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**The power of celebrities: Past experiences, current status, and a friendly encounter
as key components to transform young individuals in *It Gets Better***

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Abstract

Makeover television is generally interested in transforming individuals. Often these programs alter participants on an individual basis, ignore structural problems, and enforce normative ideas of the good citizen. An important role is preserved for celebrities, considered able to help these individuals by performing the role of expert. This article aims to demonstrate how celebrities are legitimised with the power to transform young individuals in a television program. Specifically it inquires how celebrities are represented as key actors in the process of transforming young individuals within a Dutch context in which ordinariness is promoted. To this end, a textual analysis is conducted of the Dutch program *It Gets Better*. This article reveals how the program constructs celebrities as the only way to solve the participants' problems. On the one hand, they are able to connect with audiences and participants because their ordinariness eases identification and access. The program particularly emphasises the ordinariness of Dutch celebrities while connecting it to their personal experiences with the issue at stake in the past. On the other hand, their extraordinary status in society gives them authority. The articulation of the celebrity status to personal experiences is pivotal for the transformation to take place. The critical moment of change is when celebrities deliver their messages to the individuals personally and act as a friend; consequently, individuals feel honoured to interact with them and take celebrities' messages seriously.

Keywords: celebrities; power; transform; makeover program; television

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The power of celebrities: Past experiences, current status, and a friendly encounter as key components to transform young individuals in *It Gets Better*

Look at me, I did it too (*It Gets Better* 2012, episode no. 3)¹

In the Dutch television program *It Gets Better* Dutch celebrities help young individuals with their personal problems. By showing young people how specific celebrities dealt with a similar issue, the program hopes to inspire these young people and help them conquer their insecurities. As host Patrick Lodiers states in the beginning of the program: ‘the program is for everyone, but this episode is specifically for [name of the individual]’.

This article focuses on celebrities as experts and aims to demonstrate how Dutch celebrities are legitimised with the power to transform young individuals in the television program *It Gets Better*. How come celebrities, with whom people have not chosen to identify, can be used to transform individuals into better humans? Previous research has focused on celebrity experts as a branded lifestyle expert, as experts supply audiences with branded lifestyles on how to act in domestic life (Lewis 2014). These celebrities usually have gained their fame from conveying specific lifestyles to the public, mostly via television (Powell and Prasad 2010). This research will analyse how celebrities for whom this social activism is not necessarily part of their identity and brand are portrayed as transforming individuals on television. Further, this research deals with the transformation of individuals as portrayed in reality television from a Dutch perspective. The Dutch context allows to look at celebrities who, in contrast to international celebrities, are more known for being common and emphasizing their everydayness. Also, in contrast to major countries, small-scaled Dutch society produces celebrities who are approachable. Yet, since they are staged as life experts within this format, this article aims to contribute to the field of celebrity studies by understanding

these culturally specific dynamics. Specifically, we argue how in a friendly encounter with celebrities, celebrities' personal past experiences and present authoritative status play a pivotal role for transforming individuals in *It Gets Better*.

By means of a textual analysis of *It Gets Better*, this article inquires how Dutch celebrities are represented as key actors in the process of transforming young individuals. To this end, this article relies on a literature review that, on the one hand, discusses the makeover genre. *It Gets Better* is positioned within the makeover genre in which individualistic change is central to the production of the good citizen (e.g. Weber 2009). On the other hand, the celebrities in *It Gets Better* are discussed within the framework of celebrities as public figures who are considered both ordinary and superior in contemporary Western society.

The case study *It Gets Better*

To examine the transformative power of celebrities, the Dutch television program *It Gets Better* is analysed. The series is an example of a makeover program that relies on Dutch celebrities as key figures for internal transformations. The television program aired in the summer of 2012 and 2013 by public broadcaster BNN, a channel targeting teenagers and young adults. This program resides within BNN's tradition of dealing with diseases and respectfully treating people 'out of the ordinary' in legacy of Bart de Graaff.² *It Gets Better* has an educational function: it informs viewers about problems such as depression and anorexia, aims to create more understanding among viewers for these issues, wants to be an inspiration for people with problems or insecurities, and helps the individuals who participate in the program.

Each episode covers a different problem a young individual faces and a celebrity dealt with. The issues include: a non-standard appearance (individual with skin disease vitiligo and celebrity with cleft lip), homosexuality, anorexia, depression, paraplegia,

rheumatism, stuttering, an inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis), and being bullied.

