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**Public's perception of celebrities with serious illness in Hong Kong and the impact of media stories of ill celebrities on health awareness and behaviour**

Celebrity diagnoses can strongly impact public awareness and behaviour. This study aims to examine the public's perception of celebrities with serious illness in Hong Kong and the impact of media stories of ill celebrities on health awareness and behaviour. A survey using purposive sampling was conducted in April 2014. Altogether, 297 completed questionnaires were received. The public's perception of celebrity diagnoses was generally favourable.

Respondents showed sympathy and support toward celebrities with serious illnesses. They tended to believe stories revealed by the ill celebrities rather than news coverage in media.

This is the first study to examine public perception toward celebrity diagnoses and the impact of media stories of ill celebrities on health awareness and behaviour in a Chinese context.

**Keywords:** Attitudes; Celebrity diagnosis; Health awareness; Health behavior; Hong Kong

## **Introduction**

In recent years, ill celebrities have played an increasingly prominent role in the realm of public health and disease prevention, as celebrities who are diagnosed with serious illness are increasingly willing to publicize in detail their health conditions and the treatment that they have received.<sup>1</sup> In addition to publicly discussing their health status, some have even established a charitable foundation to obtain government funding or to raise money to support related research and the patient community.<sup>2</sup> For example, after disclosing his HIV infection, Earvin ‘Magic’ Johnson became an advocate for HIV prevention and established the Magic Johnson Foundation in 1991 to support patients and to educate the public about HIV. Michael J. Fox publicly disclosed in 1998 that he is suffering from Parkinson’s disease and established the Michael J. Fox Foundation to advocate and support related research. Celebrities in Hong Kong are also actively involved in supporting other patients. For instance, Lam Kin-ming, who suffered from a major depressive disorder, founded the Joyful (Mental Health) Foundation in 2004 to spread educational information about mental illness and to support mental patients in Hong Kong. To assess celebrities’ increasingly active role in health communication, this paper will evaluate their perceived impact in raising public awareness and affecting their behaviour. This paper will also examine how the public perceives and emotionally responds to media stories of celebrity

illness.

## **Literature review**

### ***Potential impact of celebrity illness in health communication***

Media stories concerning ill celebrities are opportunities to disseminate health information to citizens and improve public health.<sup>3-5</sup> Celebrity's disclosure of their health conditions is effective in drawing much media attention to them and consequently the diseases with which they are diagnosed.<sup>6-8</sup> For example, there was a twenty-fold increase in news coverage of breast cancer after Kylie Minogue publicly disclosed her breast cancer diagnosis.<sup>7</sup> The media coverage of Jade Goody's cancer diagnosis prompted people to seek health information and led to a substantial increase in visits to cervical cancer webpages and callers asking about conditions of the disease.<sup>6,9</sup> After basketball star Magic Johnson's disclosure of his HIV seropositivity, interest in getting more AIDS information and concern about AIDS significantly increased among respondents.<sup>10-12</sup> In addition, qualitative research illustrates that the public sees the potential benefits of the public disclosure of celebrity illness irrespective of their like or dislike for the celebrity involved, as they believe that the media stories can draw attention to the issue and make them think about their own health seriously.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to raising awareness, media coverage of celebrity illness may

change the public's behaviour and motivate them to take action in disease prevention.<sup>7-9,14</sup> Media stories of celebrity illness may lead to public anxiety and prompt them to have a medical checkup.<sup>8</sup> For example, researchers recorded an unprecedented increase in initial and re-screen mammography after the reportage of Kylie Minogue's breast cancer diagnosis.<sup>7</sup> Jade Goody's public announcement of her cervical cancer diagnosis motivated the public to utilize cervical screening services and led to about half a million extra attendances in cervical screening in England.<sup>4,8,15</sup> Magic Johnson's announcement of his HIV seropositivity increased HIV counselling and testing.<sup>3</sup>

