

“Can You Handle My Truth?”: Authenticity and the Celebrity Star Image

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“People can take everything away from you, but they can’t take away your truth. But the question is, can you handle it? Can you handle my truth?”

Britney Spears, *Britney and Kevin: Chaotic*, Episode One, Original Air Date May 17, 2005

IN HIS 1985 BOOK *INTIMATE STRANGERS: THE CULTURE OF CELEBRITY*, Richard Schickel suggests that the history of celebrity in western culture is closely linked to the history of communication technology. As new forms of media develop and older forms find new ways to reach larger audiences more quickly, demand for and availability of information has skyrocketed (28). Ideally, easing and increasing the flow of information should result in the democratic ideal of well-informed public who are astutely tuned in to the world around them. However, Schickel sees the information explosion in modern society as having the opposite effect. As information is spread wider and faster, it necessarily becomes more simplified, relying more heavily on simple symbols “that crystallize and personify an issue, an ideal, a longing” (28). These symbols stand in for our needs and desires within modern society, helping us to make sense of the competing stimuli in our social world. According to Schickel, the celebrity image is a useful ideological symbol for constructing meaning within the modern western capitalist system. Generally, although not exclusively, emerging from the sports or entertainment industries, celebrities are highly visible throughout the media, thus making them easily accessible symbols. More importantly, however, is the fact that celebrity images are not confined to their professional appearances, for

example, acting in a film or singing at a concert. Graeme Turner suggests that unlike other public figures, celebrities' "private lives will attract greater public interest than their professional lives" (4). It is, in part, the blurring of the boundaries between private and public or the idea of an authentic individual behind the public persona that makes celebrity images particularly potent ideological symbols.

Some social critics, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, suggest celebrity images, as part of the larger "culture industry," are a coercive force, shaping society according to oppressive ideologies that favor the powerful elite, rather than the general public (350). They argue the celebrity image is the center of false value that works to deceive audiences into equating real life with the movies or other culture industry fabrications (353). The celebrity is not a real person, but merely a commodity, an image without substance, used to control the consciousnesses of a malleable public. While these arguments certainly highlight the power of the celebrity image as a cultural meaning maker, I contend their negative view of the audience as passive dupes misses an essential component of the negotiation of the celebrity image. Chris Rojek argues:

[T]o the extent that organized religion has declined in the West, celebrity culture has emerged as one of the replacement strategies that promotes new orders of meaning and solidarity. As such, notwithstanding the role that some celebrities have played in destabilizing order, celebrity culture is a significant institution in the normative achievement of social integration. (99)

Similarly, I suggest that the celebrity persona is more than false value, rather it is a site of tension and ambiguity in which an active audience has the space to make meaning of their world by accepting or rejecting the social values embodied by a celebrity image. Thus, an examination of how and why celebrity images generate social meaning and significance offers new ways of understanding the cultural power of media in contemporary western culture.

"Lost in an Image/In a Dream": The Celebrity Image in Celebrity Media

("Lucky." *Oops!... I Did it Again*)

Our fascination with a specific celebrity¹ at a specific historical moment is based on multiple factors. First, as P. David Marshall argues