Each episode consists of short sequences that alternate between the individual and the celebrity. The scenes provide insight into their lives and how they handle the issue at stake. To stress the gravity of the issue, the program also inserts confessionals by other individuals who hold up handwritten signs or talk about their experiences. In the last ten minutes of each episode, the celebrity and the young person finally meet. The individual is hit by surprise when the celebrity delivers a speech trying to help the individual. The second season slightly differs from this, as the speech is delivered on a video in an empty cinema theatre. After the video is finished the celebrity enters the theatre and meets the individual. The speech functions as a cathartic moment as it aims to ensure the young man or woman that it will get better. Not surprisingly, the program shares the same goal as the *It Gets Better* project, an American internet-based initiative that aims to prevent suicide by reaffirming teens that the personal life of LGBT teenagers will improve in the near future. Many of these videotaped confessionals are delivered by out LGBT celebrities.³ Especially the confessions of other inspiring individuals resemble this project.

The textual analysis consists of the complete first season, which contains four episodes. The episodes were watched and coded based on theoretical concepts with an open mind on new arising concepts. This included comments on the plot, music, setting, and notions of victimisation, ordinariness, and superiority. We compared the episodes and characters (individual vs. celebrity) with each other and paid extensive attention to the celebrities' speeches.

The celebrities in the first season of *It Gets Better* are a comedian (Jan Jaap van der Wal), a television presenter and actor (Carlo Boszhard), a former Olympic cyclist

(Leontien van Moorsel),⁴ and a radio host (Ruud de Wild). With this description of the program in mind, we now position *It Gets Better* within the makeover genre.

***It Gets Better* within the makeover genre**

Makeover programs reflect a neoliberal society in which individual merit is praised. They represent individuals as lacking willpower, responsibility, and control over their own lives (Skeggs, Wood, and Thumin 2007, Sender and Sullivan 2008). Participants, often working class individuals, need help of middle or higher class ‘professionals’ to fix their ‘mistakes’. Proposed solutions may not resonate with the working class surroundings. Thus, the makeover genre enacts class differences and ignores structural problems (McRobbie 2004, Palmer 2004). Moreover, class differences are not only reproduced in the text itself, but ideological differences are reiterated within the different responses of audiences towards reality television (Skeggs and Wood 2012).

While in the makeover genre, participants are often humiliated, treated badly, and confronted with critique, public broadcaster BNN produced a makeover program that treats its participants with sympathy and respect. *It Gets Better* does not fit in with the typical makeover genre as discussed by others. Weber (2009) mentions three criteria to include a program in the makeover genre. First, there should be a narrative of improvement. Second, subjects are humiliated as their before-bodies are shamed and without the program they would live in these before-bodies forever. Third, there needs to be a big reveal in the end. *It Gets Better* qualifies for the first, but the second and third become more problematic. While the program makes use of some victimisation techniques, it employs them with respect to the participants. Moreover, the ‘big reveal’ is not entirely absent, but as these individuals are in progress of improving, it is far from a dramatic reveal. However, some elements characteristic to the makeover genre are also applicable to *It Gets Better*.

Individual versus structural issues in It Gets Better

Rather than tackling societal problems, makeover programs alter an individual and ignore the structural reasons that caused the problem in the first place. Within the makeover genre, participants are portrayed as helpless individuals who cannot make responsible choices themselves; therefore, the participants need this television program to improve their life (Redden 2007, Skeggs 2009).

The focus in *It Gets Better* is on the individual. In some of the episodes, the problem is that the 'specialness' of the individual is a taboo or not fully accepted within society (e.g. defecation, non-heterosexual orientation, stuttering). Instead of going to the bullies of Jesse, the program teaches you to disregard what others (with an exclusionary opinion) think. The television program and the celebrity teach you how to individually solve your problem, albeit sometimes with the help of others surrounding you. In doing so, it reiterates the neoliberal body of thought, which argues that the individual is at the heart of solving his/her own problems. As Marshall (1997, 2010) argues, celebrities teach what individuality means and how one should produce this individual self, making the celebrity central to self-production.

It Gets Better emphasises the responsibility of the individual in many ways. Even though it addresses structural issues, the individual is central in solving these problems. For instance, in the episode with the chronic disorder, some structural problems with this disease are named. Celebrity Nance explains that public toilets are relatively absent in the Netherlands. On a holiday in the USA, Nance felt more comfortable because of the abundance of public toilets. This illustrates how the problem is structural, but the solution is individual. Though, Nance also states that she is open to the public about her disease to increase acceptance and to encourage the access to (public) toilets. Similarly, in the episode with the women in a wheelchair, it is noted

they are sometimes unable to enter some places because of structural problems with facilities. While for some problems more awareness could lead to more acceptance, more understanding is insufficient for solving structural problems.