Not only do ill celebrities raise public awareness and encourage the public to take preventive measures, they also influence fellow patients in their choices of medical treatments.<sup>2,16</sup> Lerner emphasizes how the asymmetrical patient-physician relationship evolved into a collaborative one, in which patient opinions are perceived to be as important as those of the doctors.<sup>2</sup> In this particular context Lerner believes that ill celebrities may influence individual patients in making decisions about medical treatments.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, celebrities provide a set of standardized lifestyles and an array of 'ready to apply options' in modern societies,<sup>17</sup> and cases of celebrity illness thus become a signpost or a way for the public to understand illness and treatments.<sup>18</sup> For example, Nancy Reagan's mastectomy led to a significant decrease

in the use of breast-conserving surgery in the United States during the period of media exposure, as the general public believed that celebrities got the best medical advice.<sup>16,19</sup>

### ***The influences of social media in communicating celebrity illness***

Most celebrities are aware of the rising importance of social media for themselves and their audience, and now they (and/or their team) actively use these networks to create their own profiles and make their own faces and content available to the social media community.<sup>43</sup> As Drake and Miah indicated<sup>44</sup>, the Internet, including social networks and blogs, has downsized the gatekeeping processes that exist in the traditional mass media platforms. Thus, celebrities have started to present themselves in more realistic, unfiltered ways to the audience.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the online media platforms provide 24/7 accessibility, dynamic content, and immediacy that are unavailable in print and television.<sup>45</sup> These online media channels pose the possibility for people—typically fans and followers—to have “direct” contact with a celebrity, as celebrities (and their teams) publish their own stories and post their images to allow the audience to get closer to their very reality.<sup>43</sup> In Murray’s point of view,<sup>46</sup> celebrities self-publishing stories indicate their efforts to try to gain back the power they lost to the fast-paced gossip industry. According to Harper,<sup>1</sup> ill celebrities become well loved after disclosing their medical conditions, because audiences would

compassionately identify with the celebrities. This kind of compassionate identification may at the same time help destigmatize the illness in the eyes of the public. Moreover, the misery of ill celebrities may even provide feelings of consolation and make audiences feel better about their own lives.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Factors that affect the influences of media stories about celebrity illness***

Media stories about celebrity illness are influential in health communication, because a celebrity with personal experience of the medical conditions about which he or she speaks is regarded as a more effective messenger in the realm of public health.<sup>20</sup> A perceived fit between the source and the cause will enhance the attribution of social motivations.<sup>21-22</sup> For example, the credibility of a celebrity in the area of depression or stress management will be enhanced if the celebrity is a mentally distressed patient. Therefore, an ill celebrity may become a trustworthy source in the area of health communication after disclosing his or her medical conditions.

However, influences of media stories about celebrity illness on the public may differ from person to person according to their demographic associations with the celebrities. It is reported that the magnitude of the effect increases for people who are demographically similar to the ill celebrities.<sup>14,19,23</sup> For example, Magic Johnson's disclosure of his HIV infection influenced African American men to a greater extent than Caucasian men;<sup>10-11</sup> the 'Goody effect' was greater for younger women and

women with young families, as they were closer to Jade Goody in age or circumstances.<sup>4,15</sup>

Another factor that affects the influences of media stories about celebrity illness is the celebrity-audience relationship. According to the Celebrity Worship Scale,<sup>24</sup> a celebrity-audience relationship has three dimensions. In low worship levels, the audience is involved in individualistic behaviours, like reading news about the celebrity, for entertainment purposes. In higher levels of celebrity worship, the audience's relationship with the celebrity is characterized by social activities. For example, they may tend to watch and talk about the celebrity with friends. The highest worship levels basically involve audience empathy, even compulsive behaviours and obsession with details about the celebrity's life. High levels of celebrity worship often contain pathological signs. These relational bonds between the audience and celebrities are important, as they are the psychological foundation and behavioural antecedents for the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements, which exert significant influences on value transfer and behaviour change.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Complex public attitudes toward media stories of celebrity illness***