"[A]lthough a celebrity may be positioned predominantly in one mediated form, that image is informed by the circulation of significant information about the celebrity in newspapers, magazines, interview programs, fanzines, rumors, and so on" (58). The celebrity persona is not confined to her professional image but consists of everything publicly available about her (Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* 2). The celebrity, therefore, is an intertextual sign informed by multiple sources in multiple ways. Although many celebrities bemoan the fact that their private lives are offered up for public consumption by celebrity media, particularly the tabloid press, the blurring of the private/public distinction that occurs in celebrity media is essential for the maintenance of their star power. While Schickel focused his analysis on supermarket-style tabloids as the main form of celebrity media in 1985, there has more recently been an explosion of celebrity news sources available both in print and on the Internet. In addition to the traditional supermarket tabloids, such as *The National Enquirer* or *The Sun*, today's celebrity media market has expanded to include dozens of glossy celebrity-oriented magazines, numerous television programs, an entire cable channel (E!), and millions of Web sites, blogs, and online forums devoted to celebrities, their lives and work. Although Schickel focused on only one form of celebrity media and may not have predicted this tabloid explosion, such an increase in celebrity information is consistent with his connection of the history of celebrity with the history of communication technology. Furthermore, because his analysis centered on the crucial role tabloids and other "gossip"-oriented media play in constructing and maintaining celebrity persona, Schickel's work is very relevant to this discussion. He suggests that our fascination with celebrities, as well as power as cultural symbols, is rooted in the "illusion of intimacy" constructed between the audience and the celebrity figure within celebrity gossip media (4). The supposedly "true" intimate and behind-the-scenes details of a celebrity's private life are of the utmost concern for these media sources, as they emphasize the notion of a "real" celebrity who, in her unguarded or supposedly outside the public eye moments, is just like the average person (Honey 62). Thus, while the fan may recognize that the star seen on screen or stage is a highly constructed figure, the star is brought close and revealed as a regular person through the media coverage of the details of her private life within celebrity media.

Schickel, though he does not examine it in depth as a celebrity media source, argues that television, in particular, has broken down the barriers between the public and private lives of celebrities by bringing these larger than life personas "into our living rooms in psychically manageable size" (9–10). He here suggests that all images of celebrities on television, whether a public performance or a celebrity news program that details the behind-the-scenes life, serve to create the illusion of intimacy between the viewer and the celebrity; I argue his claim could be made about celebrity media more broadly. The actual process of reading a magazine or online forum is, like watching television, a much more individual process than watching a star's public performance in a cinema or on the stage. Television, as Marshall argues, "embodies the characteristics of familiarity," that bring the celebrity image close to the audience member and allows her to enter into a more intimate relationship based on the accessibility of the star (119). Similarly, tabloid and entertainment magazines, fan-authored and official Web sites devoted to celebrities, and any other forum where celebrity lifestyles are the main topic of concern also bring the celebrity close to the audience by making her life not so far removed from the audience's own. In other words, the illusion of intimacy strips away the mask of the public performance through the revelation of personal and private details about the celebrity as an average person that resonate with the audience's own experiences.

"Isn't She Lucky/This Hollywood Girl": Negotiating the Star Image

("Lucky." *Oops!...I Did it Again*)

Despite this intimacy, the celebrity cannot be classified as exactly the same as the average person, which, in turn, adds to his or her appeal. Richard Dyer's valuable work on stars is grounded in the idea that a large part of the appeal of stars is their complexity and ambiguity. "Stardom," he says, "is an image of the way stars live . . . it combines the spectacular with the everyday, the special with the ordinary" (*Stars* 35). Celebrity media humanizes the stars but never completely disentangles them from their larger-than-life position as celebrities. The ultimate irony of celebrity, of course, is that fans can never really know the celebrity through any of these celebrity media texts, as they are just as constructed as a celebrity's public

performances. No one media source, not even the one most associated with the celebrity, gives us a full understanding of the complexity and tensions inherent in celebrity personas. Taken together, the star's public performances and the celebrity media coverage of her private life "ensure that whatever intimacy is permitted between the audience and the star is purely at the discursive level" (Marshall 90). The signs are so intertwined that it is nearly impossible to separate the "real" from the constructed image. Thus, it is the tension between the two sides of the persona, larger-than-life and the "real" person, coupled with tension between the possibility and impossibility of knowing the truth about her life which makes celebrities so intriguing to the public and such apt ideological symbols.