Hence, *It Gets Better* stresses that the individual has to look for the power within him- or herself to deal with and overcome his/her issues. However, sometimes individuals cannot change their physical problem, they can only change how they deal with it. While within *It Gets Better* it is emphasised individuals are normal and can do ordinary things despite their problem, not everyone is able to engage in everyday acts. For instance, people with Crohn's disease cannot control their bowel movements. The program argues that a positive attitude may help as you learn to deal with the problem or insecurities, but as some people on the Facebook page of *It Gets Better* argue it does not mean you can 'just' do everything.

Thus *It Gets Better* does not structurally neglect these problems, but it does not attempt to solve them either. This is in line with the *It Gets Better* project in which public issues are being handled on an individual basis by encouraging LGBTs to wait for it to get better without providing actual support to improve their lives. Similarly, within the television program, it is argued that gaining confidence and not caring about other people's opinions is a key to solving these issues. This is not only related to an individual approach of solving problems, but also to normative ideas of the good citizen.

The good citizen of makeover television

TV makeovers often enforce normative values. For instance, they instruct how to be a good housewife, woman, or parent. Makeover programs produce good citizens through values such as positive self-esteem, self-determination, optimism, and autonomy (Weber 2009, p. 79). In *It Gets Better*, the problems vary from physical problems (e.g.

paraplegia), psychological problems (e.g. depression), and identity positions that set the individual outside of mainstream society (e.g. a gay identity). Except for the cases of Sari (anorexia) and Monika (depression), the program is not interested in changing the individuals' problems, gender, or sexual identities. For instance, it neither attempts to make Jesse less feminine or less gay, nor seeks to remove or cover up Lianne's 'spots' to turn her into an after-body, nor attempts to deal with Sanne's chronic disease through nutrition and medicine. Instead, Jesse's gay identity is embraced and Lianne is ensured that her body is beautiful. The program's main goal is to convince the individuals of the normality and beauty of their own identities and bodies. It differs from other makeover programs by not trying to impose normative and undifferentiated body images onto participants and audiences (cf. Weber 2009). Rather, the program embraces diversity and asks individuals to accept their 'non-standard' self. Carlo Boszhard, for instance, ensures Jesse that he is a normal boy: 'Maybe you are sometimes annoying or sometimes not fun, but you are normal.' Thus, *It Gets Better* is normative in the sense that one should have confidence, be happy, and participate in society, but it does offer a plural and diverse way of being normal as long as it falls outside of diagnosable psychological problems (DSM). However, even the problem of the girls with anorexia and depression is framed as something that can be partly solved by authenticity, self-determination, and hard work.

The program resonates with Sender's (2012) arguments that 'the self-reflexivity encouraged in makeover programming invokes a much older, Romantic model that values interiority, authenticity, and expression' (p. 137) and that 'the true inner self must be expressed' (p. 135). Being oneself and being happy with oneself is constantly emphasised within the program. Host Patrick states that being honest may help the world accept Jesse's homosexuality and it is argued he should be true to himself by

coming out as gay to everyone. Sari should not try to keep up a mask of a smile when she is actually unhappy and suffering. The program attempts to bring out the authentic personalities of the individuals by assuring individuals they are appreciated the way they are.

The expert is used here as someone who does not disperse knowledge in abstract forms; rather, advice is packaged ‘through narratives of transformation and personal growth’ (Lunt and Lewis 2008, p. 14). The celebrity expert engages directly with participants and with the participants’ improvement and empowerment. It moves away from a public information project towards individual projects of the self (Lunt and Lewis 2008).

Thus, even in a non-traditional makeover program as *It Gets Better*, which treats the individuals with respect, individuals need the help of celebrities and television to achieve change. The individual is here central: in the program’s ignorance of structural solutions, and in the individual projects of the self. Now that we have a clear impression of the program and of the genre in which it is situated in, we can continue with our exploration of how celebrities are able to make this change.

Celebrities in *It Gets Better*

Several theories on celebrities focus on identification with celebrities. For instance, Marshall (1997, 2010) argues the adoration of celebrities is not based on rational thought, but on emotional attachments to celebrities. Other scholars focus on how individuals may form mediated relationships with celebrities (Brown and Fraser 2004, Drake and Miah 2010). For instance, Indian celebrity Shahrukh Khan is important for fans’ self-perception and he helps fans with their everyday struggles (Rajagopalan 2011). Fans of the Dutch singer Marco Borsato may use his songs for dealing with their own struggles (Reijnders et al. 2014). Moreover, celebrity experts ‘have come to play

an increasingly important role today in promoting, shaping, and modelling particular styles of life conduct, selfhood, and citizenship' (Lewis 2014, p. 403). In this sense, celebrities can help (to improve) individuals.

While this illustrates people can identify with celebrities and can incorporate celebrities' values into one's existing set of norms and values, it leaves out a crucial element from the television product we are discussing. The examples focus on fans specifically and whereas in daily life the individual chooses with whom to identify, in these programs an individual is confronted with a particular celebrity. The individual may not be a fan and may not even like this celebrity, but the celebrities are still able to make a difference. How come?

