

PRIDE

A foolishly and irrationally corrupt sense of one's personal value, status or accomplishments.

With estimated total earnings of £40 million, and with over 100 million followers on Instagram and over 50 million on Twitter, Kim Kardashian is what one can only describe as a mega celebrity. Being one of the highest paid celebrities in the world, she has, according to the American business magazine *Forbes*, monetised fame better than anyone else.

It all started with the leaking of a sex tape in 2007. Kardashian and her boyfriend at the time, the American singer Ray J, had made the video four years earlier, in 2003. The media attention that the leaked sex tape created helped give birth to the reality TV series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. A nude stunt in *Playboy* following the tape's emergence also probably helped. Despite being noted by critics as lacking in intelligence, and the Kardashian family being described as 'self-absorbed' and 'desperate' for fame, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* is one of the longest-running reality TV series in America; its 14th season premiered in October 2017. It has spawned several spin-off shows, including *Kourtney & Khloé Take Miami*, *Khloé & Kourtney Take The Hamptons* (starring two of Kim's sisters), *Kourtney & Kim Take Miami* and *Kourtney & Kim Take New York*.

Kim Kardashian's involvement in the retail and fashion industries has seen her launch several clothing collections and fragrances. Together with her sisters, she has also written an autobiography, *Kardashian Confidential*, which sold 275,000 copies in the first few months of being published and appeared on the New York Times Best Seller list. In 2015, Kim released a portfolio book called *Selfish*, a 325-page collection of selfies. That year she was also the most Googled person in 26 countries, including the UK. ⁱ

The sin that pride is based upon is the undue and inappropriate appreciation of one's self worth. The story of Kim Kardashian's fame, I believe, typifies how the appreciation of celebrity in today's society has become wholly out of proportion to their actual merit. This celebrity-focused culture – complete with celebrity role models and celebrity reference points – can have a seriously negative effect, both to our personal wellbeing and to society at large. I think these are worth bringing to light and starting a wider discussion about.

While there have always been famous people that we have looked up to, the celebrity culture that we see today is a new phenomenon. As Kristine Harmon of the University of Virginia notes, while we once honoured wealthy industrial elites, politicians, inventors and entrepreneurs, whom we never hoped to meet, we now have celebrity daughters, celebrity criminals and celebrity office assistants.ⁱⁱ Scholars now talk of a 'celebritisation': the democratisation of celebrity, or the idea that there has been a shift of emphasis from achievement-based fame to media-driven renown. One no longer needs to achieve something or possess a special talent in order to become famous; appearing in the media and simply being recognisable is thought to be sufficient.ⁱⁱⁱ

The British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge coined the term 'famous for being famous', saying that, "In the past, if someone was famous or notorious, it was for something – as a writer or an actor or a criminal; for some talent or distinction or abomination. Today one is famous for being famous. People who come up to one in the street or in public places to claim recognition nearly always say: 'I've seen you on the telly!'"^{iv} Psychologists Donna Rockwell and Davis Giles explain this change in celebrity status, saying that the two phenomena – fame as a condition 'of being glorified' and celebrity as a process of media exposure – coincide in contemporary culture so that a local television personality is accorded the same kind of fame bestowed upon Shakespeare.^v

Retired academic and writer Michael Foley argues in his book, *The Age of Absurdity*, that an inner emptiness brings out a craving for attention of the sort 'I am seen, therefore I am'. In the extreme form, he writes, this becomes a craving for celebrity and the desire to be noticed not just now and by a few, but to be bathed always in a universal warm glow of recognition, admiration, envy and desire.^{vi}

The lure of fame and fortune, which is at the centre of our celebrity culture, affects the aspirations of today's younger generation, whether we want it to or not. The TV singing contest, *The X Factor*, for example, is said to have attracted 200,000 applicants in 2009 – all hoping to stumble upon the golden ticket for a life of fame and fortune.^{vii}

A survey from 2014, of around 1,300 British children aged five to 10, found that 'just want to be rich' topped the career choice charter (22 per cent), followed by 'famous' (19 per cent). The more traditional career dreams of becoming a 'police officer' (16 per cent), a 'zookeeper' (14 per cent) and a 'fire fighter' (13 per cent)^{viii} lagged behind. A similar survey from 2009, of 3,000 British parents, found that the top three career aspirations for their five to 11-year-olds were sports star, pop star and actor. This compares with teacher, banker and doctor, which children hoped to become 25 years ago. The survey also found that, according to parents, the media has the biggest influence on their children's ambitions.^{ix} Commenting on this survey, *The Guardian's* Emma Brockes argued that these career choices reflect today's fashion. She writes, "When children wanted to be doctors it wasn't because they were genuinely more interested in the function of the spleen than they are now; you go where the respect is and the respect has gone to some weird places."

The American civil rights attorney and author Lisa Bloom came to a similar conclusion in her book, *Think: Straight Talk for Women to Stay Smart in a Dumbed-Down World*. Citing a survey of young American women, which found that 25 per cent would rather win *America's Next Top Model* than the Nobel Peace Prize, and that 23 per cent would rather lose their ability to read than their figures; Bloom argues that women are acting rationally in today's "shallow, self-absorbed celebertainment culture", which rewards girls for looks over brains.^x