#### *Aggression and schadenfreude*

Public approaches to media stories of celebrity illness are diverse, as they identify with celebrities in various ways. Gilbert explains the public's identification with

celebrities in terms of Lacanian misrecognition.<sup>26</sup> In Gilbert's point of view, celebrities serve as images of impossible perfection. The glamorous but ultimately unattainable existence of celebrity emphasizes the public's own insufficiency, which may arouse feelings of envy, frustration and anger and give rise to an aggressive attitude.<sup>27-29</sup> Reading media stories about celebrity illness and witnessing the celebrity's misfortune may, therefore, contain a certain degree of schadenfreude and become a source of reading pleasure.<sup>1,29</sup> Johansson perceives this particular type of reading as the public's opportunity for a momentary experience of vindication of injustices, in which the public may have power and control over the celebrity for a limited period of time.<sup>29</sup>

### *Disbelief*

Some people, on the other hand, may not completely believe in a celebrity's disclosure of his or her medical conditions and regard it as merely a 'publicity stunt' to draw media attention. After her cancer diagnosis, Jade Goody signed an exclusive deal with *OK!* magazine, after which she was a regular face of the magazine up until her death. Ashton and Feasey notice that, as the magazine is a promotional site for managed publicity of celebrities, it depicted Goody in a glamorous way with airbrushed images.<sup>13</sup> Goody's slim, tanned and styled body contrasted with the mainstream image of the terminally ill body, thus disconnecting people's personal

experiences from the media coverage. Some people even questioned her terminal diagnosis, because Goody's orchestrated images did not match with the common stereotypes of a skeletal person in end-stage cancer.<sup>13</sup>

### *Sympathy, empathy and admiration*

Not every individual will respond to media stories of celebrity illness with disbelief or a quiver of delightful schadenfreude. The 'realistic' disclosure of celebrity illness may arouse people's sympathy and can be used to vouchsafe the 'ordinariness' of the celebrities.<sup>1,30</sup> In fact, the private lives and plights of the celebrities are increasingly addressed in an intimate and verisimilitudinous way, signifying a 'democratic' counter-impulse in celebrity culture.<sup>27</sup> This appeals to the audience, because the celebrities are attainable, as they are just like the audience. Therefore, Harper believes that ill celebrities may gain positive exposure after disclosing their medical conditions, because the audience may compassionately identify with the celebrities' 'ordinary' status.<sup>1</sup> Some people may even feel sorry if there is an intrusion on the celebrity's privacy, which occurs in the case of the unwilling disclosure of their health conditions.<sup>29</sup>

Another reason for people's sympathetic attitudes toward ill celebrities is their perceived sense of closeness to celebrities. The constant exposure of celebrities in media brings celebrities into people's circles of family, friends and acquaintances,

thus establishing a sense of community.<sup>31-32</sup> Therefore, the announcement that a celebrity has been diagnosed with a serious illness seems akin to personally knowing someone with health problems,<sup>12</sup> which explains why some people are empathetic to ill celebrities.

### *Indifference*

Some people may express neither aggression nor empathy and appear to be indifferent to media stories about celebrity illness. Johansson found that sometimes, taking an interest in a celebrity or celebrity coverage is connected to feelings of shame and embarrassment.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, some people are reluctant to admit that they like reading media stories about celebrities and distance themselves from such media coverage as they do not want to be seen as more vulnerable to media influence. In the case of male readers, reading celebrity stories may contradict traditional masculine areas of interest, like political news; while, in the case of female readers, the act of reading celebrity stories is connected to the concept of social segmentation.<sup>29</sup> He believes that people's devaluation of celebrity stories is shaped by the mainstream view that those celebrity stories are of low cultural value, which explains why some people hold a seemingly indifferent attitude toward media stories of celebrity illness.