This is not to say that the reader is unable to recognize that the image of the star available in the celebrity media is any more "real" than the one on screen. Dyer argues that there is no "right" image of the celebrity because all aspects of her image are produced and constructed. The constructed nature of the celebrity sign allows the audience to derive pleasure from the ability to construct and reconstruct the star image from a variety of texts in complex and often contradictory ways. This sort of audience engagement is clearly evident in deconstructive readings of celebrity, such as the camp appreciation or gay readings of Hollywood icons like Judy Garland discussed by Dyer in *Heavenly Bodies*, both of which work against the meanings intended by the media industries that created these images (5). Thus, the audience is a crucial component of the construction of the social meaning of celebrity images. However, as Dyer points out, the audience's meaning making powers are not absolute. He says, "[A]udiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image and meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them" (*Heavenly Bodies* 5). Each celebrity image does not exist in a vacuum but, rather is dependent on the context in which it is presented (e.g., a public performance or an article in a tabloid) as well as the audience's prior knowledge of the celebrity persona. Furthermore, as Dyer suggests, the very pursuit of this meaning by audiences within celebrity media and public performances encourages audiences to think in terms of truth, bolstering their own feelings of intimacy with a celebrity image.

Dyer elsewhere claims most audiences are engaged in a project of discovering the truth behind the appearances, or, in other words,

believing that what lies behind the surface of the professional image of the celebrity is authentic and real. He argues that the authenticity sought by audiences "is established or constructed in media texts by use of markers that indicate lack of control, lack of premeditation and privacy. These return us to notions of the truth being behind or beneath the surface. The surface is organized and under control, it is worked out in advance, it is public" ("A Star Is Born" 137). The audience begins with the public persona of the celebrity, her films or pop songs, but does not have to accept this highly constructed image as the "real" celebrity. Consuming stories and photographs in celebrity media fills in the gaps of the celebrity's private life opened by the pursuit of the "real" person behind the celebrity façade. The question, then, is why audiences remain unsatisfied with the public image of the star and turn to extratextual reports in order to seek the "truth," even if they rationally are aware those images are constructed. Dyer argues that

[P]art of the answer lies in the precise and differentiated relation between the values perceived to be embodied by the star and the perceived status of those values (especially if they are felt to be under threat or in crisis, or to be challenging received values, or else to be values that are a key to understanding and coping with contemporary life). But I also want to suggest that all of this depends on the degree to which stars are *accepted as truly being what they appear to be* ("A Star is Born" 132, emphasis mine)

This search for the authentic celebrity that occurs is, I suggest, closely related to the illusion of intimacy described by Schickel. The audience's intimacy with the star gives the illusion of knowing the "truth" about what a star is "really like." More importantly, once the celebrity is positioned as "authentic," the values and ideologies she symbolizes also become "real" and culturally resonant. Marshall suggests "the celebrity is one form of resolution of the role and position of the individual and his or her potential in modern society. The power of the celebrity, then, is to represent the active construction of identity in the social world" (xi). Who we think the star "really" is, then, tells us something about who we are or who we ought to be. By uncovering what is below the surface or behind the scenes of the celebrity's public image, celebrity media purports to give the audience what is "unquestionably and virtually, by definition, the truth" (Dyer, "A Star Is Born" 136). The

never-ending quest for the “real” celebrity bestows upon her persona heightened cultural significance that is disseminated through all forms of celebrity media.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate these theoretical claims is to examine how they apply to a specific celebrity persona. Currently, perhaps in part due to the massive amount of celebrity-oriented media available, there exists an astonishing number of people in the public eye who qualify as “celebrities.” However, not all celebrities are equal in terms of media coverage.² Thus, it is necessary to focus on a celebrity whose image is easily traceable through public performances and extratextual celebrity media. I here examine the celebrity image of pop singer Britney Spears not only because her image is readily available for public consumption through a variety of sources, but also because the complex and often contradictory discourses available about her in popular media texts make her image an excellent means of exploring the roles of “truth” and “authenticity” as markers of ideological power. Exploding into popular consciousness in 1999 with her hit song, “. . . Baby One More Time,” Britney’s image, in both her public performances and in celebrity media, has evolved from innocent schoolgirl to precocious young woman to over-the-top sexpot and almost everything in between. On one hand, Britney³ certainly illustrates the power of popular media in shaping a celebrity, as her career as a pop singer is, at this point, secondary to the tabloid coverage of her private life in terms of maintaining fame (or, some would say, infamy). Although she is nearly constantly featured or referenced in contemporary celebrity media, I here restrict my analysis to two well covered “moments” in her public life from the spring and early summer of 2005, namely her relationship with and marriage to Kevin Federline and her first pregnancy. As will be demonstrated, she has actively pursued authenticity through an appeal to “truth” and the “real” Britney throughout her career, and these instances are recent examples of this trend.⁴ The appeal to the “real” Britney, however, has been used in different forms throughout her career to promote her as a cultural symbol. The celebrity media (and the mainstream media) have, at different points in time, either praised or derided her persona as “real” or worthy of emulation. For example, the cover story of the February 14, 2000 issue of *People* read “Pop princess Britney Spears: Too sexy too soon? Little girls love her, but her image makes some moms nervous” (Tresniowski et al. 98). The idea that fans, especially young fans, simply imitate the