To understand the authority of the celebrity expert, we start by discussing the relation between ordinary people and celebrities. An important element in the attraction to celebrities is their ability to be both ordinary and extraordinary. People who are fascinated with celebrities are able to identify with them because of their ordinariness while aspiring to be like them because of their extraordinariness. Similarly Lewis (2014, p. 418) argues that '[t]hrough claims both to ordinariness and to an authoritative status, the celebrity experts on reality television have come to accrue significant symbolic and affective power'. We examine how this is portrayed in *It Gets Better*.

Past: similarities between individuals and celebrities

Celebrities are on the one hand represented in *It Gets Better* as similar to the individuals. Generally, celebrities can inspire others how to deal with similar diseases and can generate awareness on an issue. For instance, Michael J. Fox raised awareness for Parkinson and through openly talking about her breast removal Angelina Jolie put genetic testing further on the map. As Panis and van den Bulck (2012) illustrate celebrities and the social cause they support often match. For instance, athletes are more

likely to support health causes. This perceived fit is accentuated within *It Gets Better* by showing similarities between the individuals and the celebrities and thereby explicitly making the connection between the two.

Clearly, the individuals and the celebrities in *It Gets Better* share similar experiences as they face or faced the same problem. In scenes that bridge the sequences with the individuals and with the celebrities, host Patrick makes this clear:

There are many people like Lianne. People who struggle with their appearance that is not standard beautiful. It seems quite something, such a contrast-rich spotted skin, but then you haven't seen Jan Jaap yet. (*It Gets Better* 2012, episode no. 1)

As such, Patrick explicitly connects Jan Jaap van der Wal and Lianne by their appearance. The similarities of the individuals and celebrities are mostly located in the individuals' present and the celebrities' past. While the celebrities may still be engaged with the issue, the focus on the episodes is on celebrities' past experiences with the issue.

Additionally, the program uses other ways to imply similarities. For instance, the first time Patrick and Lianne meet, he asks her –standing in front of a mirror– to give herself a grade. In a later scene that introduces celebrity Jan Jaap van der Wal, Patrick asks the same question. As such, the series eases the process of identification; in the first place between the individual and the celebrity but as well with audiences who might recognise themselves.

Celebrities' ordinariness

Important to the construction of the celebrity's past is the emphasis on the celebrity's ordinariness. Ordinariness of individuals on television, celebrity or not, facilitates

identification among audiences (Sender 2012). Through normalisation, celebrities are considered as one of us and this frequently increases their public esteem (Rojek 2001).

It Gets Better wants to empathise the ordinary man or woman behind the celebrity persona. For instance, Patrick meets Carlo Boszhard at the latter's home, but arrives via the back instead of using the more formal front entrance. The casual and comfortable everyday acts and speech underscore the ordinariness of the meeting. Besides these everyday familiar elements, as with the similarities, the celebrities' past is essential in their ordinariness. The program explicitly refers to this by playing songs such as 'Going back to my roots', showing children's photos, and going back to high school or other locations from the past. Celebrities talk about school trips and other activities ordinary people may engage with. Through sharing these intimate details, the program provides insight into the private life of celebrities and underscores celebrities as human beings and the similar experiences the young transforming individuals on the program are going through. Thus both being ordinary and similar is framed within the celebrities' past experiences. This normalcy and similarity provides one condition for the celebrities' transformational power. A second condition can be found in its opposite.

Celebrities are not ordinary?

While celebrities are considered ordinary, at the same time celebrities are constructed as extraordinary and special (Littler 2004, Powell and Prasad 2007). The social distance between the celebrities and ordinary people is necessary to become a celebrity. The attention celebrities receive when doing ordinary things implies that celebrities are also engaged in everyday activities. However, emphasising this 'normal' occurrence indicates that celebrities are actually not ordinary because if they were ordinary, the event would not be noteworthy (Couldry 2007). The Dutch case may be even more interesting in this regard, as many Dutch celebrities are constructed within this ordinary

debate and are praised for their commonness, more than in other countries (Chow and de Kloet, 2008). Marco Borsato (cf. Reijnders et al., 2014), André Hazes (cf. Stengs, 2010), Frans Bauer, Guus Meeuwis, Ilse DeLange, and other Dutch celebrities are praised for their ordinary and down-to-earth nature. This belief is anchored in Dutch society with its catchphrase ‘act normal, that’s crazy enough’.⁵ Someone who acts as if s/he is superior may be conceived of as fake.

