

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

“LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE!”:
The Production and Consumption of the
Early 2000s Female Trainwreck Celebrity

By

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE RISE & FALL OF BRITNEY SPEARS

“There’s only two types of people in the world:

The ones that entertain...

*and **the ones that observe.**”*

– Britney Spears in “Circus,” the title track of her sixth studio album released on November 28, 2008

*“Consumers of media are no longer innocent bystanders.
We give permission, we take responsibility,
we own expression, we play a role in all of these stories.
And our roles affect images, representation, and the real.”*

– Christopher R. Smit (2011, 14)

Britney Spears infamously shaved her head at Esther’s Hair Salon in Tarzana, Los Angeles in front of a swarm of flashing paparazzi camera lights on February 16, 2007. The resulting images, seared into our cultural memory, are symbols of the devastating limits of the spotlight that public figures inhabit. Spears was just 25 years old at the time.

At this point of Spears’s tenure in the public eye, her fame had already surpassed her original claims to prominence as a gifted entertainer and this incident, like anything else Spears did at the time, dominated headlines. The ensuing narratives surrounding the public breakdown were characterized by derision, shock, contempt, and a discernible lack of compassion. As seen in the magazine covers below, close-up paparazzi images of Spears at the salon, coupled with sensationalist headlines, were ubiquitous.



Tabloid magazine covers and their merciless depiction of Spears's infamous head shaving incident in February 2007.

As seen in *The New York Times*' special documentary feature, "Framing Britney Spears" (2021), Spears's personal turmoil became the butt of countless jokes by comedians and late-night talk show hosts like Jay Leno ("Friends say this is the craziest thing Britney's ever done that didn't involve marriage – it's unbelievable!") and David Letterman ("It was so cold, Britney Spears had a chapped

head.”). The media, eager to exploit society’s voyeuristic fascination with the female trainwreck archetype, painted a portrait of a woman who, in their eyes, had lost her mind for no good reason. Audiences subscribed to these callous narratives with extreme fervor and the spectacularization of Spears became an even more lucrative business.

Born on December 2, 1981 in Mississippi, Britney Jean Spears launched her meteoric rise to fame as an 11-year-old child star when she joined the cast of *The Mickey Mouse Club* in December 1992. Shortly after her role on *The Mickey Mouse Club*, Spears signed with *Jive Records* in 1997 and went on to release her iconic debut album, *...Baby One More Time* (1999), which remains [one of the best-selling albums of all time with over 25 million copies sold worldwide](#). Spears later cemented her legendary status as the “Princess of Pop” with her sophomore album, *Oops!... I Did It Again* (2000), which also became [a massive commercial success with record-breaking sales](#).

Throughout the early stages of her career, Spears dominated the teen pop universe with consecutive chart-topping albums and singles, releasing nine studio albums to-date. Regardless, media coverage and widespread consumption of Spears tended to focus on anything but her musical prowess:

Consider the consumption of Britney Spears. To begin, in what forms was she offered? As a child prodigy, a southern belle, an adolescent play thing, a body to be desired, a desire embodied, as a daughter, mother, divorcee, drug addict, as disabled, discouraged and down. Never as musician, never. [...] She was given to us first in song, yet almost immediately we stopped listening and started watching. It was her smile, her hair, her breasts and buttocks, her legs, her feet. *She was an image of a woman, and image only. This is how we wanted her, and this is what we consumed* [emphasis added]. (Smit 2011, 19-20)

Our already manic consumption of Spears as a celebrity object was exacerbated following her highly publicized troubles throughout the mid-2000s and reached a crescendo when she publicly shaved her head in February 2007. Incessant reporting on Spears's marriage, divorce, custody battles, and mental health struggles eventually led to a near-total eclipse of her monumental accomplishments as a musician and dancer in public consciousness.

I was 13 years old when Spears's downfall was being broadcast to the world. I remember accompanying my mother to the grocery store one day, waiting alone in line while she ran back to the aisles to grab some last-minute items. I stood there, transfixed by the distressing magazine covers that lined the aisle. I thought to myself, "Why is Britney Spears, the woman I looked up to, behaving like this? How embarrassing...she must have lost her mind." Primed by reductive headlines and unflattering photos, I found my young impressionable self buying what these tabloid magazines were selling: tickets to witness the circus of Spears's fall from grace.

I heard my mom peering over my shoulder, studying the magazine I held in my hands. "Poor girl," she muttered while placing the remaining items she picked up on the checkout line. "I hope she's alright. How could they do that to her? No one deserves to be treated like that."

At the time, I had no clue who "they" were but that was the first time I realized that Spears's so-called descent into madness and eventual exile into infamous trainwreck territory – a process that has plagued so many female stars before her, like Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith to name a few salient examples – could have been things that were done *to* her, *by* someone or something. All along I thought she was just another crazy woman – a misogynistic lie that I had been conditioned to believe for years by the [multibillion-dollar new-media industry of pop culture](#).

As I started to reach the age of Spears at the height of her public portrayal as the archetypical female trainwreck, I found myself increasingly unable to comprehend the amount of vitriol that was directed towards her in the press and I started to reevaluate my personal relationship with her as a figure of early 2000s pop culture. I gradually began to see the depravity of these tabloid narratives, which essentially served to dehumanize the incredibly real, human problems that characterized the trainwreck archetype, including, but not limited to substance abuse, disordered family dynamics, and mental illnesses.

By analyzing the representational biography of Britney Spears and our parasocial interactions with her throughout the early 2000s, this project will speak to some broader concerns regarding our collective cultural fascination with and complicity in Spears's mistreatment by the media. Though I intend to make my position against the trainwreck economy abundantly clear, my goal is not to rewrite tabloid history or absolve individuals of personal responsibility. Rather, I aim to dissect the production and consumption of the trainwreck archetype in order to highlight the misogynistic societal dynamics underscoring its popularity, in addition to the potential harm this large-scale phenomenon inflicts upon the individual – both the celebrity in question and for individual pop culture consumers. My intent is for this project to be an indictment of our society's obsession with publicly crucifying vulnerable people, particularly women, when they no longer fit the mold we've created for them in our minds.