### **Research objectives**

With the belief that ill celebrities can effectively change the public's attitudes and

behaviours and that the public has mixed feelings toward them, it is the responsibility of social policymakers or social marketers to understand the public's perception and to develop an effective health promotional program to educate or enhance the awareness and the knowledge of the public toward the respective diagnosed disease. In fact, more celebrities are collaborating with pharmaceutical companies to spread messages of related health issues. For example, the American singer Shawn Colvin and actor Chad Allen spoke about their depression in different forums and campaigns sponsored by GlaxoSmithKline, which produces anti-depressants.<sup>33</sup> These soft-sell campaigns, in which names of the products are not directly mentioned, are effective in shaping public perceptions about the illness.<sup>34</sup> Though the campaigns may raise public awareness of mental illness, there are also concerns that excessive media spotlight may adversely lead to disease mongering, in which the media may be exploited to frame certain conditions as being widespread and severe so as to expand markets for new products.<sup>35</sup>

To examine the public's perception toward celebrity diagnoses and its perceived impacts on health awareness and behaviour in Hong Kong, this study proposed four research objectives:

- To examine the public's perception toward media stories of celebrity illness;
- To explore the public's attitudes toward celebrities diagnosed with serious

illness and their perceived trustworthiness;

- To evaluate the impact of media stories of ill celebrities on health awareness and behaviour;
- To examine if media stories that were revealed by the ill celebrity and media stories that were reported by the mass media would result in different perceived credibility toward the ill celebrity.

## **Methodology**

### ***Subjects***

In this study, a purposive sampling survey of Hong Kong residents aged 18 or older was conducted in April 2014. A communication research method class of 45 students in a public university in Hong Kong was asked to invite friends to answer a questionnaire. Each student was requested to recruit 10 respondents in the age groups of 18–29, 30–39 and 40 or older. A total of 297 completed questionnaires were received. All respondents indicated that they had noticed at least one piece of news related to a celebrity or to celebrities who was or were diagnosed with serious illness in the past 10 years.

The demographic profile is summarized in Table 1. There were 150 females (50.5%) and 147 males (49.5%). About 40% of the respondents were aged 18–29 and 30–39 respectively. Only 20% of the respondents were aged 40 or older.

Insert Table 1 about here

### *Measures*

The questionnaire was divided into four main parts. In the first part, seven statements related to emotional reactions toward media stories of celebrity illness were asked. All of the statements were measured in five-point scales with '1' indicating strongly disagree and '5' indicating strongly agree. The Cronbach alpha of this subscale was .69. In the second part, 13 attitudinal statements were included in the questionnaire, which were grouped into two parts: 'attitudes toward the celebrity who was diagnosed with serious illness' and 'celebrity's perceived trustworthiness'. One statement was reverse-coded. The Cronbach alpha of these two subscales were .63 and .68 respectively. In the third part, six questions related to perceived impacts of media stories of celebrity illness were asked. All of the statements were measured in five-point scales with '1' indicating strongly disagree and '5' indicating strongly agree. The Cronbach alpha of this subscale was .73. In the fourth part, three questions related to the disclosure of media stories about celebrity diagnoses. The Cronbach alpha of this subscale was .62.

Finally, the following demographic variables including age and gender were collected.

### *Data analysis*

Means and standard deviations of the attitudinal statements were compiled and tested against the mid-point employing one-sample  $t$ -test. To examine the attitudes of different demographic groups, two-tailed  $t$ -tests or one-way ANOVA tests were conducted.

## **Findings**

### ***Public's perception toward media stories of celebrity illness***

The public's perception toward media stories of celebrity illness is summarized in Table 2. Five out of seven statements had mean scores that differed significantly from the mid-point of 3.0 by one-sample  $t$ -test. Results showed that the public exerted strong emotions toward media stories about a celebrity diagnoses. They felt sad, nervous and scared after reading a media story related to the serious illness of a celebrity. They were disappointed to learn that the celebrity diagnosed with serious illness could no longer function normally.

T-tests and one-way ANOVA statistical tests were conducted to examine if respondents of different gender and age groups have different perceptions toward media stories related to celebrity illness. Results showed a statistical difference between male ( $M = 2.97$ ;  $SD = .61$ ) and female ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = .54$ ) respondents in their perceptions toward media stories related to an ill celebrity ( $t[295] = 3.39$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not in terms of age. Females tended to show stronger emotions and reaction when

they learned about some media stories related to a celebrity with a serious illness.

