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# How Did We Get Here? An Inquiry into Pop Culture, Pop Culture Icons, and America's Support of the Degradation of Humanity Through Mass Media Consumption

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

Graduate School

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

An Inquiry into Pop Culture, Pop Culture Icons,  
and American's Support of the Degradation of Humanity  
Through Mass Media Consumption.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Thomas Steele

College of Performing and Visual Arts  
School of Art and Design

August 2017

This Thesis by: Thomas Steele

Entitled: *How Did We Get Here: An Inquiry into Pop Culture, Pop Culture Icons, and American's Support of the Degradation of Humanity Through Mass Media Consumption.*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in College of Performing and Visual Arts in School of Art and Design, Program of Art and Design

Accepted by the Thesis Committee:

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Connie K. Stewart, Ph.D., Chair

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Donna Goodwin, Ph.D., Committee Member

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis focuses on the contemporary human condition associated with the consumption of current entertainment media. Sampling on modes of thought from anthropological, biological, psychological, sociological, and biographical points of view I sought to define what it means to be uniquely human. Furthermore, I sought to compare and contrast contemporary human interactions as described through research studies associated with tabloid news sources, and the entertainment industry. The results of this study were then articulated through four works of art that visually describe that which was found amongst a variety of resources. They describe the rise and fall of the careers of three pop culture icons: Michael Jackson, Britney Spears, and Amy Winehouse. Each career ended tragically perhaps due to the current climate that encourages self-destructive behavior through media sources that keep our celebrities in the public eye. This study finds that public support, through consumption of such media sources, further perpetuates a media culture that functions to erode the moral fabric of our society today.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

A personal inquiry into pop culture and the modern human condition begins with a belief in something more. As a functioning member of modern American society, I have had the privilege to observe human behavior and its outcome both first hand and from afar. The frames that my television, computer, and various other forms of mass mediated communication provide, allow me to view the world through the lenses of many. They allow myself and others to experience things that wouldn't be possible to view or witness first hand. Through a variety of mediated forms, bits of information are being transmitted in easily digestible chunks. It is important to consider that information is being transmitted from a point of view that might not otherwise be shared by its viewers. It is also important to consider that the limited amount of time given to a story might not be enough time to tell the entire story.

Nonetheless, the moving images of the television and internet, the written forms of communication from various news sources both reputable and otherwise, and the dulcet tones of transmitted news sources from radio to podcast captivate me and many others, and shape the way we view and act in the world around us. Quite frequently, the world humans have transformed is presented in a negative light, and it is very easy to immerse oneself in the opinions of others. It is the negative rhetoric I hear, expressed through the lenses of others, that motivates me to seek out answers to the broad question of "How did we get here". I don't believe that humans have an inert propensity to treat others poorly, and it is my assumption that factors outside of the basic

human motivation, to economically prosper in society today, motivates people to act in a negative way towards one another.

We, humans, have been granted the gift of life here on Earth. There are many qualities of human life that are unique among the animal world, and humans have found a way to capitalize on those qualities to cultivate the natural world. One unique quality is our extensive use of tools. Carol Clark (2015) wrote in regards communal use of primitive tools produced during the Paleolithic era,

As humans began to dominate the landscape, the researchers theorize, they reached a population density threshold for living in larger groups and gained access to a range of technologies. That process may have helped tip the balance for the rise of modern human culture and the disappearance of the Neanderthals.

(p. 3)

Through the use of tools, we managed to fulfill our most basic needs for food, shelter, and water. With those basic needs met, we are then permitted the freedom to cultivate societal necessities including friendship and family. After meeting those needs, we then further our own development toward self-actualization<sup>1</sup> among an increasingly more complicated modern society (Maslow, 2014).

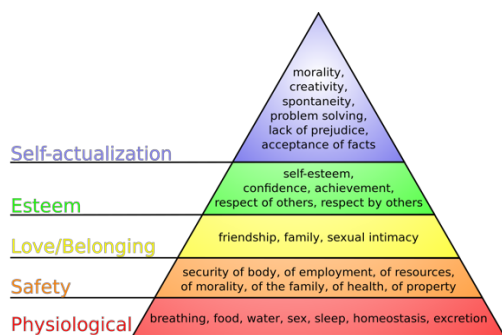


Figure I Maslow Pyramid Wikimedia.org

1. Self-actualization: The process of fully developing and using one's abilities. self-actualization. 2016. In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved October 3, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-actualization>