II. CELEBRITY MATTERS

“At times [celebrities] are part of the background noise and flow – part of the wallpaper, we say – and at times they loom up as something more. Sometimes we evaluate them as physical beings and moral agents.

Often we find them desirable, enviable, or in some other way they evoke the sentiments, the likings, irritation or boredom, that flesh and blood individuals evoke.

*Yet an aura of some sort surrounds them. They take up ritual places as heroes, leaders, scapegoats, magical figures, to be admired, envied loved or hated: to **matter**.”*

– Todd Gitlin (Turner 2014, 99)

Many people tend to dismiss pop culture and celebritydom as mindless or irrelevant; however, I believe this to be untrue. Although celebrity fascination certainly entails several notable negative facets and has the potential to devolve into clinically abnormal levels of worship, I've always found pop culture analysis to be such an interesting lens through which we can understand our personal as well as collective psychologies. Celebritydom, like other examples of cultural phenomena, relates to wider systems of power, ideology, and meaning; it can be a valuable “location for the interrogation and elaboration of cultural identity” (Turner 2014, 27). Additionally, pop culture phenomena can function as historical markers, reminding us of where we were and where we are as a society.

According to cultural studies professor, Graeme Turner, “celebrity [is] the product of a number of cultural and economic processes. These include the commodification of the individual celebrity through promotion, publicity and advertising; the implications of celebrities in the process through which cultural identity is negotiated and formed; and most importantly, the representational strategies employed by the media in their treatment of prominent individuals” (2014, 4). Moreover, as we can see in the case of Spears, Turner contends that the fame accompanying individual celebrities can often be observed extending far beyond their original claims to prominence, resulting in the celebrity's unique ability to represent and shape the discourse of everyday life.

Regarding their cultural pervasiveness, Turner argues, “the cultural meanings of and associations with the star leak into all kinds of locations in our daily lives – expanding the range of

territories into which the media industries and their ‘smiling professionals’ now gain (or control access” (2014, 20). Celebrities like Spears became so ubiquitous that her influence not only transcended her talent as a singer, but the boundaries of fame itself. Thus, celebrities can function as symbols in which we impart our own meanings and narratives.

We are able to have discussions about topics like womanhood, notions of growing up, and parenting through Spears – there has even been an academic article published that analyzed the spectacularization of Spears’s personal turmoil in relation to the ideologies underlying the Bush administration’s foreign policy (Fisher 2011, 303-332). In many instances, celebrities are no longer recognized for their talent or personhood but rather, for their metaphorical potentiality as empty vessels for relevant cultural conversations. Though the industrial production and consumption of celebrity symbols can be productive avenues of analysis, the techniques involved and their reliance on powerful media outsiders can easily threaten the autonomy of the individual through processes of objectification.

III. PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS: ILLUSIONS OF INTIMACY

“We live our lives with familiar strangers. The relationships that we have with them are second order, that is they are not based in bloodline or direct kinship. Nevertheless, at the level of meaning, they often give our lives direction and a rewarding sense of place and purpose.

Yet familiar strangers are also apparitions whom we never encounter and never really get to know.”

– Chris Rojek (2016, 10)

First coined by sociologists Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in their seminal paper “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance,” a parasocial interaction refers to a one-sided relationship between an audience – in this case, the individual consumer of pop culture – and media personalities such as celebrities, performers, and other public

figures (1956, 215-229). According to their analysis of contemporary forms of mass media, the parasocial relationship is developed through mediated encounters and is restricted by a lack of direct communication between the two parties – the audience member and the celebrity personae. Since parasocial relationships are contingent on mediation by external sources, the reality of the relationship is, to a certain extent, distorted for both parties who similarly have little to no control over the narratives that form the basis of the parasocial encounter.

Despite limited interaction, it is common for audience members to identify with celebrities and other visible figures within media landscapes, impart significant meaning into this nurtured identification, and develop genuine feelings of intimacy with the subjects of their attention. Therefore, the psychological experience of a parasocial relationship can become just as potent as more traditional relationships that are grounded in first-hand interactions.

We can observe the sheer potency of parasocial interactions in an infamous viral video by Cara Cunningham (known at the time as Chris Crocker) titled "[Leave Britney Alone.](#)" Uploaded to MySpace and YouTube on September 10, 2007 in response to the widespread condemnation Spears was receiving for her contentious VMAs "comeback" performance, Cunningham – then just 19 years old – made pop culture and internet history with her two-part video in defense of Spears. Cunningham's vehement plea became an early example of viral fame, garnering [more than 2 million views within the first twenty four hours](#) and eventually [exceeded a total of 40 million views until Cunningham deleted her YouTube channel in 2015.](#)

Like Cunningham, I too, was witnessing Spears's tabloid-fueled descent into trainwreck territory with intensifying concern and confusion. As a preteen, I obviously couldn't articulate these

thoughts, but as I got older and accumulated personal experience with our culture's animosity towards women, I kept thinking to myself: If celebrities were profitable objects produced by media conglomerates, then what does it mean to participate in their industrial production as a consumer? What does it mean to develop parasocial relationships with women that society had doomed to failure? What, if any, are the latent ramifications of identifying with these undoubtedly derogatory, hostile, and misogynistic narratives that characterize this mediated encounter?

In the videos, Cunningham is seen against a makeshift backdrop tearfully begging the public to do exactly as the title suggested: *leave Britney alone*. At one point in the video, Cunningham even threatens suicide should anything happen to Spears as a result of her media harassment:

If anything ever happened to Britney Spears, the world can kiss my ass goodbye. Because if anything ever happens to her, I'm jumping off the nearest fucking building. I don't care what anyone says; I love Britney. If anything ever happens to her...if she ever commits suicide because of a fucking idiot blogger [referring to Perez Hilton], I will kill myself too.