Insert Table 2 about here

***Public's attitudes toward celebrities diagnosed with serious illness and their perceived trustworthiness***

Regarding the public's attitudes toward celebrities diagnosed with serious illness, seven out of eight statements had mean scores that differed significantly from the mid-point of 3.0 by one-sample *t*-test. Results indicated that respondents appreciate the honesty and optimism of celebrities who admitted the diagnosed serious illness. The respondents were sympathetic toward the celebrities who were diagnosed with serious illness and they felt closer to them after reading their stories. Their attitudes toward those who were diagnosed with serious illness were positively changed as well.

T-tests and one-way ANOVA statistical tests were conducted to examine if respondents of different gender and age groups have different attitudes toward celebrities diagnosed with serious illness. Again, the results showed a statistical difference between male ( $M = 3.36$ ;  $SD = .43$ ) and female ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = .43$ ) respondents in perception toward media stories related to an ill celebrity ( $t[293] = 4.22$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not in terms of age. Comparatively, females tended to show more sympathy toward celebrities with serious illness more than males.

In terms of the perceived trustworthiness of celebrities who revealed their serious illness to the public, four out of five statements had mean scores that differed significantly from the mid-point of 3.0 by one-sample  $t$ -test. Respondents believed that celebrities who announce their serious illness were genuine and that the announcement per se was not a gimmick. They were willing to support those ill celebrities by purchasing products that the celebrities endorsed. Intriguingly, they thought that celebrities diagnosed with serious illness were much more trustworthy than healthy celebrities.

T-tests and one-way ANOVA statistical tests were conducted to examine if respondents of different gender and age groups have different perceived trustworthiness toward ill celebrities. No statistical significance was received. Results are summarized in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

***Perceived impacts of media stories of ill celebrities on health awareness and behaviour***

The respondents' attitudes toward media reports of ill celebrities on health awareness and behaviour are summarized in Table 4. All statements had mean scores that differed significantly from the mid-point of 3.0 by one sample  $t$ -test. Results showed that media stories about celebrity illness would enhance respondents' awareness and

knowledge toward the diagnosed disease. In addition, they will show more support of the celebrity diagnosed with illness. However, results showed that media stories did not entice respondents to make behavioural changes, as the responses were below the mid-point.

T-tests and one-way ANOVA statistical tests were conducted to examine if respondents of different gender and age groups have different perceptions toward the perceived impacts of media stories of ill celebrities. Results showed a statistical difference between male ( $M = 2.98$ ;  $SD = .62$ ) and female ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .54$ ) respondents in perception toward media stories related to an ill celebrity ( $t[291] = 3.95$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not in terms of age.

Insert Table 4 about here

***Perceived credibility toward the ill celebrity when media stories were covered by different agents (celebrity versus mass media)***

The respondents' attitudes toward the ill celebrity when media stories were covered by different agents are summarized in Table 5. All statements had mean scores that differed significantly from the mid-point of 3.0 by one sample  $t$ -test. In general, results indicated that respondents believed in media stories about a celebrity's illness if the stories were revealed by the celebrity, not by the mass media, including blogs, twitter or other social media written by the celebrities. They believed that those stories

are much more trustworthy than related news that was reported by the mass media.

They suggested that media stories covered by mass media were normally exaggerated.

T-tests and one-way ANOVA statistical tests were conducted to examine if respondents of different gender and age groups have different perceptions toward the perceived impacts of media stories about ill celebrities. Results showed a statistical difference between male ( $M = 3.34$ ;  $SD = .67$ ) and female ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .71$ ) respondents in their perceptions toward media stories related to an ill celebrity ( $t[295] = 3.38$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not in terms of age.

Insert Table 5 about here

### **Discussion and Implications**

The purpose of the current study was to examine the public's perceptions toward celebrities with serious illness in Hong Kong and their perceived impact on health awareness and behavioural changes. As mentioned, celebrities play an influential role in health communication. Celebrity is perceived as one of the effective tools in raising public awareness of a particular disease.<sup>8, 37</sup> For example, Lam Kin-ming, who once suffered from depression and anxiety disorder, founded the Joyful (Mental Health) Foundation in 2004, which aims to spread correct information about mental illness and support mental patients in Hong Kong. This study corresponds to past research, which suggests that celebrities may lead to an increase in concern about a disease and

