

# Gazing at the Stars

Celebrity worship is a big part of our culture—  
but is it a good thing?

By Haley Shapley

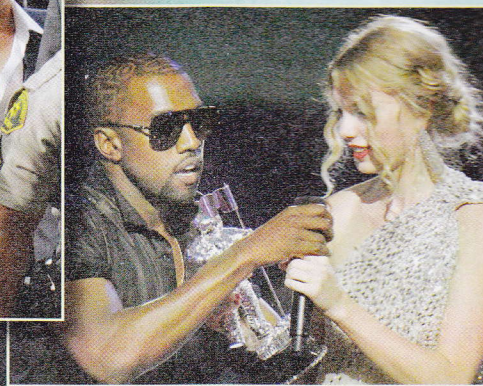
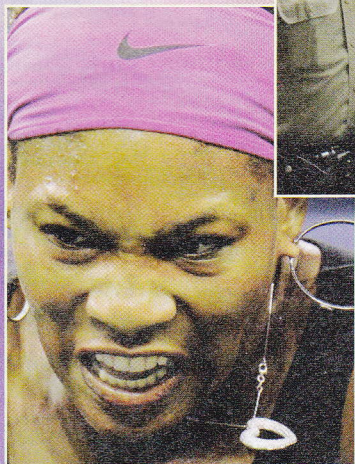
When singer Justin Bieber tweeted a photo of himself with reality TV star Kim Kardashian at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, it wasn't long before she received death threats from those with "Bieber fever." When Kanye West wore slatted sunglasses for his "Stronger" video, the shades—despite being completely impractical—flew off the shelves. And when Miley Cyrus does pretty much anything, she makes headlines.

Celebrities may have hair-and-makeup teams, big bank accounts, and designer clothes, but at the end of the day, they're just people. So why do they fascinate the rest of us? And at what point does healthy interest cross the line to unhealthy obsession?

## Why Do Celebrities Matter?

Following the lives of the rich and famous is something people of all ages enjoy, but for teens in particular, stargazing helps them explore who they





From left: Serena Williams throwing a hissy fit at the 2009 US Open, Lindsay Lohan going to court for substance abuse charges (again), and Kanye West being a huge jerk to Taylor Swift at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2009.



really are. "Celebrity culture is a way people identify with the kind of person they want to be and the kind of person they don't want to be," says Emilie Zaslow, an assistant professor of communication studies at Pace University in New York City and the author of *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*. "Adolescence is a time when teens are learning about themselves, trying to craft out who they are. ... Media has an impact on how a young person sees him- or herself."

People often feel as though they know many celebrities, each of whom has a different life story and set of values and opinions. Over time, following that celebrity culture helps teens figure out what's important to them and what's not through examples they see every day. Maybe that brash pro football player turns you off, or maybe you admire his confidence and sense of humor. Perhaps the way your favorite actress cheated on and dumped her boyfriend shocked you, so you vow to make



**‘Celebrity culture is a way people identify with the kind of person they want to be and the kind of person they don’t want to be.’** —Emilie Zaslow, communications professor

sure your relationships are more respectful. “When you’re a teenager, you’re really open to a lot of different influences [while] trying to figure out how you fit in and where you fit in,” says Sasha Pasulka, an entertainment blogger for *Evil Beet Gossip*. “It’s easy to use celebrities as role models.”

Marketing is another reason you’re probably interested in celebs. Teens spend billions of dollars a year on products, and that isn’t lost on the fashion and media industries. Many teen powerhouses are catapulted to stardom solely to sell you things, according to psychologist Robert Epstein, author of *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence*. For instance, in 2008, Disney sold \$30 billion worth of licensed products—many backed by the smiling faces of young stars such as Vanessa Hudgens and Zac Efron. “Apart from school, what a teen thinks about is actually the creation of all kinds of executives and designers,” Epstein says.

### What People Learn From Celebs

A small dose of celebrity worship is fine. In fact, one study from the University at Buffalo in New York found that thinking about a celeb can boost self-esteem; those with lower self-esteem felt better about themselves after writing essays about their favorite stars. Researchers think that is probably because people feel a bond with a celebrity that they might not have from a real relationship. It’s been shown that when people hang out with someone athletic, they feel more athletic; when they hang out with someone smart, they feel smarter. So thinking about a star you admire could make you feel you have the positive qualities you see in that person.

There are also lessons to learn from people in the spotlight. Athletes such as David Beckham and Serena Williams might inspire you to play sports, and the stars of *Glee* may prove being a chorus kid is cool. Some messages are more serious but still valuable. The 2009 news that Chris Brown had

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

After Zach Veach heard about a fatal accident caused by texting while driving, the 15-year-old race car driver from Ohio kept it in the back of his mind. He later learned about the No Phone Zone, Oprah Winfrey’s campaign urging people to put down their phones while driving. Zach knew he had to get involved.