Abraham Maslow outlines our basic humanistic needs in an easily consumable visual of a pyramid (see Figure I). His idea is very simple. Once basic needs are met, one is free to focus on the top of the pyramid where self-actualization can ultimately be achieved. Outside of Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" societal constraints based in economics and politics tend to complicate how modern humans go about achieving self-actualization for oneself. To "make it" in the world today, one must fulfill his or her basic humanistic needs, as well as find success within an economic climate governed by our political elite. For many it is financial freedom that stands in the way of true self-actualization amongst and within modern society today. Those that have achieved financial freedom do so with the support of others, and those that are "on top" financially are capable of garnering enough public support to be granted the societal status of celebrity. Aeschbacher and Hellmueller (2010) state, "The media maintain the intersection between achieved and attributed celebrity status...and thus highly contribute to their celebrity status in society" (p. 3). It should be noted that one does not need to live in the public eye to achieve financial freedom along with self-actualization, and many do fulfill all needs privately. However, it is those that achieve success in the public eye that I am most interested in for this study. Their success directly correlates with public participation through financial support and media consumption, and those at the top of this model are idolized through the eyes of many. Those with celebrity status represent a form of self-actualization that many strive for themselves. Dr. Drew Pinsky and S. Mark Young (2009) state, "The celebrity lifestyle has become a subject of aspiration for the rest of us" (Loc. 233). A chance at artistic freedom, and more than enough money to be able to pursue all human needs without limitations makes celebrities desirable subjects of study, not only for myself, but for those that revere art, music, and the products celebrities produce. This study illustrates the potential negative outcomes of celebrity life for those that believe that the life of a celebrity is one that they could achieve as well.

With superstar status symbolizing what humans can achieve within the confines of our global economic system, a desire to learn of the intimate lived experiences of celebrities has spawned an entire entertainment industry surrounding people of that stature. A thirst for knowledge of, and documentation concerning the lives of celebrities can often drive people to extremes. I assume that most often those extremes are positive in intention, but when the object of study is human those extremes could have very negative results. The most basic of all human rights are deemed unalienable<sup>2</sup> within the United States' Declaration of Independence (1776) where it is written, "We hold these truths to be self-evident<sup>3</sup>, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Those rights are then upheld within the many amendments of the Constitution of the United States that stand as the root source for all laws within this country. Ethically and legally a study should not interfere with those unalienable rights. But those rights are very vague and open for interpretation, and often the deeper a study looks into its subject the more we can learn and benefit from that study.

### **How We Come to Know**

This is the basic premise for knowledge gathering in general. The more we come to know, the more we find we need to know. In the case of those who garner celebrity status amongst society today, the extremes people go to in an effort to learn more about them may transcend ethical boundaries that may or may not be upheld legally depending upon the actions of the press. For instance, in an effort to experience and understand as much as one could about the late Princess Diana, she was pursued by paparazzi to the point where she died in a high-speed car crash in 1997 (Bittermann & Reuters, 1997). Residing in a legal gray area, tabloid news

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2. Unalienable: impossible to take away or give up. 2016. In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved October 3, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unalienable>

3. Self-Evident: clearly true and requiring no proof or explanation. 2016. In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved October 3, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-evident>

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sources have the capacity to procure images of celebrities through many obtrusive modes. Lea Hellmueller and Nana Aeschbacher found that, “Because the freedom of the press holds a landmark position in the United States Constitutional System, people refrain from going so far as to preventing media outlets from publishing photographs of celebrities” (2010, p. 10). It can also be noted that those who enter into celebrity status essentially brand their name giving up a right to privacy especially when seen in public (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010). With the law essentially on the media’s side, the boundaries are constantly being pushed to gather as much information as possible, and in some instances the consequences have been dire.

### **Celebrities as Commodities**

At the beginning of her film *Britney Spears Unbreakable*, Sonia Anderson (2013) opened with a statement that summarizes public point of view of pop culture icons. She declared, “Throughout the history of pop music there are some people so famous, so much the focus of media attention, that they cease to be viewed as human beings” (General Entertainment Co. Ltd, min. 2:06). It is this point of view that can be so damaging to a person in the position of pop star, but can also influence people to act in an inhumane way toward someone who is now viewed more as a commodity than a person.