interest in acquiring more information.<sup>8,37</sup> Celebrities have recently gone public about their serious disease. Results indicated that respondents in Hong Kong were indeed very supportive of celebrities with serious illness. Some even look up to the celebrity diagnosed with serious illness for his or her courage in fighting the illness. The famous Hong Kong female singer Sammi Cheng, for instance, is well-known for her major depressive disorder some years ago. She was perceived as a brave idol to many young people in Hong Kong, because she admitted her disease to the public and stayed very positive while fighting it. She even posted on Twitter many photographs of her running and exercising to encourage people to exercise more to keep a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Sammi Cheng also recorded a theme song for the HK Familylink Mental Health Advocacy Association to help increase public awareness of mental illness and to raise funds for the organization.

This study also showed that the public generally expressed positive emotions toward a celebrity who develops a serious illness. Previous research has shown that the public is more interested in the private lives of ill celebrities than in their professional lives.<sup>39</sup> The public interest in the private lives of celebrities is satisfied by the increasingly tabloid mass media, which is characterized by sensationalism, an emphasis on private affairs, and the personalization of news.<sup>40-41</sup> Media stories about celebrities are a safe topic for informal talks and strengthen social bonds and cohesion,

thus establishing a sense of community.<sup>29,32</sup> Results indicated that females in particular showed more positive support and sympathy toward ill celebrities. These results correspond to previous research, which suggested that public's empathetic attitudes towards ill celebrities might further lead to feelings of consolation and admiration. Harper recognizes the consolatory function of media stories of ill celebrities who overcame adversities, as she believes that the public may feel better about their own lives and be more capable to deal with their frustrations after reading such stories.<sup>1</sup> Lerner also emphasizes that narratives of celebrities fighting against their illness are about the concepts of determination, inspiration and hope.<sup>2</sup> These attributes may thus lead to the public's admiration for the ill celebrities, who battle their illness.

Since celebrities can help to promote disease information and enhance public awareness of the diagnoses, their disclosures of diagnoses helps to set the stage for information seeking and changes in health behaviour.<sup>11</sup> This study showed that media stories about the celebrity's diagnoses were able to enhance the general public's awareness of and knowledge about the disease. For instance, respondents agreed that those stories were effective to motivate them to talk more with family and friends about the disease. However, more in-depth information is needed to educate the public about prevention methods and treatments that are required to cure the disease.

In addition, this study suggested that there is a difference between media coverage of diagnoses that is revealed and disclosed by the ill celebrities rather than by the mass media. Respondents believed that mass media always exaggerate the extent of sickness, while celebrities were perceived as more truthful in revealing their own stories to the public. Respondents tended to trust stories revealed by the ill celebrities more than stories reported by the news media. Future research is needed to understand better the link between celebrity disclosure and its perceived trustworthiness, because it will have implications on public information-seeking and attitudinal changes. If respondents believed in the media stories about the ill celebrities, they are more likely to listen to their advice with regard to health issues. Set against this, increasing public awareness and general knowledge of serious diseases are good, but few celebrities publicize the most important messages on disease, including prevention and treatment methods. In addition, the educational significance of media coverage revealed by news media is in doubt.<sup>8,12,16</sup> Hilton and Hunt note that media stories about celebrity illness tend to focus on 'human interest' aspects at the expense of mobilizing messages.<sup>8</sup> Factual or educational information, which may help the public to recognize early symptoms or may mobilize the public to adopt preventive measures, is often neglected. The public also acknowledges the fact that they learn little or almost nothing from the media stories of celebrity illness, as

they notice that information about the disease is not a key feature of those stories.<sup>13</sup>

Social policy makers should use related media coverage of an ill celebrity to educate and provide more in-depth health information, such as curing treatments and support by the government and so forth, rather than the status of the ill celebrities.

