Ultimately, my results suggest that the anonymity of the online format is less important than expected. However, high status respondents displayed a marked ability to perform both inwardly and socially in a way that ensures that indulgence in this sort of culture remains a benefit, not an impediment

INTERNET SLUMMERS

Richard Hoggart (2004) offers the memorable description "television slummers" (p. 42) to denote those individuals whose choice of lowbrow television programmes belies their highbrow status. Building on Hoggart and based on the survey findings, I would like to offer the term "Internet slummers" to describe those individuals with sufficient educational capital to be deemed "high status" and who know "what's better to like" (Brunsdon, 1997: p. 163) but who choose to indulge in online "trash" culture such as www.perezhilton.com for easily accessible escapism and/or social benefit and likely also with a carefully cultivated distance (Ang, 1985) from the cultural product. These individuals' tastes defy easy explanation due to their fiercely maintained highbrow attitudes juxtaposed with their rampant indulgence in lowbrow cultural products.

Given the increasing importance of the online marketplace, the concept of "Internet slummers" may offer implications for the possibility of a more nuanced strategy for capitalizing on the consumer potential inherent in the type of site that reportedly receives 10 to 12 million hits per

day (Boorstin, 2008). Current marketing insight on blog readers is primarily limited to standard demographic information gathered by advertising feeder sites such as blogads.com (Copeland, 2006) and offers little insight into the attitudes of consumers. Subjectively speaking, the ads currently featured on www.perezhilton.com largely appeal to the lowest common consumer and appear to assume an inherent equation between the taste level of the reader and the taste level of the subject material on the blog. Increased acknowledgement of the complex taste hierarchies, leisure preferences and (perhaps most notably) attitudes of potential consumers could engender a more savvy – and more successful – marketing strategy.

7. CONCLUSION

This research builds on the existing literature relating to leisure practices, practitioners' attitudes, and social status, and investigates the applicability of salient concepts to the contemporary context of the online celebrity gossip blog.

KEY INSIGHTS

Survey results confirm that, among these respondents, www.perezhilton.com does indeed attract high status readers (64% of respondents), the vast majority of whom are "at least daily" visitors. Yet regular indulgence in Perez Hilton's blog does not dictate off-line leisure preferences of high status readers, 40% of whom cite BBC and CNN as sources they visit most frequently to "keep up with current events.".

Two findings suggest that high status respondents reconcile their indulgence in Hilton's blog through self-reflexive maintenance of "ironic distance" (using the concepts described by Ang, 1985 and Skeggs et al., 2008). First, high status respondents more frequently express superiority *over the culture* celebrated in the blog. Second, attitudes toward *their own practice* of indulgence in this trash culture demonstrate a carefully cultivated distance from the cultural object.

Qualitative data indicate that the instant *accessibility* of the online format appeals to high status individuals. Yet the *anonymity* of the online format proved to be largely irrelevant.

The findings on the convoluted interaction between status and leisure preferences, the overwhelming influence of attitude in reinforcing status, and the surprisingly prevalent (and shame-free) indulgence in "trash" culture on the part of otherwise high status individuals are all relatively seamless extensions of the conceptual framework anchored by Ang (1985), Brunsdon (1997), and Bourdieu (1984) in their discussions of "legacy media" (as described by Tremayne, 2007).

The concept of "Internet slummers" extends Hoggart's "television slummers" descriptor to this new medium. The most salient characteristic of "Internet slummers" is their simultaneous maintenance of highbrow attitudes and frequent indulgence in a lowbrow cultural product.

The hypothesis posited that online media would promote a levelling of social status in regards to leisure preferences. If assessment of www.perezhilton.com readers were limited to the current standards of website traffic data gathering (i.e. number of 'hits'), one could conclude that "levelling" had occurred, since the actual *practices* of respondents were relatively blind to status level. However, further unpacking of the data reveals that status hierarchies are effectively reinforced by the *attitudes* expressed toward the cultural product.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Moving beyond superficial usage data to explore status, motivations and attitudes of users could yield a more comprehensive and insightful understanding of new online leisure pursuits, including the celebrity gossip blog. Such understanding could benefit both academic research and online marketing strategies. Future research would also benefit from re-interpreting hierarchies and determinants of status and exploring the relationship with tastes and leisure practices. Repeating the research with multiple celebrity blogs could offer both comparative data and sufficient power for assessment of statistical significance. Applying other research methods could also help determine the extent to which these results are more broadly applicable. For example a focus group or in-depth interview with online celebrity gossip readers of a variety of ages might be illuminating; such a format might uncover crucial motivations and perspectives that could inform future research.

Finally, the initial evidence of "Internet slummers" uncovered by this research is intriguing and has the potential to contribute to greater understanding of the dual roles of status and attitudes in consumption of online leisure products. However, this nascent concept warrants critique and challenge through future study and analysis to determine its utility and result in actionable advancements.

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