Even though celebrities may be ‘normal’ down-to-earth humans, this does not suggest celebrities lack a higher status as celebrity. Despite that a Dutch celebrity may be regarded as a down-to-earth person who takes time to drink coffee with you and does not mind sitting on a second-hand couch, it is still considered special to meet him/her. It is important for these celebrities to be *constructed* as the girl/guy-next-door who is not spoiled and conceited. This does not signify, however, that meeting them or seeing them cannot be perceived of as special. In fact, meet-and-greets are considered very unique by fans (cf. Reijnders et al., 2014).

Moreover, not every celebrity has an equally high status. Some television programs with celebrities may be relying heavily on so called ‘B-stars’ (e.g. SBS’s *Sterren Springen*, internationally known as *Celebrity Splash!*), this is not necessarily the case for *It Gets Better*. A so-called ‘reality celebrity’ may be particularly lacking power. Reality celebrities may have a ‘less valuable mode of fame’ which suggests they are less powerful (Curnutt 2009, p. 253). Perhaps, this can be attributed to the class related aspects of such ‘celebrity chavs’ (Tyler and Bennett 2010). Reality celebrities are well-known, but they are still embedded within their lower or working-class identity. Consequently, they would have difficulty transforming people to middle-class values, central to the makeover genre.

Thus while there are differences between celebrities, overall, celebrities enjoy a higher status. While this status can transcend to other domains (e.g. celebrity societal engagement) and some argue celebrity experts increasingly play a role within public life (Lewis 2014), in the entertainment sphere celebrities' effect is most prominent (e.g. Alberoni 2007, Thrall et al. 2008). Only powerful celebrities can shape political news; celebrities can be more successful by incorporating their issues into the entertainment genre. Although celebrities cannot easily set the media agenda, celebrities can mobilise people to take action through other means than (traditional) media, including their concerts or online communication (Thrall, et al. 2008). Rather than setting complete social movements into motion, celebrities often aim to achieve change in individuals (Marshall 1997, 2010). *It Gets Better* can be seen as an extension of the promotion of a social cause celebrities often lend their support for.⁶ However, this time the process is filmed and the focus is on one individual. Because it is through the entertainment genre and on an individual basis, celebrities can be effectively portrayed in facilitating change. To stress celebrities are also extra-ordinary, the celebrities in *It Gets Better* are portrayed as differing from the individuals in the present.

Present: differences between individuals and celebrities

In the genre of makeover television, experts' authority is based on their expertise – whether based on professional characteristics or personal experiences (Powell and Prasad 2010, Smith 2010). Even if viewers are unfamiliar with this particular celebrity beforehand, personal details are provided to enhance the celebrity's credibility (Smith 2010).

To strengthen that celebrities are distinctive, they are portrayed and addressed slightly different than the individuals on television. This reflects and reproduces celebrities' status and authority First of all, the program emphasises the celebrity status

of the guest celebrity in such a way that even viewers who are unfamiliar with the celebrity understand that s/he is a celebrity. All celebrities are at some point portrayed in their professional celebrity activity. Carlo is presenting his television show *life 4 you*, Ruud is presenting his radio show, Jan Jaap is joking around in sketches of his comedy shows, and on multiple occasions Leontien is cycling. Additionally, other visual and verbal references to their celebrity status are made. For instance, visiting places where the celebrities have performed or worked, talking about their careers although always in relation to the problem, and inserting shots of celebrities' awards present in the living room.

Second, other representational strategies are used to discern the guest celebrities from the young individuals. An important trope is the representation of the celebrities as carefree and confident. Whereas the young individuals are still in the middle of their struggle, the celebrities seem able to reflect and even joke about the issues at stake. In contrast to the individuals, the celebrities are able to reflect on the situation with their current perspective; thereby, the celebrities are more likely to agree with Patrick and understand his point of view. Leontien van Moorsel agrees that weighing so little was unacceptable, whereas Sari would still disagree with Patrick's body image of her. This represents the celebrity as more balanced as s/he is more in agreement with the politically correct way contemporary society looks at people with non-normative identities or who deal with physical or psychological issues. While host Patrick's confronting questions may also be regarded as part of victimisation, it can be explained within the Dutch society of directness. Rather than perceiving this as victimisations, it resonates with the Dutch values of being honest and direct. What others may perceive as rude, can be regarded as normal to the Dutch. In another program (*Over mijn lijk*, translated with *Over my dead body*) Patrick Lodiers' directness

is also appreciated and valued. Further, the program sometimes slips into portraying the young individuals as victims. Even though the victimization trope is not as pivotal as in most makeover shows, *It Gets Better* injects its episodes with moments of dramatization that underscore the helplessness of the young individual. Jesse, for instance, is shown walking around alone on the school yard, while his voice-over says that he feels left-out. Lianne, the girl with vitiligo, is asked not to wear any make-up to reveal how bad the spots are. She argues on her blog this is something she would normally never do (Lianne 2012). By juxtaposing these dramatised moments with the relaxed scenes in which, for instance, the celebrities are introduced, the distinction between both is reiterated throughout the episodes.

