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

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.

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

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant literature can be grouped into two primary content areas. The first area encompasses

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).

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

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, therinkrteehr ingedhpphgosth thae. peee fht-1 (d) aerheph

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

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

5. RES

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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.

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

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 w

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Table 1.1:

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

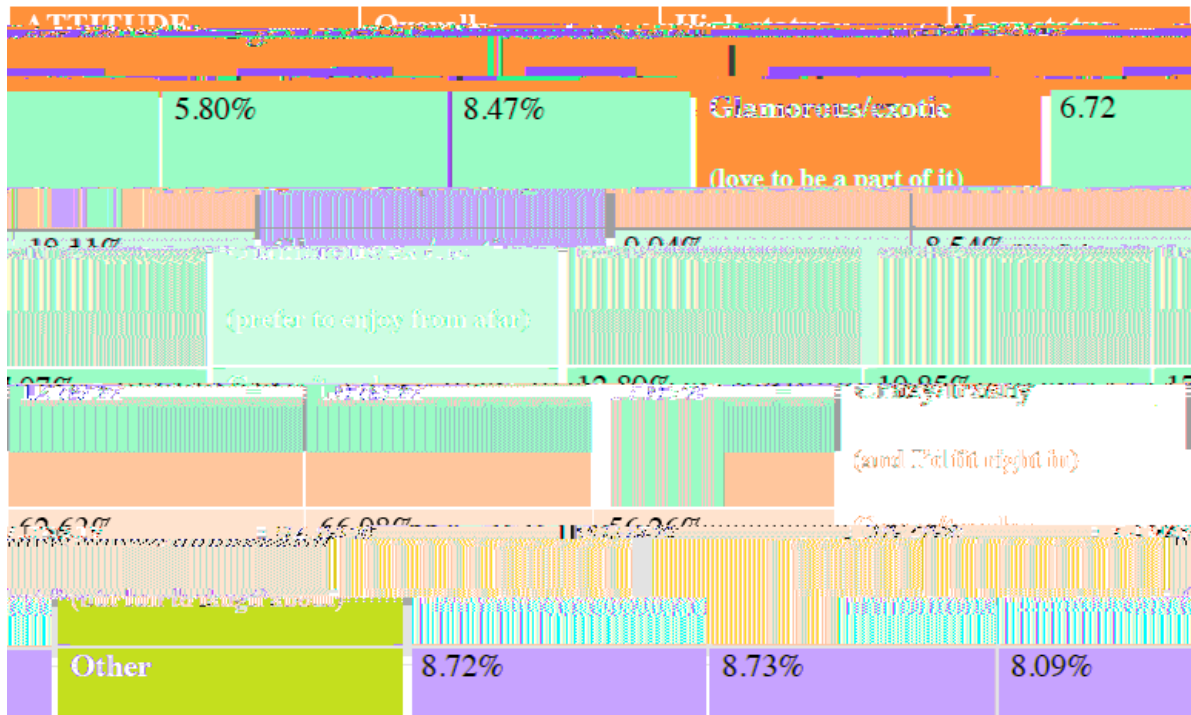| ATTITUDE	Overall	Highest	Lowest
	5.80%	8.47%	Glamorous/exotic (love to be a part of it) 6.72
		9.04%	8.54%
(prefer to enjoy from afar)			
		12.80%	10.85% very (avoid Hollywood like the)
	62.62%	66.08%	56.26%
Other	8.72%	8.73%	8.09%

Table 2.3:

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

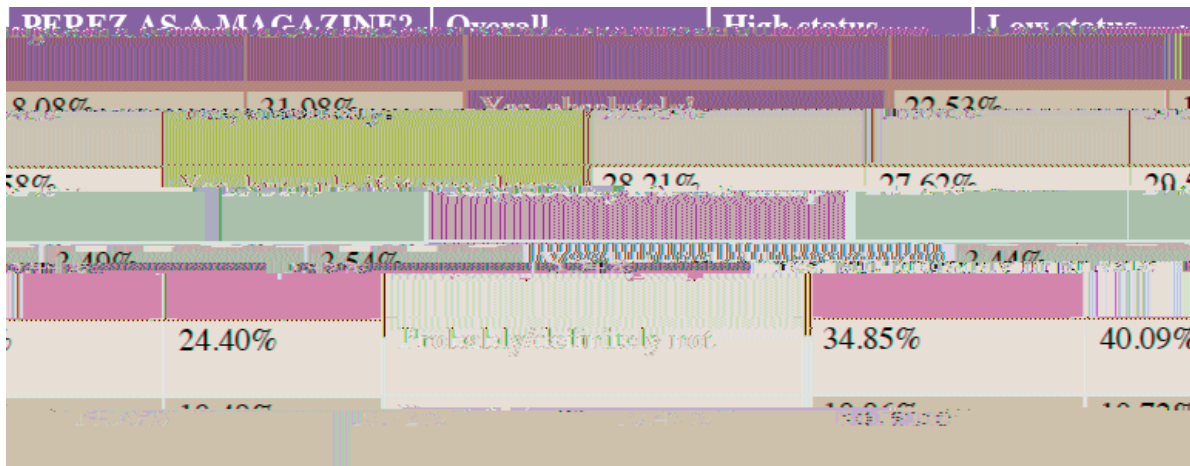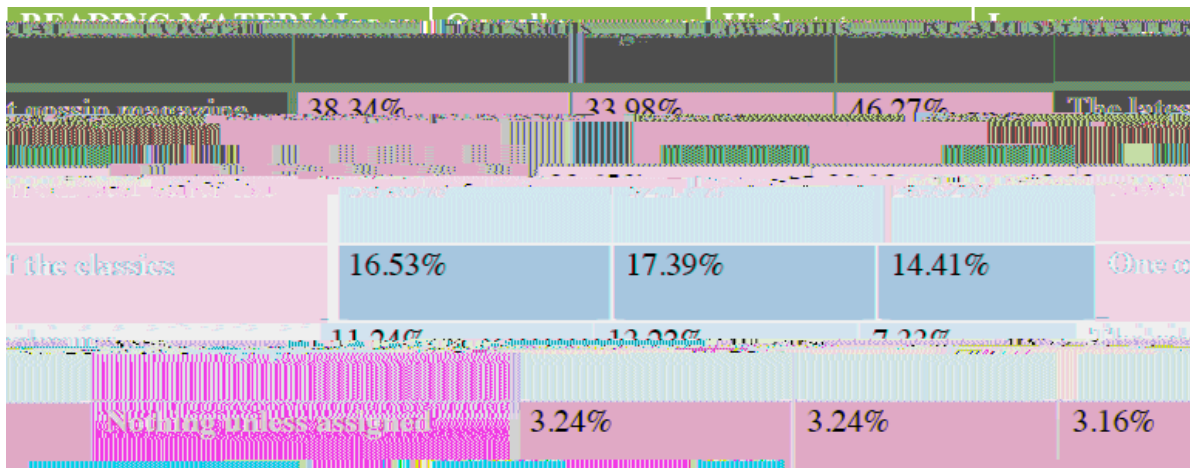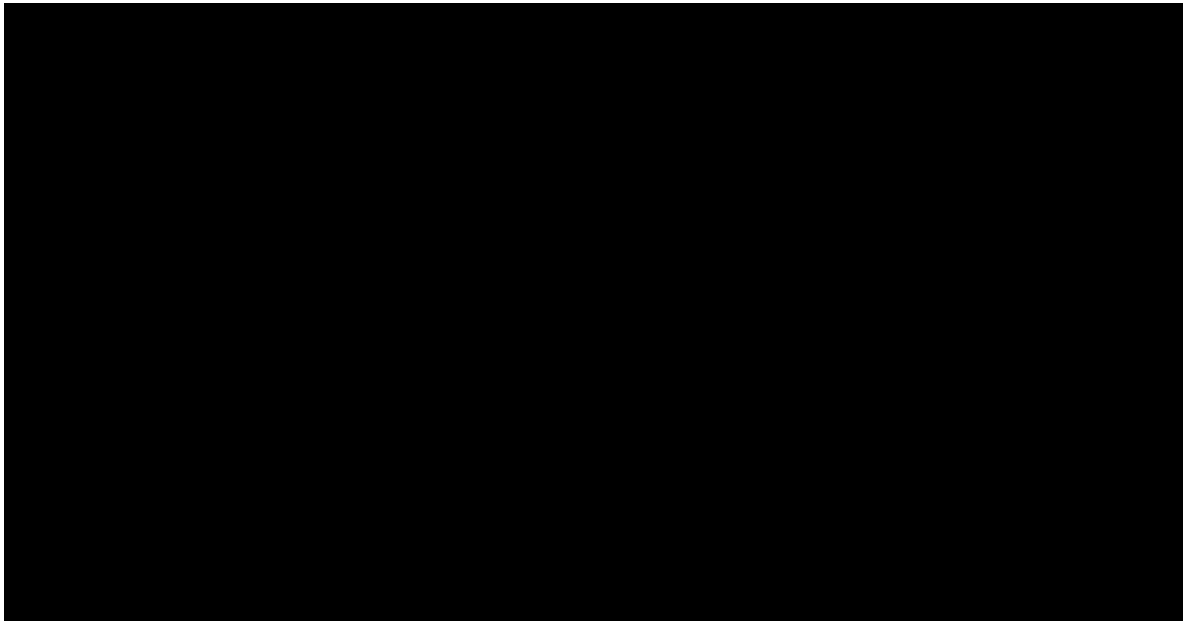| PEREZ AS A MAGAZINE?	Overall	High status	Low status
Yes absolutely	8.08%	31.08%	22.53%
	38%	28.21%	27.62%	20.5
	2.40%	2.54%	2.44%	
Probably/definitely not	24.40%	34.85%	40.09%
	19.49%	19.96%	19.72%

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

READING MATERIAL	Overall	High status	Low status
A gossip magazine	38.34%	33.98%	46.27%	The latest
The classics	16.53%	17.39%	14.41%	One o
	11.24%	12.02%	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]

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

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

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

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

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 indulge

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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

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

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