On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Michael Jackson died from a cardiac arrest due to a lethal dose of painkillers administered by his physician (Taraborrelli, 2009). On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2011, Amy Winehouse died of alcohol poisoning (Hearsum 2012), and in early 2007 Britney Spears seemingly gave up on her pop star career when she symbolically shaved her own head amid a sea of paparazzi. It was later discovered that she shaved her head in an effort to hide all drug activity in the hopes she could win a custody battle with ex-husband Kevin Federline over her two children (Soltis, 2012).

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4. Paparazzo: a photographer who follows famous people in order to take their pictures and then sells the pictures to newspapers or magazines. 2016. In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved October 3, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paparazzi>

Each incident, very much separate from one another, bares a commonality as well. Many celebrities die early deaths, and though many celebrity downfalls can be attributed to drug abuse and alcoholism I feel there is more to the story beyond excess consumption of controlled substances. Why do so many people, who seemingly have it all, who have been publicly revered and embody the triumph of the American dream, make decisions that inevitably end their lives and/or careers?

### **Basis for Discovery**

Throughout the course of this study my focus was primarily on three key pop culture icons who, seemingly, died early deaths amongst a thriving career, or in the case of Britney Spears, almost ended her career with a very public fallout that culminated with her shaving her own head early in 2007. The question driving this study is, *why would somebody, who seemingly has it all, be so self-destructive to the point where they ultimately end their own life or career?* The answer is, *It's complicated.*

For this study I sought out many different resources that would ultimately help to explain human behavior. In particular, I wondered, is it common for celebrities to exhibit such irrational behavior as illustrated by the three icons focused on within this study? Was their behavior irrational at all? Was it the circumstances that many celebrities face that lead to this behavior? What circumstances do many celebrities face beyond what the general public might face, and what is the basis for those celebrity circumstances? Once again, how did we get here? To help shed light on my inquiry I looked into studies that compared and contrasted human behavior with that of our closest ancestors, primates. I looked into the music industry, its management structure, production and promotions, and I extensively looked into the lives and careers of Michael Jackson, Amy Winehouse, and Britney Spears. I sought out information revolving around the media and America's communications structure. My main concern was with how

information, revolving around human subjects, is gathered and communicated amongst mass mediated circles. My hope was that through this research I would be able to pinpoint-reasons for the behavior of the icons in question. My assumption was, due to their celebrity status, they were somehow being treated in an inhumane<sup>6</sup> way that led to their seemingly irrational behavior. With that in mind there were many questions I hoped to answer. What does it mean to treat someone in an inhumane way? In other words, what constitutes inhumane behavior, actions or treatment? If, in fact, celebrities are somehow being treated in an inhumane way, is it public support and consumption that somehow legitimizes this type of behavior or treatment? What would lead people to treat other people in this way? Is the result of this type of treatment an often tragic departure from a life that revolves around an appealing and seemingly bright career? What is it that pop culture<sup>7</sup> represents that causes people to act the way they do? Is it a lifestyle we all strive for, that is seemingly upheld by the people we champion into celebrity status, or is something else contributing to our behavior and theirs as well?

There are many examples of celebrities who have managed to successfully navigate the situation they were in and managed to maintain long and fruitful careers with endings that were very much governed peacefully and on their own accord. This is quite common actually, and the purpose of my research is not to state that if one enters into the realm of celebrity status that one will exhibit potentially irrational behavior that will result either in the tragic ending of a career, or their life, or both. However, this seems to happen all too commonly among celebrities, particularly within the music industry. The purpose of my research is to shed light on this phenomenon, and to hopefully bring into question our own behavior in regards to consumption, business practices, and our overwhelming participation in today's popular culture.

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6. Inhumane: Not kind or gentle to people or animals: not humane. 2016. In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved October 17, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inhumane>

7. Culture: The beliefs, customs, arts, etc., of a particular society, group, place, or time. 2016. In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved October 17, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>

## CHAPTER II

### PART I: THE RISE OF THE CONTEMPORARY HUMAN CONDITION

When my children first entered this world they entered as delicate human beings, curled up, eyes squinty, covered in amniotic fluid, cold, unknowing and largely helpless, relying on those around them as well as human instinct to navigate the situation they were in: life. Their situation, though beautiful to me, is not unique. For centuries humans have inhabited the earth procreating, learning, growing, developing, conquering, refining, etc. Regardless of what verb you use to describe the human race the fact of the matter is, we exist. We, humans, exist as part of the animal world, yet separate from it; as part of the natural world, yet separate from it; as part of the cosmic realm, yet separate from it. Though humans enter this space unknowing, we are capable of learning, and growing, and communicating, and building, and manage to accomplish many things in the short time we are granted the honor to inhabit this space. We have all been granted the gift to inhabit this space. With that in mind, one would think a common conception would be to live within the bounds of our natural existence. To live amongst the natural world, and the animal world, coexisting among both to create one world based in harmony where the gift of life has been honored among all that exists within this space.