(Cunningham 10 Sept. 2007)

Cunningham's deeply felt connection to Spears is palpable through the screen; her impassioned delivery in between uncontrollable sobs alerts the audience that she is defending Spears from a place of genuine concern.

The "illusion of intimacy" (Horton and Wohl 1956, 217) that motivated Cunningham's rhetoric throughout her emotional defense of Spears is aided by large-scale advancements in communications technologies. According to Richard Schickel in *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*, the production and consumption of celebrity is closely linked with the history of communications technology (1985, 13). He observed the tendency for audiences, amidst improved

means of communication and a general proliferation of information, to simplify and objectify celebrity symbols in their attempts to “crystallize and personify an issue, an ideal, a longing” (Schickel 1985, 28). In doing so, these processes of displacement strengthen our illusions of intimacy by “[helping] us to resolve ambivalence and ambiguity not only about the issues of the day, but about our own more private needs and desires” (Schickel 1985, 28).

Though it was unclear to viewers at the time, Cunningham’s motivations behind filming that iconic video extended well beyond Spears herself and echoed the psychological processes articulated above by Schickel. To Cunningham, the treatment that Spears was receiving in the media was symbolic of her own familial struggles at the time:

[Cunningham’s]’ mother was homeless after having returned home from the military and serving in Iraq. She was struggling with severe PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] and [Cunningham], who was raised by their grandparents, was pleading with their family not to give up on her. Just like they would later plead with the world not to give up on Britney, someone they described as a Southern, free-spirited woman, and who reminded them so much of their own mother. (Pruitt-Young 27 Jun. 2021)

In her own words, Cunningham describes the intensity of emotion that drove her earnest defense of Spears:

I was trying to fight for my other family members to still believe in [my mom]. I was begging them to give my mom a chance, and so there was a parallel in my life, that sort of tension of why I was defensive over a misunderstood woman, because my mom had me at 14 years old, you know, and she was very misunderstood. And I, in some ways, felt like I had to protect my mom and fight for her. (Pruitt-Young 27 Jun. 2021)

As parasocial theory outlines, celebrities can become subjects that extend far beyond their public domain, infiltrating the privacy of our hearts and minds to the point that we begin to project our personal experiences onto their own.

According to Schickel, tabloids are a form of “emblematic journalism,” which “provides neither context nor a sense of continuity of the lives and happenings it chronicles. Everything it reports exists outside history entirely, is made to live on the page only for the reader’s instant emotional gratification” (1985, 51). We can conceptualize individual celebrities as highly visible, culturally relevant, centralized emblems in order to understand the wider systems of meaning that are mapped onto them. Following this argument, it seems that we were living in a time where people were keen to strip female celebrities of their humanity, pigeonholing them into the trainwreck archetype to become easy targets for derisive entertainment.

Perhaps we can attribute the lack of empathy surrounding Spears’s representation to the tabloids’ astute exploitation of our culture’s need for instant gratification at the expense of women. Instead of providing serious discourse around her outbursts, tabloids consistently capitalized on the opportunity to paint an image of an irrationally hysterical Spears – a point that Cunningham communicates in her video by drawing our attention to the external variables that might have contributed to Spears’s behavior, in this instance, her “failed” performance at the VMAs:

And how fucking dare anyone out there make fun of Britney after all she’s been through? She lost her aunt. She went through a divorce. She had two fucking kids. Her husband [Kevin Federline] turned out to be a user, a cheater, and now she’s going through a custody battle. All you people care about is readers and making money off of her! SHE’S A HUMAN!!!

(Cunningham 10 Sept. 2007)

In order to illuminate the stance that we, as a culture, took towards Spears throughout the early 2000s, we can analyze the public reaction to Cunningham's "Leave Britney Alone" against the prevalence of less empathetic narratives that dominated popular media at the time. As stated earlier, Cunningham's video [amassed millions of views in a short amount of time](#) and its influence quickly circulated beyond the boundaries of MySpace and YouTube. Unfortunately, all of the attention seemed to completely miss the message Cunningham was attempting to convey and she, like Spears, [became a cheap target for jokes by late night talk show hosts and was parodied endlessly on television shows like *South Park*](#).

Meanwhile, the narratives that prevailed seemed to mirror the vicious tone set by tabloid commentators. One of Spears's fiercest and most outspoken critics during this time was Perez Hilton – a controversial celebrity blogger whose ruthless reporting arguably made him as famous and controversial as the celebrities he wrote about. Born Mario Armando Lavandeira Jr., Hilton's unapologetic take on celebrity culture attracted widespread readership and in July 2007, his blog [reached a record 8.82 million views in just 24 hours](#). Following her VMAs performance, Hilton published a scathing open letter to Spears on his online gossip column:

Dear Britney,

Fuck you! FUCK YOU!!!!!! We are insulted, offended, and disgusted by your "performance" at the VMAs. Are you fucking serious??? What you did was disrespectful to your few remaining fans. And it was disrespectful to MTV! You didn't even try!!!!!! You should have just cancelled, bitch.

Your performance was beyond pathetic. The old Britney Spears, who was at one point (a long time ago) truly great, would be embarrassed by your lack of professionalism and utterly shiteous appearance at the VMAs...

You seemed dead onstage. You have lost that spark and shine that used to ooze out of you!

We all know you lipsynch, but you couldn't even do that well at the VMAs! And you barely danced! You couldn't even get good hair extensions?????

You have no one to blame for your failure but YOU! There was no way you were going to be good. You were out partying every night before the VMAs for three days in a row until almost sunrise! You were probably still drunk or high during your performance!!! You almost tripped a few times, you fucking mess!!!!!!

No bullshit excuse that you or your camp will come up with can make up for how pathetic your performance was.

You heard Sarah Silverman was going to make fun of your kids and it upset you? Deal with it! Rise above it! Or don't go on!