ideological image of the celebrity echoes Adorno and Horkheimer's argument about the culture industry as deception. Such a reading positions Britney's image as a form of social control that posits oppressive notions of femininity and hypersexuality as the definition of womanhood. I do not deny that such a reading is a viable one, but I suggest it disregards the complexity of her image. Just what messages about femininity and sexuality actually are read onto her image can be ambiguous and dependent on context. While some media sources may deride her as trashy or too sexy for her young fans, Britney's own attempts to reveal her "truth" opens the possibility for alternate readings of her image as a positive cultural marker. For instance, she often "fights back" against the negative press by claiming to give the public the "truth" about her life through her song lyrics, Web site postings, interviews with the "right" kind of magazines, and, in the spring of 2005, on her reality show, *Britney and Kevin: Chaotic*. These representations are, using Dyer's definition, marked by the illusion of Britney giving up private and unpremeditated information about her life behind the façade of her public star persona. In other words, they present the authentic Britney for the audience's scrutiny. Of course this supposed position of authenticity is itself fraught with contradiction, as her version of the "truth" is just as mediated as the stories available in the gossip magazines. Ultimately, it is up to the audience to put together the pieces of Britney Spears's star persona in a way that is socially meaningful and pleasurable to them.

"Baby what you see is what you get": Defining Celebrity Media

("What U See [is What U Get]." *Oops!... I Did it Again*)

Certainly celebrities are featured in all sorts of media, including media devoted to their particular genre of public performances, such as *Entertainment Weekly* or *Premiere* for television and film or *Rolling Stone* for music. While these media sources do contribute in some way to the discovery of the "authentic" celebrity through a focus on the public performance side of celebrity, tabloids and other celebrity media forms I call "glossies," on the other hand, work to authenticate the "real" celebrity through coverage of her life outside of these public performances. An examination of these celebrity media forms provides greater insight into the illusion of intimacy and the pursuit of au-

thenticity in the consumption and negotiation of celebrity personas. That her celebrity image is overwhelmingly rooted in the speculation and gossip of the tabloid press rather than in her public performance as a singer, it is important to define just what I mean by *tabloid*. In her study of tabloids and tabloid readers, S. Elizabeth Bird suggests the term *tabloid* has come to signify a paper dealing primarily with graphically told human-interest stories that rely more on pictures than on actual prose content (8). While this is an apt description of much of the celebrity gossip genre, Bird is remiss in not differentiating between tabloids in terms of content. She argues that “the tabloids serve up a mixture of celebrity gossip, human-interest features, usually with a ‘sensational’ twist, stories about occult and psychic phenomena, UFOs and so on, and large doses of advice, self-help tips, and medical news” (8). Following Turner’s categorization of celebrity media, I suggest that while this aptly describes such half-broadsheet newsprint supermarket tabloids as *The National Enquirer* or *The Sun*, there exists another level of “glossy” magazines that trade solely on celebrity news and lifestyles, thus creating a separate tabloid genre (see Turner 72–75).