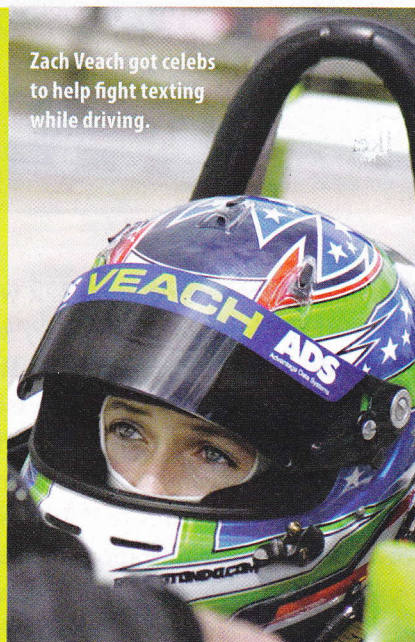
He collected signatures from friends, fans, fellow drivers, and even CNN host Anderson Cooper. “Having celebrities involved is important. They set trends—what they do, we do,” Zach says.

Celebrity influence alone isn’t usually enough to make people do good deeds, but it

can certainly inspire them. “Typically, young people don’t change their values based on what they see, but it can reinforce some ideas we already have and help to push us in the right direction,” says communications professor Emilie Zaslow.

That has certainly happened to Zach. In the racing world, he’s gotten Danica Patrick and *Dancing With the Stars* champ Helio Castroneves to sign on, along with more than 33 fellow Indy 500 drivers. “They’re the fastest drivers in the world, and if they’re setting examples, maybe it’ll get a little further,” Zach says.

Zach Veach got celebs to help fight texting while driving.



COURTESY OF ZACH VEACH



hit Rihanna showed dating violence can happen to anyone, even the young and beautiful. Lindsay Lohan's progression from *The Parent Trap* cutie to jailbird is an example of the dangers of drugs and alcohol.

### When Adoration Goes Too Far

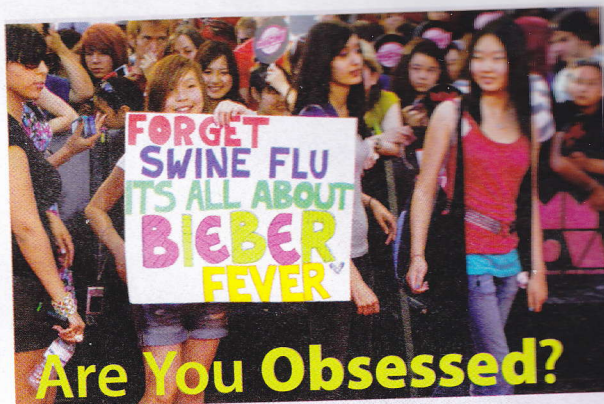
Reading celebrity blogs, marveling at Lady Gaga's latest outfit, and seeing whom Nick Jonas is dating can be fun. In one study, U.S. and British researchers looked at the range of interest in famous people. They found that most people are mildly interested in celebs—they may collect posters of their fave star or watch all his or her movies—but their real-life relationships are unaffected. Maddie S., 17, from Washington state, admires actress Kristin Chenoweth, has read her book, and watches her plays. But, Maddie says, "I'm not like, 'I saw her wearing that, and I have to wear that.'"

There's a point, though, at which the interest can become obsessive. A small subset of people suffer from "intense-personal" celebrity worship, say researchers—for example, people might insist they really know a celebrity and think they're destined to be together. They may camp outside a singer's tour bus or plan a wedding to a star basketball player.

Then there's a third, even smaller, group labeled "borderline-pathological" celebrity worshippers. Those people would do something illegal for their favorite star and might even become stars. The teens obsessed with celebrity fashion who were recently caught breaking into the houses of Orlando Bloom and Paris Hilton to steal their clothes and jewelry might fit into that category.

### Keep It Real

No matter where you fall on the spectrum, realize that the fantasy life celebs seem to live is just that—a fantasy. "Look beyond the surface, and think about it," Pasulka says. "Be aware that what's presented on television and in magazines has very little to do with reality. What can look really fun and exciting in a photo or in a 30-second clip is not always really fun in real life." Behind a celeb's super-glam image



Researchers in the United States and England have identified a condition the media has dubbed "celebrity worship syndrome," which they believe affects about a third of the population. See where you fall on the scale.

#### LEVEL 1: ENTERTAINMENT-SOCIAL

- My friends and I like to discuss what my favorite celebrity has done.
- I enjoy watching him or her.
- Learning the life story of him or her is a lot of fun.

#### LEVEL 2: INTENSE-PERSONAL

- I consider my favorite celebrity to be my soul mate.
- I have a special bond with him or her.
- I can't stop thinking about him or her, even when I try to concentrate on other things.

#### LEVEL 3: BORDERLINE-PATHOLOGICAL

- If someone gave me several thousand dollars, I would consider spending it on something my favorite celebrity had once used.
- If he or she asked me to do something illegal as a favor, I would probably do it.
- I would be very upset if he or she got married.

Source: Daily Mail

may be 16-hour workdays, nonstop traveling, and constant hounding from the paparazzi.

So go ahead and pick up that copy of *Us Weekly* if you want to. But know your limits. If you find yourself tweeting to Kim Kardashian that she needs to stay away from your man, you might need to take a break from stargazing and root yourself in reality (and no, "reality" TV doesn't count). **CH**

### Think About It

How might the Internet and other aspects of technology have influenced celebrity worship? Do you think those changes are positive or negative?