

NewScientist

Science in Society



search New Scientist

Go »

Login

[Home](#) [News](#) [In-Depth Articles](#) [Blog](#) [Opinion](#) [Video](#) [Galleries](#) [Topic Guides](#) [Last Word](#) [E-Newsletter](#) [Jobs](#) [Subscribe](#)

[SPACE](#) [TECH](#) [ENVIRONMENT](#) [HEALTH](#) [LIFE](#) [PHYSICS&MATH](#) [SCIENCE IN SOCIETY](#)

[Home](#) | [Science in Society](#) | [Life](#) | [News](#)

How celebrities stay famous regardless of talent

12:17 24 June 2009 by [Ewen Callaway](#)

The peak of the Spice Girls' popularity has long passed, but Victoria Beckham – aka Posh Spice – still has massive media exposure. And Paris Hilton, who is famous for her lifestyle alone, makes world headlines daily.

A new psychology study helps explain why some stars burn bright, long, long after their talent has faded – if it ever was there to begin with.

Simply put, says [Nathanael Fast](#) of Stanford University in California, people need something to talk about. The human desire to find common ground in conversation pushes us to discuss already popular people, he says.

Fast's team focused not on gossip column celebrities, but on professional baseball players in the US

"We realised that there's a ton of stats and performance data available for baseball, so if we can show that famous or well-known baseball players become more prominent than unknown baseball players who perform just as well or better, we're able to make a convincing case," he says.

Many economists have argued that in the market of popular culture, quality marks the difference between popularity and obscurity. For instance, a 1991 study by [William Hamlen Jr](#) of the University at Buffalo, New York, found that an objective measure of vocal harmony predicted album sales, with Barbara Streisand coming out on top in both measures.

Playing dumb

To determine if conversation could drive fame, [independent of quality](#), Fast's team gave a list of eight baseball players with statistics on their previous season's performance to 33 male and 56 female volunteers. Volunteers picked a name from the list and drafted a short email to another person in the group about the player. In some cases, the volunteer was told that the person receiving the email was an avid fan.

More often than not, they found, volunteers conversed about popular but under-performing players like Ken Griffey Jr and Roger Clemens, rather than more obscure players who put up amazing numbers, such as Miguel Cabrera.

Volunteers who were baseball fans themselves tended to pick an obscure player if they thought they were emailing an expert. Yet the same fans tended to converse about prominent players when they didn't know anything about their correspondent.

"The very experts who could kind of inform everyone else don't. They actually keep feeding them the information they already know because that helps establish a connection," Fast says.

Amateur influence

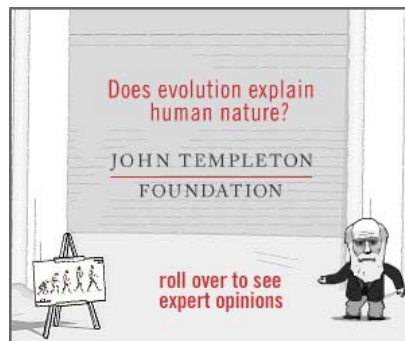
To test their theory on a grander scale, Fast and his colleagues examined the relationships between fan chatter on internet message boards, media coverage, and an objective measure of a player's popularity – fan balloting for the annual "All-Star" game. This mid-season contest pits the most popular players from baseball's two divisions against one another.

PRINT SEND SHARE



Paris Hilton is world famous, but what does she do? (image: Sipa Press/Rex Features)

ADVERTISEMENT



More Latest news

Five myths about HIV and AIDS

15:50 23 June 2009

Despite the overwhelming evidence that HIV causes AIDS, a hardcore group still denies it. We explore five of the most common myths about AIDS

NASA criticised for sticking to imperial units



23:06 22 June 2009

The space agency's decision not to convert its shuttle-replacement programme to metric units could hurt efforts to build a global civilian space industry, critics say

[New York approves controversial egg donor payments](#)

17:42 22 June 2009

This week's issue

Subscribe



20 June 2009

ADVERTISEMENT



INTERNET FOR THE WAY YOU CONNECT

VERIZON HIGH SPEED INTERNET
WITH SPEEDS UP TO 1 MBPS

NO HOME PHONE SERVICE REQUIRED

\$19.99 per month
WITH 1-YR AGREEMENT



Get It Today!

Players who garnered the most All-Star votes also received the most media coverage and message-board attention, Fast's team found. A statistical analysis, however, suggested that internet conversations, particularly on message boards not devoted to baseball, drove media coverage and All-Star game votes.

The best players, of course, were the most likely to garner All-Star votes. But all things considered, internet mentions by non-experts had as much of an effect on voting as performance, Fast's team found.

'Infectious ideas'

If this whole argument seems circular, that's the point. Prominent people stay popular for longer than they ought to because they serve as conversational fodder, which in turn drives more media coverage.

"Take Paris Hilton, somehow or another she became well known and now people are more likely to talk about her," Fast says.

Mark Schaller, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, agrees. "It does provide an answer to the question of why fame is self-perpetuating, even when the famous person isn't doing anything fame-worthy anymore."

What is less clear is how people, ideas and practices become prominent in the first place, Schaller says. In baseball, performance is likely to provide the initial inertia to stardom. But other aspects of culture come into prominence because of a quality that Schaller calls communicability.