Besides the absence of the victimisation of celebrities, in some episodes the process of the celebrities' transformation is differently portrayed from the young participants' makeover. The young individuals' trajectory to change is mostly represented in a linear fashion, whereas the celebrities recount their transformation by alternately focusing on good and bad moments. The confessionals in particular start with their negative experiences and opinions from the past, but end with wisdoms they can pass onto struggling individuals. In contrast to the typical makeover shows, *It Gets Better* does not contain a typical after with a completed transformation. While Patrick ends with the question 'so is it getting better?' the transformation is presented as being further completed in the future. Sari talks about her treatment plan and Monika talks about the future and her plan to get better.

A depression is of course not instantly solved but the program and Ruud de Wild have provided me with the impression that I am special, that I am worth it and that life is worth fighting for. (*It Gets Better* 2012, episode no. 4)

Moreover, the after-body is also observable in the celebrity. The celebrity forms an

excellent role-model of what the after could be like. By intertwining the stories of the celebrity and the participants a connection is made to what life *could* be like. This is even further emphasised when the celebrity gives his/her speech in which a reflection on the self is rendered on the individual who needs to get better. If the individual would be more like the celebrity, the individual would move from the before to the after.

These features thus all give the backdrop to why a celebrity would be attributed with the transformational power to change an individual. Specifically, in *It Gets Better* the celebrities are portrayed as originating from 'ordinary' audiences who have elevated to the higher level of being a celebrity. This emphasises the idea of upward mobility and thus the transformation the celebrity has made. This status is furthermore illustrated through particular privileges that come with this status.

Celebrities' status

Alberoni (2007) claims that celebrities are the 'powerless elite' because their charismatic power is restricted to the entertainment sphere. However, some scholars disagree with this arguing that celebrity experts such as Jamie Oliver manage to persuade individuals with their political aims (e.g. Lewis 2014). Kurzman et al. (2007) argue that celebrities share characteristics with Max Weber's concept of status and thus one could argue celebrities manage to transcend modern differentiation.

First of all, celebrities enjoy interpersonal privileges (Kurzman et al. 2007). Many people are eager to interact with celebrities. People's interest in the private life of celebrities is exemplary for this (e.g. Drake and Miah 2010). Once a celebrity pays attention to an ordinary person, this individual may feel honoured. Celebrities themselves, however, often prefer contact among each other illustrating the high-status group they have formed (Kurzman et al. 2007). These interpersonal privileges are

clearly symbolised within *It Gets Better*. In the first season, each episode includes a meeting with a famous friend of the celebrity. Moreover, this aspect is well illustrated when the celebrity and the individual meet, which we will discuss in detail below.

Second, celebrities enjoy normative privileges. As explained before, celebrities function as role models. As people want to be like celebrities, they automatically ascribe certain celebrities with a higher status and recognise celebrities' superiority. However, different from Weber's status conceptualisation, only some people give celebrities these normative privileges. Individuals choose to admire particular celebrities, not all (Kurzman et al. 2007). As discussed previously, the celebrities in *It Gets Better* are portrayed as potential alters for the individuals and consequently are portrayed as role models of how to deal with an issue.

A third aspect of a higher status are its economic privilege. It almost seems a truism to say that celebrities enjoy economic privileges as fame directly converts itself into financial gains (Kurzman et al. 2007). This is sometimes observable in *It Gets Better* in which celebrities' higher class is visible through more expensive houses and possessions. Though at the same time, as explained earlier, elements of ordinariness are also incorporated here.

Finally, celebrities have legal privileges. While Kurzman et al. (2007) are more resistant to say that celebrities enjoy legal privileges, they acknowledge that some advantages have been established. Celebrities enjoy 'the right of publicity', also known as personality rights, which means that they can control and profit commercially from their likeness, image, name, and identity. Additionally, informal legal privileges are also granted to celebrities concerning law enforcement. As may be expected, this last privilege is barely visible within *It Gets Better*.

While not all these different privileges are as prominent within *It Gets Better*, celebrities are clearly portrayed as being from a higher class than the individuals at stake. Thus, through the representation of these different privileges (particularly interpersonal and normative), celebrities are represented as authoritative figures. Their ability to transform may be fuelled by their interpersonal privileges, specifically because the relationship between the celebrity and the individual in the program is portrayed positively.