In an interview back in 2013, the former US president, Barack Obama, criticised shows like *Keeping Up with The Kardashians* for corrupting the values of today's children. Describing pre-celebrity culture, he said: "There was not that window into the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Kids weren't monitoring every day what Kim Kardashian was wearing, or where Kanye West was going on vacation, and thinking that somehow that was the mark of

success.”^{xi} In a similar vein, in Britain, the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, has publicly argued against the endorsement of today’s celebrity culture. In an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper, he said, “If you look at the footballers, you look at our celebrity culture, we seem to be saying, “This is the way you want to be.” We seem to be a society that celebrates all the wrong people. Kids are meant to believe that their stepping-stone to massive money is *The X Factor*.”^{xii} Former culture minister, Barbara Follett, has also taken a stand against this culture, arguing that children suffer in a culture that values fame and wealth above hard work. She said, “Kids nowadays just want to be famous. If you ask little girls, they either want to be footballers’ wives or win *The X Factor*. Our society is in danger of being Barbie-dolled.”^{xiii}

As I mentioned earlier, this celebrity-focused culture is a recent phenomenon that has crept into the very essence of our societal conscience and become normalised. While the generations that grew up before this celebrity storm can snarl and mock the phenomenon – because we have something to compare it to – for the generation growing up now it’s a normal state of affairs. The celebrities our young ones see in the media will inevitably become their role models. That is why a discussion about the celebrity culture and what values and aspirations it comes with is both important and overdue.

As an example of the great role that celebrities play, the number one trending person on Google Search in 2015 was Lamar Odom. For anyone who has not yet heard of him, he used to be married to Khloé Kardashian, Kim’s sister, and he has made several appearances on the Kardashian’s reality TV show. The couple briefly had their own reality series, *Khloé & Lamar*. In October 2015, Lamar was found unconscious in a brothel in Nevada, having overdosed. The media went crazy and the story was told and updated countless times across media platforms.^{xiv} This was undoubtedly a difficult time for both Lamar and his loved ones, but the world must have gone quite crazy, as the story engaged millions of people around the world. Another Kardashian family member wrote one of the top-10 tweets of 2015. When Caitlyn Jenner – Kim Kardashian’s former stepfather and a reality TV star – sent out her first ever tweet, which read, “I’m so glad after such a long struggle to be living my true self. Welcome to the world of Caitlyn. Can’t wait for you to get to know her/me,” it received over 400,000 likes and was retweeted almost 200,000 times.^{xv}

Another statistic I find shocking, and which shows just how infatuated we are with celebrities, concerns the volume of books the entertainment personality Katie Price has sold. With five autobiographies and 10 novels under her belt, Price is among the UK’s top 100 bestselling authors of the decade, alongside the likes of J. K. Rowling.^{xvi} A *New York Times* article describes how, when her ghost-written novel *Angel Uncovered* – the story of a working-class girl turned glamour model – was released, women lined up for hours to see their idol at bookstores around the country. In Chester, “staff were forced to shut the whole store as hundreds of people, mostly teenage girls, crowded around the entrance while queues stretched as far as Tesco on Frodsham Street.”^{xvii} In 2007, Price’s second ghost-written novel *Crystal* – a book about a woman who wants to become a singer – sold more copies than the combined sales of all six works on that year’s Man Booker shortlist.^{xviii}

Katie Price is a good example of a celebrity who has become a role model for many young women. With her economic success (a net worth of around £45 million), shrewd business sense and sexual freedom, she is frequently presented in popular culture as embodying the achievements feminism made possible. The celebrity icon started off her career as a Page 3 Girl and glamour model under the name Jordan. Her fame and seemingly exciting and luxurious lifestyle has inspired many women to follow in her footsteps. A 2005 UK online survey of almost 1,000 girls aged 15-19 found that 63 per cent considered 'glamour model' and 25 per cent considered 'lap dancer' as their ideal profession. This was from a list of choices that included teacher and doctor. That must be the Katie Price, or Jordan, effect.

A related 'Jordan effect' is the reported increase in 'boob jobs', i.e. women having breast augmentation procedures.^{xix} The *Daily Mail* ran a report in 2008 on a group of teenage girls whose role model was Katie Price. Some were saving up to have their breasts enlarged in order to become glamour models, just like their heroine. According to one of the girls, "Katie Price has got the perfect life – a career in modelling and on TV, plus books and other things – and she always looks pretty in magazines."^{xx} That hits the point perfectly. As long as our youngsters are surrounded by a culture that praises money, fame and looks above anything else, the likes of Katie Price and Kim Kardashian will be the picture of success in their young eyes.

Another problem with having celebrities as role models is the way the media portrays them. The tabloids and other media knows that 'dirt' sells and, as such, more headlines are created when a famous person makes a mistake than when he or she has done something positive and honourable. Hence the abovementioned media frenzy around Lamar Odom. But what message does it send to young people when Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan hit the headlines for driving under the influence or Justin Bieber's police arrest picture is splashed across the front pages? Does it send a warning message of how not to behave or does it legitimise anti-social behaviour and spur young people to get into drugs and binge drinking?

Aside from what today's celebrity culture does to the aspirations of young people, what does it do to their wellbeing? According to a 2011 British study, 82 per cent of the 1,500 people questioned, who were aged between 13-24, thought that the media's obsession with celebrity created unachievable role models and is damaging to young people's self-esteem. The survey was carried out by Teesside University for O2's Think Big programme. Commenting on it, Professor Tony Chapman said that young people were caught between the fame and fortune of celebrity and what were realistic goals. Although he argued that most young people want a decent job, to be in a safe environment and to have a good relationship, he also said, "I think from time-to-time that even if they don't think it is realistic, they see the fame and fortune it gives a lot of these people and they look in the mirror and say who am I compared with that?"^{xxi}

I will give the American *Twilight Saga* actress Kirsten Stewart the closing words for this chapter: "Fame is the worst thing in the world. Especially if it's pointless. When people say, 'I want to be famous' – why? You don't do anything."^{xxii}

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