"Catching an idea is not a whole lot different in some metaphorical way than catching a disease," he says.

Journal reference: *Psychological Science* (DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02387.x)

If you would like to reuse any content from New Scientist, either in print or online, please contact the syndication department first for permission. New Scientist does not own rights to photos, but there are a variety of licensing options available for use of articles and graphics we own the copyright to.

Have your say

Comment title

Your name

Email

Comment

[read all 17 comments](#)

Comments 1 | 2

Females And Masses Love The Sweet Smell Of Success

Wed Jun 24 12:51:15 BST 2009 by **Polemios**

"It does provide an answer to the question of why fame is self-perpetuating, even when the famous person isn't doing anything fame-worthy anymore."

Fame is autocatalytic because people like success per se, not because they need some idiotic "conversational fodder"

The answer is here: "Females love the sweet smell of sexual success" ([long URL - click here](#))

[reply](#) [report this comment](#)

The US state has approved payments for women who donate eggs for stem cell research – but some fear a backlash from the US public

'Secret' questions leave accounts vulnerable



17:16 22 June 2009
Email services often protect accounts with security questions that make life simple for hackers – but getting your best friends' help in unlocking frozen accounts could provide a solution

[see all related stories](#)

Most read Most commented

[NASA criticised for sticking to imperial units](#)

[Earth's coastlines after sea-level rise, 4000 AD](#)

[Animals that count: How numeracy evolved](#)

[Email patterns can predict impending doom](#)

[Everything you always wanted to know about female ejaculation \(but were afraid to ask\)](#)

TWITTER

New Scientist is on Twitter



Get the latest from New Scientist: sign up to our Twitter feed

NewScientist

\$18
every 3 months

Subscribe

Saving over 70% off the newsstand price

Related Jobs

[Senior Scientist - Cambridge](#)

[Purification Biotechnologist - 12 month FTC](#)

[Purification Biotechnologist - South](#)

Partners

We are partnered with Approved Index. Visit the site to get free quotes from [website designers](#) and a range of web, IT and marketing services in the UK.

Females And Masses Love The Sweet Smell Of Success

Wed Jun 24 13:14:55 BST 2009 by **Think Again**

How to become Famous in first place:

1. Choose a catchy name
2. Do something that gets peoples attention
3. Make sure the 'in' people are talking about it

Please add more...

How did Kenedy and Obama become famous?

How did actors become famous?

How did Google and ebay become famous?

Why is Craigslist such a dark horse?

How did Christianity and Islam and Buddhism become famous?

Anyone drink Pepsi anymore?

How on earth did companies get people to smoke when it smells lousy and kills people?

Guess if you can show that we can connect with others if we do something, we will tend to do it - whatever its other effects might be...

Facebook?

[reply](#) [report this comment](#)

[view thread](#)

Females And Masses Love The Sweet Smell Of Success

Wed Jun 24 15:08:37 BST 2009 by **me**

really? I thought it was men who were are after success. females are generally less ambitious and thus generally less self-centred than males. Thats where the conversational 'fodder'comes in. Females are more about establishing relations. Even if it means talking nonssense.

Given the high quality of your 'fodder', I would probably guess you are female too? Unless of course you just want to make an impression with whatever it is you have to say, in which case you are definitely male.

[reply](#) [report this comment](#)

Females And Masses Love The Sweet Smell Of Success

Wed Jun 24 15:34:49 BST 2009 by **Polemos**

Buy a vibrating pacifier, Xanthippe.

[reply](#) [report this comment](#)

[view thread](#)

Great Research - Thanks

Wed Jun 24 13:00:45 BST 2009 by **Think Again**

I can definitely use this in my work - branding being so competitive...

[reply](#) [report this comment](#)

"somehow Or Anohter"????

Wed Jun 24 13:41:19 BST 2009 by Frank

PH got "popular" because of a home made porno tape. Sheesh-- how clueless is the author?

[reply](#) [report this comment](#)

This comment breached our [terms of use](#) and has been removed.

[view thread](#)

"somehow Or Anohter"????

Wed Jun 24 14:14:05 BST 2009 by Rowan Hooper, online news editor

Thanks for spelling this out! We tried to allude subtly to it by mentioning PH's "lifestyle"

[reply](#) [report this comment](#)

[view thread](#)

[read all 17 comments](#)

Comments 1 | 2

All comments should respect the [New Scientist House Rules](#). If you think a particular comment breaks these rules then please use the "Report" link in that comment to report it to us.

If you are having a technical problem posting a comment, please [contact technical support](#).

[Back to top](#)

[Login for full access](#) [Login](#)

About us

[New Scientist](#)
[Advertise](#)
[Syndication](#)
[Who's who](#)
[RBI Jobs](#)

User Help

[Contact Us](#)
[FAQ / Help](#)
[Disclaimer](#)
[Ts & Cs](#)
[Cookies](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)

Subscriptions

[Subscribe](#)
[Renew](#)
[Gift subscription](#)
[My account](#)
[Back issues](#)
[Customer Service](#)

Links

[Site Map](#)
[Browse all articles](#)
[Magazine archive](#)
[NewScientistJobs](#)
[The LastWord](#)
[E-Newsletter](#)
[RSS Feeds](#)

© Copyright Reed Business Information Ltd.