As we all can see, this isn't necessarily the case. At some point along the continuum of human existence they/we strayed away from a natural way of life to one that I will refer to as a *supernatural* way of life. I say *supernatural*, based on the fact that all we have managed to surround ourselves with has been cultivated from the natural world, yet now exists beyond nature itself. These creature comforts and tools that allow us to navigate and control the natural world, these toys and devices that serve as distractions from our natural existence, but also give us the



capability to communicate and transmit knowledge to one another, allow ourselves to further develop the world around us in more efficient ways. They make it possible for us to conquer more of the natural world, and make it more our own. Our actions and use of tools contribute to what it means to be uniquely human. Our ability to communicate and transmit knowledge as well as survive in more efficient ways contributes to what it means to be uniquely human, and helps to clarify how we have managed to get here.

### **Basis for Human Behavior**

Eugene Thacker (2011) in his book *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy vol. I* describes three worlds that effect the human condition. Those three worlds are the *world-in-itself*, *the world-for-us*, and the *world-without-us*. In regard to the world-for-us Thacker states, “This is the world that we, as human beings, interpret and give meaning to, the world we relate to or feel alienated from, the world that we are at once a part of and that is also separate from the human” (2011, p. 4). In regard to the world-in-itself Thacker describes it as, “a paradoxical concept; the moment we think it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-in-itself and becomes the world-for-us” (2011, p. 5). The world-without-us is the basis for the Thacker’s subtitle *Horror of Philosophy*. To clarify he states,

I would propose that horror be understood not as dealing with human fear in a human world (the world-for-us), but that horror be understood as being about the limits of the human as it confronts a world that is not just a world, and not just the Earth, but also a Planet (the world-without-us). (2011, p. 8)

This world-without-us tends to plague the human mind which, in turn, sparks a response of fear rooted in the survival instincts passed on from our ancestors. This call to action encourages us, humans, to further cultivate the world-in-itself into the world-for-us based on a means for

survival. For the world-without-us reminds us that we are not entirely in control of our own destiny. There is always something more we can learn and/or do to improve our situation in the world-for-us.

What we do, quite often, is thought to be rooted in instinctual behavior (Gazzaniga, 2008). The animal world, we have worked to separate ourselves from, encourages certain behaviors within us. Our fight or flight response, in many situations, is an instinct that has been shared amongst all animals potentially since the beginning of time. It is a habit that helps to explain our ancestral past, and links us to a world of quadrupeds. Most notably, primates bear most similar traits to hominids, the biped mammal more commonly known as human being. First theorized by Charles Darwin (1809-1882), and largely agreed upon by a majority of contemporary scholars, humans have evolved from apes. Strong evidence supports this suggestion, but there is always room for speculation. One thing we do know for sure is humans, as well as many other species here on earth, have the ability to adapt to environmental factors over time, in often extraordinary ways. In other words, most, if not all species found on earth, are capable of evolving. The most extraordinary leap would be for one species to give rise to a new form of species all together. This would be true of humans if we did in fact evolve from primates, for there are qualities, unique to humans that contribute to a large separation from our nearest ancestors.

It is obvious that art and ingenuity separate us distinctly from the natural world, but there are physical characteristics that have allowed us to thrive beyond the existence of primates. The most notable feature is the size of our brains in relation to our stature. Michael S. Gazzaniga states in his book *Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique*,

We have brains that are bigger than expected for an ape, we have a neocortex that is three times bigger than predicted for our body size, we have some areas of the

neocortex and the cerebellum that are larger than expected, we have more white matter, which means we probably have more connections, and now we have some microscopic differences in cortical minicolumns. (2008, p. 8)