Though media coverage of celebrity illness may raise public awareness and motivate people to adopt preventive measures, some researchers worry about its adverse impact on the appropriateness and cost-effectiveness of the medical services.<sup>14</sup> Media stories about celebrity illness may cause anxiety and widespread panic leading to unnecessary medical interventions.<sup>8,14,31</sup> For example, Kylie Minogue's breast cancer story prompted women to undergo radiographic investigations, which may have detrimental effects, such as increased radiation exposure and cancer phobia.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the sudden influx of an anxious public may clog up the medical system and reduce the capacity of services available for people at a higher risk.<sup>14,31</sup> Social marketers and social policy makers should be careful when they plan education and prevention campaigns. Future research should also examine the negative impacts of media coverage of celebrity diagnoses.

Set against the source by which respondents get to know about the news of an ill-celebrity, interestingly, respondents believed that stories that were revealed on the Internet and by social media by the ill celebrities have greater credibility than stories

that were disclosed by mass media. It appears that social media is an effective tool to disseminate important health information. Such sites as Weibo, YouTube and Facebook enable groups to connect and communicate among networks of co-workers, friends, family members, and even strangers. People join various interest groups and become fans of different celebrities or models on their Facebook or Weibo pages. Sometimes, the celebrities or models will also exchange their views with their audience (fans) via these tools. This kind of ongoing and reciprocal interaction between the audience and media models allows different individuals to adjust and exchange their attitudes, values, and behaviours. This continuous interaction constitutes a more friendly and casual relationship between the audience and the modelled exemplars than was previously experienced. Images and personalized communication messages in these new forms of social environments are believed as more relevant, credible, and memorable.<sup>38</sup> Social policy makers can consider using social media to disseminate health information related to celebrity diagnoses to increase understanding toward the respective diagnoses.

### **Implications of the study**

Celebrity is perceived as one of the effective tools in raising public awareness of a particular disease.<sup>8, 37</sup> Celebrity is an attention-gathering mechanism that can attract media attention and focus the spotlight on a particular issue. Media stories about

celebrities revealing their own histories of illness challenge the norm of hiding the shame of illness and may encourage people to seek help. For example, Lam Kin-ming, who once suffered from depression and anxiety disorder, founded the Joyful (Mental Health) Foundation in 2004, which aims to spread correct information about mental illness and support mental patients in Hong Kong. Sammi Cheng, a renowned Hong Kong Cantopop singer and actress who reported to suffer from serious depression for 3 years, recorded a theme song for the HK Familylink Mental Health Advocacy Association to help increase public awareness of mental illness and to raise funds for the organization.

This study showed that generally public attitudes toward celebrity diagnoses and related media stories are positive. It appeared that the public is more interested in the private lives of ill celebrities than in their professional lives.<sup>39</sup> The public interest in the private lives of celebrity is satisfied by the increasingly tabloid mass media, which is characterized by sensationalism, an emphasis on private affairs, and the personalization of news.<sup>40-41</sup> Media stories about celebrities are a safe topic for informal talks and strengthen social bonds and cohesion, thus establishing a sense of community.<sup>29,32</sup> However, this research showed that there is a different perception toward media stories that were revealed by the ill celebrities rather than by the news media. Respondents tended to trust stories revealed by the ill celebrities more than

stories reported by the news media. Future research is needed to understand better the link between celebrity disclosure and its perceived trustworthiness, because it will have implications to public information-seeking and attitudinal changes. If respondents believed in the media stories by the ill celebrities, they are more likely to listen to their advice with regard to health issues. Set against this, increasing public awareness and general knowledge of serious diseases is good, but few celebrities publicize the most important messages on disease, including prevention and treatment methods. In addition, the educational significance of media coverage revealed by news media is in doubt.<sup>8,12,16</sup> Hilton and Hunt note that media stories about celebrity illness tend to focus on 'human interest' aspects at the expense of mobilizing messages.<sup>8</sup> Factual or educational information, which may help public to recognize early symptoms or may mobilize them to adopt preventive measures, is often neglected. The public also acknowledges the fact that they learn little or almost nothing from the media stories of celebrity illness, as they notice that information about the disease is not a key feature of those stories.<sup>13</sup> Social policy makers should make use of related media coverage of an ill celebrity to educate and provide more in-depth health information, such as curing treatments and support by the government and so forth, rather than the status of the ill celebrities.

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