Glossy refers to the slick shine of the paper on which the magazine is printed, which seems to mimic the shine of the glamorous stars covered inside, and is also distinct from the newsprint of the traditional supermarket tabloids discussed by Bird. These “glossies” include magazines such as *Us Weekly*, *People*, *Life* and *Style Weekly*, and *In Touch Weekly*. Even *Star*, which began as a typical half-broadsheet tabloid has revisioned itself as a magazine-sized glossy in order to keep up with its celebrity-centered competition and, perhaps more importantly, distinguish itself from the more traditional tabloids like *The National Enquirer*.³ With the exception of *People*, these “glossies” always feature a celebrity on the cover and utilize celebrity images in every facet of its content. For example, *Us Weekly* regularly features fashion and beauty advice and articles, but all with a “how to copy the look of the stars” emphasis that reinforces the importance of celebrity to their readers. *People* often places celebrities on the cover (including several covers featuring Britney Spears) but also includes many human interest stories that do not revolve around celebrities, such as stories on “real life” events like the 2002 murder of Laci Peterson and the subsequent trial and conviction of her husband, Scott. This seems to distinguish *People* as a more authentic class of celebrity magazine endowed with the credibility of more traditional journalism. While some may argue that *People’s* coverage of such stories

turns the players into celebrities, the fact that they deliberately cover noncelebrity stories and also focus on the human-interest side of national events distinguishes them from the other glossies' pure celebrity focus. Furthermore, *People* generally eschews the more salacious and unsubstantiated celebrity gossip featured in the other glossies. It relies more on actual interviews with celebrities rather than quotes from anonymous "sources close" to a star. This aspect of the distinction will become critical in Britney's self-management of her image.

Yet all these glossies do have some important similarities. First, all these magazines essentially trade in celebrity gossip, or at least behind-the-scenes information. Although the focus on gossip has long been derided by the more legitimate press as frivolous and unrelated to real life, it has important implications for celebrity power. Turner says gossip should be "understood as an important social process through which relationships, identity, and social and cultural norms are debated, evaluated, modified, and shared . . . [it] has inserted the celebrity into processes of social and personal identity formation that are clearly fundamental" (24). In other words, what the glossies say about a celebrity is directly related to the cultural power of the celebrity image. As will be shown in the case of Britney Spears, the contradictory and complex media coverage of the actions of a celebrity plays a role in the possible cultural meanings a celebrity image can represent. Similarly, Bird suggests that the celebrity gossip available in tabloids acts as a source of images for the "hall of mirrors" of culture. She argues that different components of culture are not simply linked but actively inform each other. Thus, celebrity gossip stories "bounce off and add to the established image" of a star "derived from previous reading and viewing" (2). Following specific stories about Britney Spears through several glossy magazines as well as through her own Web site and reality show demonstrates how different tellings of the same event work together to construct "Britney" for the audience both as a celebrity and as a cultural symbol of femininity and heterosexuality.

"And When You Mention My Name/Make Sure You Know the Truth": Britney Spears and Celebrity Media

("Outrageous." *In The Zone*.)

Although my focus is on more recent incarnations of Britney's image, one must understand, at least briefly, the history of her image in popular

consciousness. She was a fifteen-year-old veteran of the wholesome *Mickey Mouse Club* when her first album, . . . *Baby One More Time*, was released in 1999. At the time, her publicly performed image personified youth, naïveté, and innocence coupled with a burgeoning sexuality that, while lusty, was nonthreatening and avowedly heterosexual. However, the projected “good girl” image soon clashed with a greater emphasis on her sexuality in her songs, her videos, and her public appearances. Her clothing in her videos and public appearances became more revealing, her dancing and song lyrics became much more sexualized, and persistent rumors about breast augmentation drew more attention to her body as an object of (male) desire. Most tellingly were the rumors (and eventual admittance by Britney herself) that she was no longer the virgin she claimed to be, a pillar upon which her “good girl” image was built. As she got older, and in fact became a legal adult, her image was more and more sexualized, both in the public performance of her songs, videos, and concerts, and in celebrity media coverage of her exploits, including alleged heavy partying and her infamous quickie Las Vegas wedding that ended a mere 55 hours later. What is interesting about this shift is that while the celebrity media derided her as becoming increasingly trashy and hypersexual in comparison with her initial public persona, Britney maintained that she was simply a girl blossoming into womanhood and, as such, was merely staying true to herself and what she wanted, rather than what the public supposedly wanted from her.