A true professional will DELIVER – no matter what!!!! Let's repeat that. It's worth repeating.

A true professional will deliver – NO MATTER WHAT!!!!!!!!!!!!

What you did was inexcusable!...You should apologize to everyone, Britney!!!! You are pathetic! FUCK YOU!

xoxo

Perez

P.S. Your beer belly looked hot!

Though these words might be shocking to read now, during a cultural moment where we are finally beginning to reckon with our past mistreatment of Spears, the tone Hilton is taking in his open letter to Spears was not uncommon during the early 2000s:

The very real influence of Perez Hilton's hysterical cultural performance becomes apparent as one peruses MTV's 2007 VMA website, where the unbridled rage projected at Britney Spears

in post after message board post begins to subsume all notions of conventional sanity and plain good sense [...] “Dancing_freak31” writes, “BRITNEY SUX!!! WHEN I WAS LITTLE I USED TO LOVE BRITNEY BUT NOW SHE’S SUCH A WHORE.” “JazzyPha22” echoes this sentiment, writing, “Britney SUCKS, WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OLD BRIT, SHE’S JUST SOOOO DIRTY! (Fisher 2011, 319)

The attitudes encapsulated in the user comments above aligned with those found in tabloid reports, which attacked Spears’s physical appearance and overall performance with published statements like [“Spears was stuffed into a spangled bra and hot pants and jiggled like Jell-O as she sleepwalked through the song. She didn’t seem to care that she danced like she had a pantload, that her lips weren’t synched with the song, and the tune isn’t that great”](#) (“BRITNEY A BUST” 10 Sept. 2007). Unlike the stance Cunningham took in “Leave Britney Alone,” tabloid reporters like Hilton didn’t seem to care much at all about humanizing Spears. They, like many of the viewers at home watching her performance, expected Spears to deliver, no matter what. And when she failed to do so, the general reaction from the public was to resort back to sending hateful messages that denigrated everything from Spears’s appearance to her value as a human being.

From both spectrums of the public’s reactions towards Spears, there appears to be a level of emotional excess in the ways we perceive and engage with her as a public figure. Whether we love or hate her, figures like Cunningham and Hilton demonstrate the intense fanaticism and hysteria underlying our parasocial relationship with Spears. As a child star, Spears commands a level of long-term investment from her audiences, one where we feel a special kinship with Spears due to the longevity of her tenure in the public eye. Since parasocial interactions are fundamentally one-sided, audiences have the opportunity to craft their own narratives before imposing them onto the persona.

The narratives that we've crafted for Spears have always exhibited paternalistic undertones, with audiences operating on the assumption that they know what is best for her and therefore, deserve the right to voice their opinion in support of *or* against her personal affairs.

Part of Spears's success depended on her ability to integrate these expectations into a seamless performance and for much of her early career, "her pop princess persona not only operated within conventional discourses of race, class, beauty, desire, and embodiment, but thrived on them and in turn, she was adored for it" (Fisher 2011, 314). Granted, not every consumer will subscribe to the same discourses or even follow consistent rules of engagement, but Spears's enduring prominence relies on her effective negotiation of commonly held expectations, which then secures her place in the spotlight.

Spears's actions seem to be constantly measured against an assumed social contract and our reactions towards her take a hostile turn when we feel like she's failed to honor this sacred contract, namely when her behavior deviates from the narratives we've imagined for her. For Hilton and other critics, their mental picture of Spears was threatened when her VMAs performance failed to align with their schema of a successful comeback, which then elicited the vitriolic outbursts outlined in previous paragraphs. On the other hand, Cunningham and ardent supporters of Spears react with a fierce sense of protectiveness when they witness her faltering, sending well wishes in hopes that she can overcome her struggles to become the powerful pop sensation that she once was. Though I acknowledge that this may be an oversimplification of the complex dynamics underlying individual relationships with Spears, these examples clearly illustrate the intensity of emotional investment involved in Spears's influence as a celebrity.

IV. PAPARAZZI PARASITES: THE DISEASE OF MISREPRESENTATION

“I don’t want anyone touching me. I’m tired of everyone touching me.”

– Britney Spears when she infamously shaved her head in February 2007

*“The marketing of a body is an odd thing, no matter how we have normalized it in society.
The taking and shaping of a soul, of a person, causes their destruction.”*

– Christopher R. Smit (2011, 77)

In a video published by *Hollywood.tv* titled, “[Britney Spears Hits the Gas Station](#),” Spears is filmed in September 2007 pulling up to a local gas station in Hollywood with three of her assistants. She is immediately confronted with a flood of paparazzi who rush to surround her vehicle, desperate to greet their long-awaited target with a sea of flashing camera lights and a cacophony of deafening camera clicks mixed with chaotic shouts for Spears’ attention.

One of Spears’s assistants steps out to put herself in between the swarm of paparazzi and the car, waving her hands and imploring the cameramen to move back. As the assistant steps to the left, paparazzi standing on the right stampede to fill the empty spaces she leaves behind. In the car, Spears is struggling to shield her face with a toy Spiderman figurine while her assistant continues to appeal to the paparazzi by cautioning them that Spears’s children are in the backseat: “She deserves her privacy! Get away, please! She has her children! Please get away! PLEASE!!!” Her frantic pleas fall on deaf ears, drowned out by the incessant clicks and flashes from the paparazzi’s cameras. The horde of cameramen continue to crowd around the vehicle, trying to capture their million-dollar shot of Spears who, in this moment, clearly does not want to be seen.



Typical scene of Spears being surrounded by paparazzi.

The business of celebrity representation operated much differently during the early 2000s prior to the introduction of social media. The paparazzi industry maintained near exclusive control over our access to celebrities and thus, governed much of their public perception through the images they captured. Celebrity relationships with paparazzi can be symbiotic, with publicists and celebrities collaborating with paparazzi and tabloids to advance mutual interests; however, this relationship quickly mutated into a parasitic disease and Spears became the involuntary host for an industry over which she had little to no control – one that was predicated on her ongoing exploitation. Without social media feeding our hunger for celebrity access, the paparazzi business, along with the tabloids they collaborated with, became extremely lucrative.