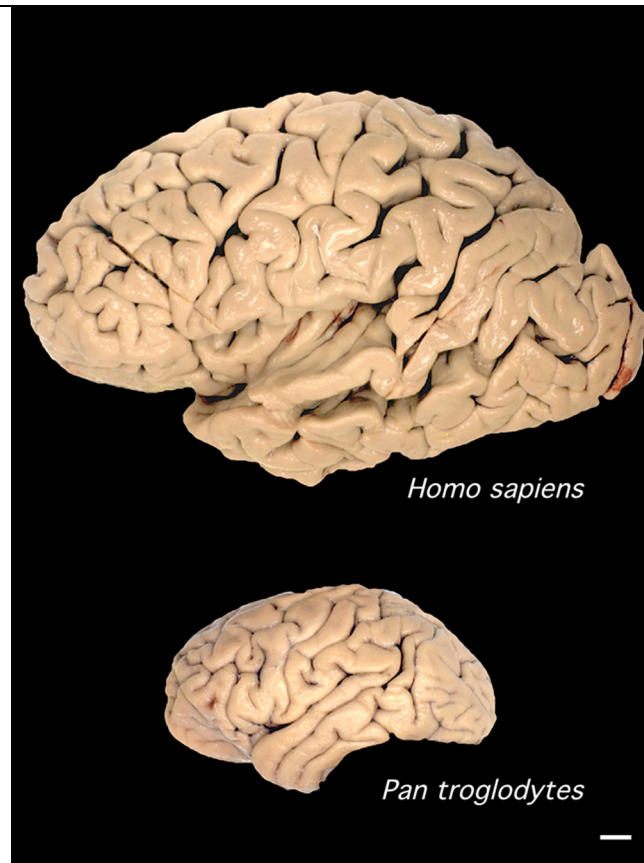


Figure II Brain Size Comparison [wikimedia.org](https://www.wikimedia.org)

Within our brains there appear to be distinct differences between hominids and all other animals. Gazzaniga explains, “A major phenomenon of human brain function: Its ubiquitous lateral cerebral specialization. Nowhere else in the animal kingdom is there such rampant specialization of function” (2008, p. 30). The discovery of our brain’s ability to compartmentalize functions and processes has led to extensive research into where particular functions and processes may emanate from within the brain. Understanding Phrenology has led to theories regarding the hemispheres of the brain. For instance, it is often hypothesized that right brain thinkers are more free and creative, while left brain thinkers are more analytical and

structured (Nielsen, Zielinski, Ferguson, Lainhart, & Anderson, 2013). However, the hemispheres of our brains are not entirely separated, but rather linked, and information can be shared from one side to another. Gazzaniga postulates, “It may turn out that the oft-ignored corpus callosum, the fiber tract that is thought merely to exchange information between the two hemispheres, was the great enabler for establishing the human condition” (2008, p. 30). Human beings’ ability to take advantage of varying degrees of thought emanating from a variety of regions within the brain has helped to forge the separation between human and animal.

Notable physical characteristics not only separate us further from the animal kingdom, but also make unique functions such as speech possible. One feature, or lack of a feature, is an opposable first toe. According to Gazzaniga, “We lost our opposable first toe and developed a foot that could carry our upright weight” (2008, p. 44). He also states, “The thoracic spinal foramen, the channel that the spinal cord travels through, has enlarged, and the point where the spinal cord enters the skull has moved forward to the middle of our cranium rather than the rear” (2008, p. 44). The fact that we, humans, are bipedal creatures allows for characteristics unlike the rest of the animal kingdom. For instance, we are able to walk and speak. Robert Provine, a professor who researches laughter at the University of Maryland theorized that, “bipedalism broke the link between breathing patterns and stride, and allowed the flexibility for regulatory breathing and ultimately speech” (Gazzaniga 2008, p. 44).

The human ability to walk upright, work, and communicate at the same time made for the efficient transmission of information possible from one to another. Our capability to learn and grow, decipher and make sense of information, and our propensity to share what we have learned has helped to make the human race an unstoppable force here on earth. The fact that we share tools, food, information, etc. seems to go beyond human nature and basic survival instincts. However, humans are capable of suppressing and delaying natural tendencies to focus on oneself

that makes working among and within a collective society possible (Darwin, 1859; Gazzaniga, 2008). Primates, among many animals, function in groups, work collectively, share empathy, and occasionally share necessities. Humans function in much the same way. However, a rational thinking human being could easily put his or her interests above everybody else's, and justifiably so. I see this with my children, and it is very common in American society today.