However, none of this, so far, has explained *why* the celebrities are able to transform these individuals. We have merely shown that celebrities are portrayed as both similar (in the celebrities' past) and different (in the present). In order to explain further why celebrities are able to transform individuals, we need to take into account a third condition which is stressed in *It Gets Better*: the constructive and friend-like encounter of the individuals with the celebrities.

Celebrities as friends

Individuals, especially fans, may perceive a celebrity as a friend. Friendships can be used to reinforce professional's opinions. For instance, the experts in *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, involve themselves emotionally with the 'plucky' participants, illustrating an empathic relationship (Palmer 2007). Individuals are more likely to accept the expert's advice as it is reinforced by a 'comrade'. Hosts can fulfil this role as comrade when they make the participant comfortable with the cameras, are supportive, and use 'feel-good' language (Smith 2010).

Within *It Gets Better* the relationship between the celebrities and the individuals is generally positive. Rather than focusing on destructive aspects, as is arguably used by shaming and bullying them within the makeover genre, celebrities in *It Gets Better* emphasise constructive aspects. For instance, Leontien van Moorsel declares in her

speech to Sari ‘I discovered that everyone who deals with anorexia nervosa all [has] a strong personality. And you are too. Otherwise you cannot starve yourself every day like this’. Similarly, Carlo Boszhard states that ‘all homosexuals have in common that they are brave, because at some point they have to look into the mirror and tell themselves they are who they are and there is nothing wrong with that’. In other words, *It Gets Better* emphasises the personal and friendly relationship between celebrities and individuals. Having these positive and supportive words of celebrities may ease the transformation. This corresponds to the shift in everyday expertise in popular culture; experts increasingly engage directly with individuals rather than that they provide abstract knowledge to a more general audience (Lunt and Lewis 2008).

When the individual meets the celebrity

So far, we have discussed how three conditions of celebrities in *It Gets Better* contribute to the individuals' transformation: the celebrities' ordinariness and similar experiences from the past, the celebrities' authoritative status in the present; and the emphasis on the friendly encouraging words of the celebrities. These different approaches are combined in the final part of the program in which the individual meets the celebrity.

Even though many family members and friends already adopt the role of coach, the program represents the intervention of television and in particular the celebrity as necessary in achieving change in the individual. Patrick asks friends and family if they have any suggestions for the troubled person, but their advice is insufficient. In case of Lianne, who has vitiligo, Patrick states there is no lack of compliments' and while many people regularly emphasise beautiful and positive aspects of Lianne, she does not believe them. The support these individuals received from professional and friends did not solve their problems. As such, it seems that the key to understanding this is not to focus on *what* these celebrities say, but by acknowledging the fact that the supportive

words are communicated by the celebrities.

The pivotal moment of change occurs when the celebrity delivers a speech to the individual who wants to feel better. In the speech, the celebrity addresses the issue at hand and uses his/her own experiences to show how one can transform. The personal experience is crucial to understand why the celebrities are given the power to achieve change in the individual. Leontien van Moorsel, for instance, emphasises this personal connection by stressing: 'I know like no other how you feel'. The celebrity's experience is supported by the entire episode which demonstrates how the celebrity has transformed into a person who is accepting of him- or herself and/or has battled his/her disease. The program illustrates how the celebrity can inspire the individual who will have to go through a similar process.

The celebrities relate to the participants' current experiences, but also provide them a view of how the future may be. The participant as s/he is now and the participant as s/he potentially could become relates respectively to the past and present self of the celebrity. The normative privileges of the celebrity are here important; the celebrity argues the individual should want to be like the celebrity. Leontien stresses that if Sari works hard, she can become as happy as her. Jan Jaap notes that if Lianne finds her talent, she will eventually end up standing in the spotlight. This reinforces the celebrities' normative privileges and the idea of the celebrity as the ideal 'after'.

Moreover, the change in the individuals can occur because celebrities step out of their celebrity world and reach out to these ordinary people to help them, fitting in with the 'interpersonal privileges' (cf. Kurzman et al. 2007). Besides, the celebrities aim to be constructive towards the individuals. This attitude implies that individuals should appreciate the meeting of celebrities and this positive approach may help in transmitting celebrities' messages. In Sari's and Monika's case, Patrick introduces the celebrity

before holding the speech. After having called Sari or Monika to the front he announces the entrance of the celebrity as ‘Here is none other than’. The idea that the celebrity needs to be announced shows how special the presence of the celebrity is. After the speech, Patrick asks Jesse what he thinks about the speech. Jesse answers that Carlo’s expressions are very cool. They are cool not because of *what* Carlo said but because they are expressed by the celebrity Carlo; both his mother and friends have expressed similar sentiments during the episode. Jesse, in a way, feels honoured because a celebrity interacts with him; this emphasises Carlo’s celebrity status and power. Lianne says that ‘she gets it now’ and Monika states that the filming and speech of Ruud have made her realise she is worth something. The celebrity is thus portrayed as someone who manages to make an impression on the individual in contrast to the many others who have tried before.⁷ The interpersonal privileges are illustrated by portraying ordinary people as feeling honoured to interact with celebrities. These interpersonal privileges are then translated in normative privileges, which gives celebrities authority.