The so-called “[paparazzi gold rush](#)” of the early 2000s saw photographers rake in obscene amounts of money for shots of in-demand celebrities. Tabloid magazines and television networks alike witnessed dramatic increases in profit when they presented coverage of Spears. According to Brittain Stone, the photography director for *Us Weekly* from 2001 to 2011, the publication set aside a [weekly budget of approximately \\$140,000](#) for paparazzi to capture candid shots of Spears – amounting to a yearly budget of \$7 to \$8 million – with individual images selling for upwards of \$1 million.

Economic incentives for paparazzi photos of Spears were echoed by other magazines as well, with Spears gracing the covers of *OK! Magazine* [54 out of 103 times between January 2006 and January 2008 – more than doubling the magazine’s ad revenue to \\$51 million in 2007 alone.](#)

There was an overwhelming demand for photographers to capture candid photos for tabloids, which relied heavily on their [“gotcha” power](#) when it came to celebrity representation. Operating on the “gotcha” premise, tabloids are able to assert a level of authority over a celebrity’s right to autonomous representation and impart prejudiced narratives that benefit their own industrial interests. From the time Spears entered the public eye as a child, there seemed to be an overzealous desire to control her, particularly when it came to matters surrounding her symbolic representation of girlhood and womanhood:

Things get tricky because we don’t want [Spears] to mature, but we do want her to become a woman. We want to stunt the growth of her personality, we want her to stay innocent. But we also want her to have the breasts of a woman. We want to sexualize her but we want her to stay a child [...] It all boils down to vulnerability: make the woman vulnerable and you will make her innocent; take away her power and she becomes the perfect piece of art.

(Smit 2011, 100)

Throughout her life, Spears was treated as a celebrity commodity – one that could be packaged, marketed, and sold for our collective consumption. Correspondingly, we understand Spears as an objectified product through her albums, music videos, live performances, memorabilia and merchandise, and other currency. Though we may never know with certainty who the “real” Britney Spears is, the allure of unconsented candid photos, along with their reliance on her objectification and the “gotcha” premise, speaks to the outsider-imposed misrecognition of Spears.

If, following Charles Taylor's theories on the politics of recognition, identities are products of ongoing negotiation and dialogue with the outside world through recognition or its absence (1994, 25-73), then what does it mean to be recognized by millions – if not billions – of people all over the world, each possessing their own conflicting opinions and beliefs about who Spears is or should be? Moreover, what does it mean when the self is presented to the world through representational avenues that the subject has little to no authority over? Could celebrity be conceptualized as “a sort of glamorized misrecognition” (Smit 2011, 62)?

We rarely heard from Spears herself as she was spoken for by the tabloids, paparazzi, her management team, and by our cultural expectations. Even the most direct sources, such as interviews, were presented to the public in a carefully crafted and controlled environment. Countless examples throughout history demonstrate the notion that “nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (Taylor 1994, 25); and it was clear during this time that Spears was hurting as she never consented to being constituted, disseminated, or interpreted as a trainwreck.

Nevertheless, newsstand sales spiked and television ratings soared whenever Spears's personal turmoil was put on display. It was clear to media magnates that they could easily exploit consumers' voyeuristic appetite for Spears's descent into trainwreck status and “as more ridicule produces more interest, excessive negative attention paid to Spears became a self-perpetuating cycle normalized and condoned by commercial logics of supply-and-demand” (Fisher 2011, 317). During the paparazzi gold rush, candid shots of Spears accompanied by intimate revelations about her personal life became an

economic imperative because they equated to guaranteed profit, especially when those portraits of Spears could be sensationalized and spun to further the narratives of her already presumed downfall.



“Britney Spears was carrying her baby and pregnant with her second child when she was chased by over 300 paparazzi. She ran into a cafe hoping the manager would help but they laughed and took pictures of her crying.” – [Danielle Bennett via Twitter](#)

The burgeoning economy of social media during the late 2000s definitively transformed the power of the paparazzi industry. In some ways, images of celebrities have become democratized through social media and a level of autonomy restored. Issues with devious algorithms and photo manipulation aside, social media has acted as a democratizing force in our consumption of celebrity imagery. As a new technology of representation, social media provides new avenues of power for the celebrity in managing their own representation and for us, as consumers, in choosing which celebrities and what content we want to see on our personalized feeds:

Now, celebrities control their own narratives – they readily offer bikini bodies and makeup-free selfies from their own cameras, which are devoured by fans despite the digital nip-tucks –

and call photographers [to] stop by at their own whims. This, in turn, has stripped tabloids and classic pap shots of their “gotcha” power [...] Social media overhauled the celeb photography game [...] Prior to Instagram, your weekly magazines were reliant on paparazzi to provide images for them to print, and fans were reliant on magazines to see celebrities. Now, celebs can just post on Instagram in real time and the media will pick it up later that day.

(Hazlehurst 11 Aug. 2021)

Nowadays, the steep decline in paparazzi influence has led to the commercialization of the celebrity-commodity taking place largely in the realm of social media. And perhaps one of the most prominent examples of this shift in representational power and its economic potential can be seen in the Kardashian empire. Much has been written regarding their economic success, particularly the ways in which the Kardashians [are able to tap into the latent potential of social media and use their online prestige to their advantage](#).

Celebrities like Kylie Jenner and Kim Kardashian are examples of how celebrities can exploit this cultural behavior to their advantage, capitalize on their representational objectification to engage in a self-aware, reflexive dance with the harsh realities of celebrityhood. In doing so, they are able to utilize their tightly controlled reality television show, as well as their social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, to communicate directly with their hundreds of millions of followers, promote their various business enterprises, and most importantly, play a decisive role in curating their own representation – a privilege that Spears and other celebrities in the golden age of paparazzi did not have.