Historically however, humans had to function as a collective for means of pure survival. Human society benefited by working together for many reasons beyond simple survival. In the beginning, more eyes were keen to threats from predators, and collectively people could share in hunting and gathering responsibilities. This made food gathering more efficient. Everyone benefitted from this process, and more time was freed up for socializing and tool production. Sharing, itself, is a learned behavior, and as people began to understand the benefits of sharing with one another this act became more and more common among cultures. Darwin referred to this act as a low motive based on the quid pro quo aspect of sharing. He stated, "From his low motive he might acquire the habit of aiding his fellows; and the habit of performing benevolent actions certainly strengthens the feeling of sympathy which gives the first impulse to benevolent actions" (1859, p. 322). What Darwin refers to as "low motive" Gazzaniga refers to as "reciprocal altruism" which he claims is rarely found in the animal world (2008, p. 85). Darwin goes on to connect the act of sharing with empathy for the human condition when he states,

Ultimately our moral sense or conscience becomes a highly complex sentiment – originating in the social instincts, largely guided by the approbation of our fellow-men, ruled by reason, self-interest, and in later times by deep religious feelings, and confirmed by instruction and habit. (1859, p. 322)

Humans willingness to share led to many virtues that are unique to the human condition, and the act of sharing can be illustrated in many forms from the giving of time and labor, to goods, and

perhaps most importantly communication of knowledge. Darwin focused on the benefits of transmission of knowledge when he stated, “Great law givers, the founders of beneficent religions, great philosophers and discoverers in science, aid the progress of mankind in far higher degree by their works than by leaving a numerous progeny” (1859, p. 325).

The benefits of knowledge transmission are inarguable, and a common way to communicate what one has come to know is through ‘water cooler talk,’ or gossip. Gossip not only functions to transmit knowledge, but functions as a bonding ritual as well. Gazzaniga noted in comparison of the social rituals found in primate communities, “Gossip takes the place of physical grooming that cannot be faked” (2008, p. 95). He made sure to mention the fact that this form of grooming must not be faked, because otherwise it functions as a lie which undermines the moral fabric of the process itself. An unfortunate consequence of human socialization, are actions that go against the virtues which are culturally established within the group, and one way to expose those actions and signify the liar is through gossip. Gazzaniga found,

Gossip serves many purposes in society: It fosters relationships between gossip partners, satisfies the need to belong and be accepted by a unique group, elicits information, builds reputations (both good and bad), maintains and reinforces social norms, and allows individuals to evaluate themselves through comparison with others. (2008, p. 96)

Another interesting aspect of our culture is its evolution. The process of social bonding through gossip and exposing those that undermine cultural bonds has evolved into an industry in itself, and the juicier the gossip the more this industry stands to gain through public consumption, exposure, and ultimately ad revenues.

## **PART II: THE COMPOUNDED CONTEMPORARY HUMAN CONUNDRUM**

The human grooming process of gossiping has manifested itself in many forms throughout history, and one common form of gossip today is through mass mediated news. Amongst news circles there are varying degrees of information being transmitted from the mostly reputable to outright sleaze. Tabloid news sources fall under the latter end of that spectrum, and work to degrade what was once considered to be a very beneficial collective experience. Though, the result of tabloid gossip circles, that largely revolve around celebrities of the time, is much the same as the result of gossip amongst groups of the past. The difference lies in the source of the information. “Elizabeth Bird found that celebrity stories, like all gossip, were a means of building moral consensus among readers” (Wilson, 2010, p. 29). The function of gossip today still serves as a form of comparison; a way to evaluate ourselves based on the actions of others. However, as Gazzinga pointed out, another function of gossip is to expose the liars, or moral deviants, amongst society.

Typically, in order to be in a position to expose those that act against the moral fabric of society, one must maintain a trustworthy reputation. In the case of tabloid news sources today, the information is often being compiled and produced from the liars themselves. Wilson (2010) notes, “The proliferation of celebrity gossip is enabled by a deregulated media economy, where scandal narratives and human interest stories about celebrities comprise an impressive share of mainstream media content” (p. 25). To put it plainly, controversy sells and news stories combined with photographic evidence are pure gold. “In other words, readers are incited to take

pleasure not from a playful identification with star images and the ‘masquerade’ of stardom but rather from a vigorous, ongoing process of moral adjudication” (Wilson, 2010, p. 29). Wilson goes on to elaborate, “Celebrity gossipers were less interested in the construction of star personas or intimate knowledge of star’s souls and more focused on judging celebrity behaviors” (2010, p. 29). The incentive is there for tabloid publications to make up controversy in an effort to boost sales and increase advertising costs, and a major source for that type of information is through the photojournalist stream of images produced by the paparazzi.