The idea of being true to yourself despite pressure to conform is a hallmark of her more recent celebrity image. It may make her a role model, on one hand, but it also allows celebrity media to frame her as an example of incorrect moral behavior by showing her as being inauthentic or untruthful. The conflict between the “truth” offered by Britney and the “truth” offered by the tabloids and glossies is, therefore, a primary site through which audiences negotiate her image. Who is the purveyor of the “truth” about Britney—the glossy magazines, which provide unauthorized and uncontrolled, and therefore seemingly authentic, details of her public appearances (rather than her public performances as a singer) or the star herself? Ultimately the actual truth is irrelevant to Britney’s image. What matters is how notions of truth and authenticity are used by both Britney and the celebrity media as a means to convey social norms and values.

Britney Spears constantly presents a representation of herself as an average person who just happens to be famous, and who, more

importantly, is unchanged by her fame. All her own publicity, including her official Web site and her reality television program, is clearly focused on presenting a "real" person behind the glitz and glamour of her public performances. She also demonstrates her authenticity through media interviews that allow the audience to scrutinize her image supposedly outside of her self-managed image. However, the magazines to which she grants interviews often become accomplices to her own image production. Thus, the fact that *People* is often the only glossy-style celebrity magazine to which Britney will give official interviews may be related to their distinction from the other glossy magazines. *People's* coverage of her, as with most of their celebrity coverage, tends to be much more complementary and in step with her own image management. For example, after getting married in a secret surprise ceremony in an attempt to thwart paparazzi and gossip magazine coverage of her wedding, Britney and former backup dancer, Kevin Federline, gave *People* an exclusive interview and the rights to her "personal" wedding photos in their October 4, 2005 issue. This, at least temporarily, displaced the other glossies as reliable sources of information about her. For the audience, *People* seems to show a more authentic Britney because it is sanctioned by Britney herself. In fact, in the weeks following, other glossies actually quoted the *People* story as a source. In other words, the *People* interview was thus given more credibility as the "truth" about their wedding and relationship because it came from Britney herself, though mediated through the magazine. This "truth" was that they were "blissed-out newlyweds" who were deeply in love (Tauber et al. 65). Furthermore, her marriage made Britney "realize that [she] is growing up, becoming a woman, and things just need to be different. . . . [She] feel[s] like it's a beginning" (71). This image is in contradistinction to the hypersexualized and partying image of Britney that had been dominating the glossies up to this point.

Britney's self-produced image has always relied on the notion that she is the girl next door or just like the average person, and her presentation of her relationship and marriage to Kevin Federline explicitly worked to solidify this image. In the opening segment to the pilot of their reality show, *Britney and Kevin: Chaotic*, they have the following exchange about life in the public eye that clearly positions the show, like other Britney sanctioned media, as an authentic source of "truth":

Britney: "When you're in the public eye, people think you're different."

Kevin: "Think you're different."

Britney: "Truth is, I want what everyone wants."

Britney and Kevin: "Love."

Britney: "This is my journey."

Kevin: "This is my journey."

Britney and Kevin: "Our journey."

Chaotic is clearly framed as a Britney's opportunity to reveal her "true self" to her fans through her own personal video footage as well as interviews that help frame the narrative of that footage. Appearing on television, and on a "reality" show no less, brings the "real" Britney close to her fans, highlighting the importance of the illusion of intimacy in negotiating the celebrity image. Speaking of a similar television documentary featuring former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell, Andrew Tolson suggests this approach is "not simply a revelation of an essential 'real person,' it is nevertheless a disclosure of a way of being a celebrity, a way of coping with its pressures, by mapping out and following through a self-conscious personal project" (449). In other words, being Britney can never really be an ordinary experience. She is constantly followed by paparazzi, spends much of her life either preparing for or performing on stage, and rarely has a moment to herself away from her fans or her entourage. However, *Chaotic's* narrative focus on her desire for "what everyone wants" emphasizes that her lack of ordinariness is a result of the way her life is reported by celebrity gossip magazines, not because of her lack of such qualities. It utilizes the codes of reality TV to foreground a rhetoric of authenticity in the narrative and return her image to ordinariness, thus making her "real" self accessible to audiences. In fact, in the pilot episode of *Chaotic* she says "I think being in the public eye, you know, they have their own way of projecting you and what they want the world to think of you, as what you're like. But I think I'm just like anybody else, you know. I long for love and companionship and all of those things." By drawing attention to the artifice of celebrity, the Britney presented in *Chaotic* is positioned as the "real" Britney who reveals the "truth" about her life to the audience.