V. CELEBRITY PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION, & TABLOIDIZATION

“I am seen as dangerous because it is hard for celebrities and their publicists to control me, to spin me. Before it was easier for them to manipulate the truth in the news...some magazines are celebrity and

publicist friendly and don't want to say anything that will upset the stars, or upset the publicists, because they need 'access'.

I don't need access. I don't ask for access, I don't care."

– Perez Hilton in an [interview with BBC News](#) on February 23, 2007

According to cultural theorist Graeme Turner in *Understanding Celebrity*, publicists are integral to the production of celebrity: “[Publicists] stand between the celebrity and the public, almost literally, in that their job is to manage all communications between them [...] The publicist’s function is to control, coordinate, and if necessary, massage that information and those images of the celebrity which are circulated to the public” (2014, 48). By maintaining a defensive barrier between their clients and the public, publicists assert a certain level of control over the discourse of celebrity and thus play an essential role in our perception of celebrities.

The industrial production of celebrity is a mystifying process that seeks to manufacture highly visible products – the celebrity commodity – while simultaneously working to ensure that the means of production remain invisible, discreet, and hidden from public view (Turner 2014, 29). For example, we are often only alerted to the publicist’s role in manipulating celebrity affairs when their clients engage in unsavory behavior or are caught in an embarrassing, reputation-tarnishing situation. Due to the purposefully obscure nature of the inner workings of public relations, it is nearly impossible to separate truth from invented fiction – the “spin” that publicists impart – when it comes to celebrity affairs.

Even in the age of social media when it seems like celebrities are speaking to the public directly through Twitter or Instagram, it is impossible to decipher whether or not there is a publicist working behind the scenes. For example, publicists are often still the ones that establish the boundaries and

rules of our engagement with their client – at times even impersonating their celebrity clients on social media platforms, writing press releases and engaging with fans as if they were the celebrity themselves (Turner 2014, 48).

Public narratives that helped to produce the female trainwreck archetype during the early 2000s resided predominantly within the predatory matrix of tabloidization, which encompasses contemporary transformations in media content, production, and consumption (Turner 2014, 84); it is a space characterized by wantonly salacious headlines that hold little to no regard for the humanity of the subjects involved. Though critics of tabloid commentators argue that processes of tabloidization serve no real value because they “sacrifice information for entertainment, accuracy for sensation, and [employ] tactics of representation which entrap and exploit its subjects” (Turner 2014, 84); tabloid journalism is nevertheless significant in that it constitutes an indispensable mechanism of the industrial machine that catapults celebrity subjects into public visibility.





Examples of magazine covers that exploited Spears through the trainwreck archetype.

As Hilton suggested in the introductory quote, independent tabloid journalism can be viewed as a potential threat to the careful management of celebrity communications because it circumvents the rules of public relations and bypasses the publicist entirely. Compared to more “respectable” media outlets whose goal is to work alongside publicists to depict the celebrity in a favorable light, figures like Hilton tend to do the exact opposite, opting instead to produce a highly disparaging version of the celebrity commodity with rumored gossip and scandalous exposés. As we can see in the production of Spears as a trainwreck spectacle, the power that publicists wield is oftentimes limited and the headlines that make the front page can be published with or without their consent.

Though tabloids and more traditional journalistic endeavors tend to be positioned as disparate forms of media, they inevitably converge to satisfy two diametrically opposed, but related dimensions of audience demand: the reverential consumption of celebrities as objects of admiration versus the hostile consumption of celebrities as objects of derision. Tabloid journalism became a profitable enterprise due to its precision in identifying this popular demand, deliberately indulging and

exploiting audience desires to revel in those moments that occur outside of the purview of publicist control. Whether we like it or not, the commercial success of tabloid features renders them powerful disruptions to the established media landscape as well as to the authority wielded by celebrity publicists.

VI. “MISS BAD MEDIA KARMA”

*“I’m Mrs. Lifestyles of the rich and famous.
I’m Mrs. Oh my God that Britney’s shameless.
I’m Mrs. Extra! Extra! This just in!
I’m Mrs. She’s too big, now she’s too thin...
You want a piece of me?”*

– Britney Spears in “Piece of Me,” one of the lead singles from *Blackout*, her fifth studio album released on October 25, 2007 amidst her highly publicized personal struggles

*“[Britney Spears] shaved her head, attacked the paparazzi, more custody drama.
Thank you, Britney Spears. Being bad is good for my business.”*

– Perez Hilton in a clip from “Framing Britney Spears” (2021) by *The New York Times*

On the set of a music video Britney was shooting in 2007, [Perez Hilton is filmed donning the same hot pink bobbed wig Spears had been photographed wearing after shaving her head](#). “I have presents for you Britney!” he shouts while pulling out various items from a duffel bag in front of a crowd of paparazzi.

He begins by pulling out a box of Nair hair removal cream, remarking, “We all know Britney likes a clean workspace” – referring to the highly publicized photos of Spears’s vagina that were taken and distributed without her consent. Hilton hunches over, “What else...” he mutters to himself as he shuffles through his bag in search of another item. Letting out an amused sigh of discovery, Hilton

then unravels a piece of white fabric to reveal a pair of underwear for the cameras: “I also brought her some new panties because I think Britney should stay covered.”

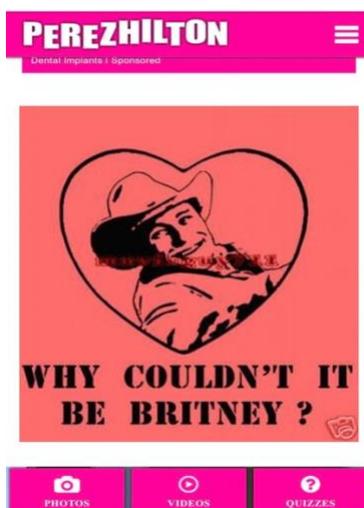
One of the multiple paparazzo in the audience lowers his camera, inching closer to the panties Hilton is holding in his hands. “We’ve already seen her vagina,” Hilton continues mockingly. “Three times actually.”