Conclusion

While the program *It Gets Better* illustrates that makeover programs can be humane and can give us insights into people’s life worlds, it is interesting that it uses a celebrity to accomplish this. Though the program steps away from cruel victimisation techniques that shame and bully participants, it resonates with the makeover genre on other aspects. Its emphasis is on personal transformations rather than structural improvements. Similar to the *It Gets Better* Project, the television program emphasises individualism and takes little action in challenging and changing structural aspects. It seems both the project and the program want to contribute positively to the problem, and arguably contribute somewhat to changes by making the topic discussable, but both rely on an individualistic framework. Moreover, *It Gets Better* fits within the makeover genre with

its normative ideas of good citizens as authentic and confident. Though in contrast to the traditional makeover genre, *It Gets Better* adheres a diverse definition of what is normal. In this process, *It Gets Better* illustrates that celebrities, particularly in combination with television, can serve a pedagogical function to teach these norms and values.

The celebrity expert has been discussed within its authoritative role because of his/her skills and knowledge related to the domestic and the everyday; in other words, celebrity experts are teaching a 'lifestyle' (Lewis 2014, Powell and Prasad 2010). Moreover, experts such as Jamie Oliver can be considered brands selling this lifestyle (Lewis 2014). In addition, this article examined the position of existing celebrities as temporary experts facilitating change. By examining the Dutch context in which ordinariness is appreciated more than in other Western countries, this article illustrates how celebrities in *It Gets Better* are displayed with the ability to facilitate change based on several conditions. First, they are able to change the individuals because they have been through a similar experience. They are experts based on previous personal experiences. Once, they *were* ordinary, insecure, and unhappy too. Second, their celebrity status is accompanied with normative and interpersonal privileges; this provides them with an authoritative status necessary to facilitate this change. Even though Dutch celebrities are often perceived of as ordinary, they are still ascribed with authority and power. They are, in the present, different from these individuals since they overcame the issue and transformed into celebrities. Third, the celebrities meet the individuals, which is a positive experience for the individuals as they receive encouraging words. Thus, the *past* of the celebrity can be compared with the *current* situation of the individual. This is where the ordinariness plays a role, and through the past *It Gets Better* makes the celebrities similar to the individuals. The *present* of the

celebrity can be compared to the *future* of the individual. Celebrities are portrayed with their normative role as the program emphasises people should want to be like the celebrities. This is emphasised by perceiving the celebrity as potential after for the individual. When individuals meet with celebrities, individuals feel special because they receive positive attention from a celebrity. Precisely because of this specialness, individuals may feel empowered. These celebrities are portrayed as able to help these individuals via these combined conditions. Through the identification with the celebrity's construction related to the past and the aim to be how the celebrity appears in the present, the troubled individuals can see themselves changing into better persons when they personally meet the celebrity.

Precisely because the celebrity is portrayed as facilitating change in an individual and able to inspire the ordinary, the power of the celebrity is reinforced. However, this change is limited at the same time. The celebrities in this program, although facilitating change, do not transform people on the basis of a social movement; rather this change is personal and individualised, which is according to Marshall (1997, 2010) characteristic of the agency of a celebrity. The celebrities could possibly make the topics less of a taboo among audiences, but whether they really help anyone else besides the individual in question, remains an open question.

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Notes

1. Since the program is in Dutch, the first author translated all the quotes used in this article.
2. Bart de Graaff (1967–2002) was founder of and presenter at BNN. After a car accident in his youth he got a kidney failure and consequently a growth disorder. The network has several shows in which people talk about their diseases, handicaps, and 'being out of the ordinary', such as *Je Zal Het Maar Hebben* (Imagine Having It) and *Je Zal Het Maar Zijn* (Imagine Being It).
3. The website can be retrieved at www.itsgetsbetter.org.
4. Leontien van Moorsel started her own program shortly after *It Gets Better* called *Tot Op Het Bot* (To/Till The Bone) in which she follows six girls for one year and helps them battle anorexia.
5. In Dutch: 'Doe maar normaal, dan doe je al gek genoeg'.
6. Some celebrities are also involved with this cause outside of this television program. For instance, Leontien van Moorsel helps individuals dealing with anorexia with and without cameras.
7. Though one may question if changes in individuals are permanent, there are some indications some individuals have changed (e.g. blogs, personal posts on the *It Gets Better* Facebook page, presence in blood donation magazine).