The show gives moral weight to heterosexual love and marriage as the path to happiness and contentment. *Chaotic* appears to be specifically aimed at reclaiming Britney's earlier "good girl" image by

portraying her sexuality as safely ensconced in a monogamous heterosexual relationship. To this end, the narrative of the show also works to convince her fans that Kevin is not only the love of her life, but also a really great guy. This is an important project in terms of maintaining her truth, as it conflicts with glossy magazine coverage of their relationship. When the couple first began dating, the glossies widely reported the fact that Kevin left his then-pregnant girlfriend, Shar Jackson, with whom he had already fathered another child, in order to be with Britney. The coverage of their relationship by the glossies focused not on true love or monogamy, but on Britney as a trashy home wrecker and Kevin as a cheating cad. Interestingly, Kevin's prior relationship or his role as a father to two children with Jackson is never mentioned during the entire course of the series, despite the fact that the events covered in *Chaotic* occurred at the same time as all the tabloid coverage of his other family. The audience member who knows this part of the story may overlook it to sympathize with two young people in love, but the fact that it is never mentioned in the show draws attention to the ways in which "truth" can be obscured by Britney just as by the gossip magazines.

The notion that the celebrity herself is not always the most authentic source of "truth" was again raised during in the spring of 2005 during speculation in both the tabloids and the glossies that twenty-three-year-old Britney was pregnant with her first child. After paparazzi photos of her "baby bump" and quotes from anonymous sources were featured in March issues of *Us Weekly*, *Star*, and, *In Touch Weekly* as confirmation of her pregnancy. Britney fired back on March 30, 2005 with a letter on her official Web site (<http://www.britneyspears.com>) to the "false tabloids." She wrote, "Do you, *Us Weekly*, *In Touch*, *Star* and other desperate magazines want employees who are honest, or those who are liars? It seems to me that you'd prefer the latter." *People* was excluded from her diatribe, but was mentioned in a postscript that read, "PEOPLE Magazine [sic] is great in my book!" Although she never specifically mentions the speculation about her pregnancy in these magazines, given the timing of the letter, one could read her letter as a denial of her pregnancy as well as a rebuking of the celebrity gossip mill.⁶ The vagueness of her letter was likely intentional, however, as she revealed in the April 25, 2005 issue of *People* and on her Web site that she was, in fact, pregnant. So while the other "false tabloids" were actually correct in their report that she was pregnant, it

was not fully realized as “truth” until she told her side of the story. Through her admission, she reclaims her pregnancy as a symbol of her loving relationship with Kevin and growth as a woman. In a later exclusive interview with *People*, she says she thinks pregnancy, “brings out a pure side of you, and I think that’s cool” (June 13, 2005, 64). This works against glossy speculation that her “bizarre public silence” about her clearly obvious pregnancy was related to reports that Kevin was cheating and Britney got pregnant to save the marriage (Ratledge, “Britney and Kevin; What went wrong?”). This is not to say such reports immediately vanish because the star herself has denied them as falsehoods. Speculation about why and when she got pregnant continued to appear in the glossies, fueled by her public appearances and comments. Thus, the audience can still read her image through multiple lenses in order to decide what they want to believe as “truth.”