Finally, he pulls out a bottle of Jack Daniels whiskey. “One of my mottos is ‘Fuck Rehab!’ So, I brought Britney some Jack. She’s already been boozing so we can have a drink together. You think she’ll appreciate my presents?”

In that moment, Hilton is addressing his question to the crowd of paparazzi standing directly in front of him. The rhetorical question assumes an affirmative response and is also addressed to all of us who are at home watching. Hilton’s success as a pop culture commentator and the thriving economy of the female trainwreck alludes to our consent; whether we agree as individuals or not, castigating these celebrities became a social norm. We’ve given our collective consent to a special, socially acceptable breed of misogyny.

As a preteen fascinated with celebrity culture, I found myself scrolling through Hilton’s blog on a daily basis, completely and blissfully oblivious to the harm it was causing. Through his online columns, Hilton became a highly successful public spokesperson for our cultural fascination and hatred of female trainwreck celebrities. The daily commentary published on his blog was relentless in verbalizing and perpetuating our culture’s misogynistic obsession with debasing women we’ve judged to be trainwrecks. One particularly deplorable instance of Hilton’s cruelty masked as humor occurred after the untimely death of actor Heath Ledger in 2008, when [Hilton sold t-shirts on his blog](#)

displaying the text, “Why couldn’t it have been Britney?” underneath an image of Ledger’s character from *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Hilton’s “humorous” approach, as seen below in his distinctive use of poorly edited captions and doodles on top of unflattering paparazzi shots, enabled a more palatable form of women-hating attitudes; it was much easier to digest misogynistic content if we could objectify women and turn them into a punchline.



Screenshot of the t-shirt Hilton sold on his blog following Heath Ledger’s death on January 22, 2008.



Screenshots from Hilton’s blog of Spears’s paparazzi photos with his added captions and doodles, which quite literally displace Spears’s subjectivity in favor of Hilton’s own outsider-imposed narratives.

Our culture’s hunger for the spectacle associated with Spears’s tragic downfall from her beloved popstar pedestal into the abyss of irredeemable trainwrecks was insatiable. Though it was

common for comedians across the board to exploit this tragedy for entertainment and profit, one of the few late-night hosts that refused to cater to our ravenous appetite was Craig Ferguson. On February 20, 2007 – just a few days after Spears’s highly-publicized head shaving incident – Ferguson prefaced his nightly monologue by contemplating the horrific implications of joking about the vulnerable, noting the potentially deadly consequences involved: [“People are falling apart. People are dying! That Anna Nicole Smith woman...she died!”](#) Clearly used to jokes being made at the expense of famous women society has deemed trainwrecks, the crowd responds with laughter, seemingly unable to comprehend the gravity of Ferguson’s speech.

Nonetheless, Ferguson continues and says that tonight, he’s not going to make any jokes about Britney Spears. The mere mention of her name elicits automatic laughter from the audience, who are still reluctant to grasp the fact that Ferguson is attempting to treat the situation with the seriousness it deserves. Speaking from his own experiences with alcoholism, Ferguson reflects on Spears’s erratic behavior and again, reiterates to the audience that he’s not going to make jokes at her expense.

“She clearly needs help.”

Again, the audience laughs.

In an interview, [Ferguson elaborated on the reasoning behind his monologue](#), which at the time broke social norms, hinting at the various interests driving the jokes at Spears’s expense: “I think that society, there’s something, kinda social, socially lacking...I won’t do this show for demographics, I won’t do it for viewers, I certainly won’t do it for money.” As reactions from Ferguson’s audience suggest, we’ve been conditioned into a culture that expects the dehumanizing treatment of Spears as a punchline, not as a woman who clearly needed support.

VII. CONCLUSION: “FREE” BRITNEY

*“I’ve lied and told the whole world I’m okay and I’m happy. It’s a lie.
I thought I just – maybe I said that enough, maybe I might become happy because I’ve been in denial.
I’ve been in shock. I am traumatized, you know, fake it till you make it.
But now, I’m telling you the truth, okay?”*

*I’m not happy. I can’t sleep. I’m so angry.
It’s insane and I’m depressed. I cry every day.”*

– Britney Spears addressing the court regarding her conservatorship on June 23, 2021

After being involuntarily admitted to the hospital twice in January 2008 for psychiatric evaluation, Spears was [formally placed under a conservatorship on February 1 of that same year](#).

According to United States law, “conservatorship is a legal status in which a court appoints a person to manage the financial and personal affairs of a minor or incapacitated person” (Kenton 20 Jul. 2022).

In Spears’s case, the court granted her father, Jamie Spears, legal authority to control her financial assets and personal affairs. Though it was originally instituted as a temporary protective measure, the conservatorship eventually escalated into an abusive arrangement that controlled nearly every aspect of Spears’s life and career for 13 long years until it was [ultimately dissolved on November 12, 2021](#).

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in Spears’s conservatorship, with support from fans and the wider community alike coalescing into the #FreeBritney movement. On June 23, 2021, Spears addressed the courts publicly for the first time with a phone call that was broadcast in the courtroom as well as to the rest of the world. During [the 23-minute-long phone call](#), Spears is heard pleading with the judge to terminate what she argued was a sadistic legal arrangement spearheaded by her opportunistic father. To make her argument, Spears provides the court with several examples of the mistreatment she’s suffered under her father’s authority. According to Spears, she was regularly subjected to involuntary medical and psychiatric evaluations, prescribed debilitating medications

against her will, forbidden from choosing her own attorney, coerced by her father and management team to fulfill performance obligations, prohibited from removing her IUD (intrauterine birth control device), and threatened into compliance by restricting access to her kids. Spears's harrowing testimony confirmed the suspicions of the #FreeBritney movement and finally revealed, in her own words, the horrifying extent of trauma that was inflicted by her conservatorship for over a decade.



Scenes from the #FreeBritney movement that formed in support of Spears's battle to end the 13-year-long conservatorship she was pressured into on February 1, 2008.

Though the direct aim of the #FreeBritney movement was to end the abusive conservatorship Spears has been forced to endure for the past 13 years, the movement also spurred public discussion about the troubling culture of the early 2000s – in particular, the role tabloid journalism played in exacerbating her mental health struggles. One of the figures that was called upon to answer for his

crimes was Hilton, who Spears's supporters considered to be one of the worst perpetrators of abuse against Spears during the early 2000s. When asked in an interview about his past behavior and the potential role it played in her mental health challenges, Hilton admits that he "[didn't lead with empathy and compassion](#)" and "[carries deep shame and regret](#)" for his treatment of Spears. However, Hilton qualifies his apology and attempts to rationalize his reprehensible mistreatment of Spears by arguing that he was merely "[shocked, alarmed, and especially concerned for her young children.](#)"

Unsurprisingly, an overwhelming number of fans rejected his apology and doubted its sincerity. Some of the comments left under his apology video titled "[My Message To Britney Spears And The Free Britney Movement | Perez Hilton](#)" are as follows:

"People are holding you accountable. You can apologize, but the damage is done. Her life is in this horrific place because of what so many people did. I hope that she gets her life back. I feel for her, I cry for her. Let's all do whatever we can to help Britney." – *Sho Dill*

"The apologies mean nothing, you helped put her in her own personal hell and you deserve to live with that." – *Vina Paul*

"Perez you made your fortune off of the girls from 2000s. "Sorry" isn't enough. You could have spoken out sooner and also you made this video about you suffering that you're getting bullied." – *Alexandra Kartbeiser*

"Shame on Perez for trying to jump in the Britney wagon for [clout]. He was one of the ones that tore her apart. How dare him! Oh, poor thing. He can try to ruin someone's life and it's okay because he apologized. . . The only reason he is apologizing is because he wants to jump on the Free Britney wagon for publicity. He is dreadful and so is the people that supports him..." – *Jd Popayan*

Interestingly enough, the majority of defamatory posts about Spears on Hilton's blog have all but disappeared. While I was conducting research on this topic, I encountered several broken links and

scarce reporting about Spears on Hilton's blog during the early to mid-2000s – the period when Spears's mental health struggles were highly publicized.

Despite removing the posts that have since garnered heavy criticism, Hilton, as evidenced by the comments above, has been unable to eradicate his shameful behavior from public memory altogether. Folks on [Twitter](#) and other social media websites seem hesitant to absolve Hilton of his responsibility in producing Spears's trainwreck spectacle and profiting off her mental health struggles. Perhaps what is most telling is the fact that Hilton's social media profiles and online gossip column still exhibit the same signature style for which he previously apologized and claimed to take responsibility for; images of celebrities remain accompanied by sensationalist headlines, speculative reporting, and hastily scribbled captions on top of candid paparazzi photos.

Despite the success of the #FreeBritney movement in advocating for the termination of Spears's 13-year-long conservatorship, there seems to be a lingering hesitancy from the public to fully let go of Spears. Now that Spears has access to social media platforms like Instagram, users are seen flocking to the comments section to insert their own thoughts and opinions on Spears's well-being. Though supporters of Spears may have good intentions, their intense devotion and paternalistic fixation on "saving" Spears from what they perceive as ongoing control have unintended consequences, at times reinforcing the very narratives of control they purport to be fighting against.

Even on a straightforward video Spears posted of herself dancing in her home, there are rude and conspiratorial comments posted like the ones shown below. In these comments, individuals are seen evaluating her image, sanity, personal choices, and newfound freedom against their own blueprint

of what those concepts should mean *for* her; and if what she presents does not live up to these expectations, users do not hesitate to let Spears know of their dissatisfaction in the comment section.



- britneyspears** • Following
Bazzi • Mine
- briittany_** Can we get her a hair stylist and photographer
2 w 973 likes Reply
- ca_hodge** There is much more things to do with your life than trying on clothes and swaying in the same spot in the same room making videos. Live your life, get out of the house more.
2 w 370 likes Reply
- christyh0821** This is getting old and you aren't making sense. Please focus on you and stay off social media. You need to heal!
2 w 335 likes Reply
- nevena.0708** That's why i think this is not over. She's still being controlled and this is becoming so weird. I'm really curious if we ever find out what is and who is behind all this. She's definitely not free. #freebritney
2 w 161 likes Reply

Screenshot of comments from [one of Spears's Instagram videos](#), in which users are seen criticizing several aspects of her personal life, ranging from Spears's physical appearance to her performance of mental well-being and freedom.

Spears has also taken a firm stand against recent well-intentioned documentaries like “Framing Britney Spears” (2021) and [posted the following statement on Instagram](#) to vocalize her discomfort with all of the renewed attention on her traumatic past: “These documentaries are so hypocritical ... they criticize the media and then do the same thing 🤔🤔🤔?????” Even in our most loyal defense of Spears, we seem to privilege our own narratives and continue to dismiss Spear’s right to autonomous representation – an eerie reminder of the controlling dynamics that characterized the legal restraints

Spears endured under her abusive conservatorship, in addition to the dimensions of control underlying her previous exploitation by the media.

Now that her conservatorship has been terminated, it would make sense for supporters of the #FreeBritney movement to honor the goal stated in the movement's name and let Britney be free. However, it seems that we, as a society, have conflicting ideas of what "freedom" should look like and we appear to be committed to our own narratives about Spears. Despite good intentions, we continue to demonstrate an adamant refusal to grant Spears full permission to be free on her own terms, which makes me wonder if we can ever truly reconcile our one-sided relationship with the celebrity of Britney Spears.

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