Clearly, the audience is presented with multiple and often contradictory representations of an authentic Britney Spears. But, unlike Adorno and Horkheimer’s claim that such images deceive audiences into following dominant ideologies about femininity and heterosexuality, the audience actually can negotiate these images in ways meaningful to them. For example, Melanie Lowe’s ethnographic research on “tween” engagement with Britney Spears suggests that young female fans recognize that there are multiple facets or “personalities” to her image that come out differently in her songs and in her media appearances. However, Lowe says, “[W]hile the girls applaud the notion that Spears’s personality would have many different facets, they don’t necessarily approve of each one individually” (134). Although they may not like each personality, and most of the girls Lowe interviews demonstrated a strong dislike for the “slutty” persona of Britney, they accepted it as part of her larger persona as long as it was performed authentically. If Britney chose to dress or act in a certain manner, it was acceptable because it was a reflection of who she really is, not who the media or the public want her to be (138–39). Their frustration with oppressive messages about femininity available in Britney’s image, such as the objectification of the female body, could be resolved by turning to another aspect of her persona. Thus, as previously argued, it is the pursuit of the authentic celebrity persona that is at the root of their social power. The fact that the real “truth” about Britney can never be known is irrelevant, rather it is about celebrating or deriding the facets of her personality that helps audiences make sense of her image and of

their social world. Audiences can maintain their enjoyment of the image through careful negotiation of multiple facets of her persona.

The illusion of intimacy and the pursuit of truth that characterize the negotiation of the celebrity image are central to the ideological power of the celebrity sign. The audience negotiates the image using notions of authenticity and truth to decipher the "real" celebrity. This is not a simple process, but one fraught with complexity and contradiction. The "Britney Spears" presented in *Chaotic* is not necessarily the same "Britney Spears" available in glossies like *Us Weekly*. However, one is not inherently more authentic or, more importantly, culturally resonant than the other. Rather both (as well as the countless other projections of "Britney Spears") are spaces of negotiation through which the audience uses Britney's celebrity persona as a means to provide "a sense and coherence to a culture" (Marshall x). Although we can never really know the truth about a celebrity, as it is a mediated and highly constructed position, the pursuit of that truth allows audiences to organize and understand themselves and the world around them.

Notes

1. I use the terms *celebrity* and *star* interchangeably. Although some may argue a distinction between the two, my interest in publicly available images or personas constructed around a particular famous individual makes both terms equally apt descriptions.
2. Some celebrity personas are more aligned with their public performances (as actors, etc.) rather than in celebrity media speculation, whether by choice or by sufficient lack of public or media interest in their personal lives. Though it is outside the scope of this paper, it seems some celebrities are more apt cultural symbols than others because of their presence in celebrity media over their public performances. For example, very few "serious" actors have their private lives subjected to the kind of public media scrutiny to which other less "serious" actors are.
3. Though I recognize that there is a real person called Britney Spears, all references to her denote my argument that all seemingly private or authentic aspects of her persona available to the public (whether controlled by her or not) are, as Dyer suggests, representations or performances. I do not pretend to hold the key to the "real" Britney, since the nature of the celebrity persona is such that given my lack of personal relationship with Ms. Spears, I can in no way claim to hold the truth about her. Rather, I attempt to demystify the notion of authenticity that surrounds her image in popular discourse.
4. Though I intend to highlight Britney's own agency in the construction of her image, it is quite possible that a publicist, agent, or public relations staff, not Britney Spears herself, who makes the decisions about the public performance of her persona. However, no matter who actually makes the decisions, they are still aimed at shaping the publicly available image of "Britney."
5. Though such an analysis falls outside the scope of this article, the distinctions between the tabloid and the glossy celebrity magazine both in form and content appears to have an element of both economic and social class distinctions. For example, the focus on celebrity lifestyle and

modes of consumption assumes the reader has at least some disposable income to spend on emulating the stars. Additionally, the glossy magazines seem more highbrow in that they, like their mainstream press counterparts, eschew the UFO and occult-type gossip of the traditional tabloids.

6. Though the original letter is no longer available on Britney's official Web site (as archives only go back to October 2008), details of the letter are available on People.com <<http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,1043528,00.html>>.

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