Hellmueller and Aeschbacher (2010) note, “Both the general public and journalists consistently view paparazzi more negatively than other groups of photographers, denigrating them as the ‘worst of the worst’” (p. 9). The negative viewpoint of paparazzi photographers is based in the roots of this type of journalism, but also stems from the role this type of journalism has grown into over time. The paparazzi form of journalism grew from a form of journalism known as yellow journalism that was commonly known for its sensational style (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010). Driven by money and an insatiable public demand for celebrity controversy an incentive was created for paparazzi photographers to work tirelessly for an image that showcases celebrities in a less than favorable light. Kim McNamara (2011) states,

Recent years have seen paparazzi operating in packs, relentlessly following celebrities and crowding around them when they appear in public spaces. Some have argued that this amounts to ‘a new breed of guerrilla paparazzi’ (Day, 2008). In contrast with traditionally managed celebrity photographs capturing the celebrity in optimum light, this new breed is portrayed as pressuring celebrities with aggressive behavior to try to provoke controversial (and valuable) images to sell tabloid newspapers and magazines. While paparazzi are accused of invading



celebrities' private lives and harassing them, their pictures meet a market demand for images which capture them in 'ordinary' poses, off guard. (p. 522)

Redmond and Holmes (2007) point out, "The audience's consumption and reception symbolizes the necessary 'fuel' to keep the economic enterprise of celebrity going" (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010, p. 21). It is the audience who not only creates the support for celebrity status, but also the support for tabloid news sources, and ultimately the conduct of the paparazzi.

A paparazzi journalist can make a lucrative living, and despite the negative point of view of this type of journalism, the industry is growing (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010). Howe (2005) states, "A single photo can sell from anywhere between \$6,000 to \$100,000 and some estimate that a paparazzo can earn up to one million dollars a year" (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010, p. 10). With the proliferation of hand held devices and easily transportable cameras anyone can now enter into the paparazzi field of journalism. This is a freelance industry, and as pointed out one can make a good living doing this type of work. One sad aspect of this dichotomy is celebrities must willingly sacrifice personal freedoms, and in particular, their privacy in order to receive the exposure necessary to elevate their celebrity status. For without public acknowledgement celebrity status does not exist.

My personal interest in this study is the psychological effect participation in this process has on the individual, because the celebrity lifestyle is not what the general public experiences life to be. Krista Tippet (2016) points out,

In America, many features of public life are better suited to adolescence than adulthood. We don't do things adults learn to do, like calm ourselves, and become less narcissistic. Much of politics and media sends us in the opposite, infantilizing direction. We reduce great questions of meaning and morality to 'issues' and simplify them to two sides, allowing pundits and partisans to frame them in

irreconcilable extremes. But most of us don't see the world this way, and it's not the way the world actually works. (p. 12)

Her example focuses on politicians in the public eye, but the behavior she describes is a reaction often seen by celebrities in the entertainment industry as well, and perhaps her statement helps to shed light on the behavior exhibited by Michael Jackson and Britney Spears in the latter part of their careers. Perhaps the notion that public life is better suited to adolescence helps to explain why Michael Jackson and Britney Spears relished their childhood celebrity status, and sought to further their careers later in life. However, the pressures of constantly being in the public eye obviously had their toll on those two and Amy Winehouse as well. With fans and journalists continually attempting to expose skeletons in celebrity's closets the most notable impact can be on one's self-esteem. When one loses self-confidence in an industry where success directly correlates with an image of surety the constant maintenance of one's self-esteem can result in some bizarre behavior.

Benabou and Tirole (2002) state, "The fact that higher self-confidence enhances the individual's motivation gives anyone with a vested interest in his performance an incentive to build up and maintain his self-esteem" (p. 874). One's physical appearance can indicate many things to a judgmental public constantly trying to expose controversy with every turn. In an article titled, "Stark Raving Fat: Celebrity, Cellulite, and the Sliding Scale of Sanity" Brenda Weber states, "A woman's slender body correlates not only with her moral fiber and professional success but with her mental well-being and separation from working-class codes of excess. Thus, thin-ness is read as a signifier of both impulse control and sanity" (2012, p. 346). Ricciardelli and Clow (2009) echo this sentiment when they state, "Individuals assess their appearance based on what society has deemed attractive, meaningful, and valuable. As a result, an individual's feelings of self-worth (i.e. self-esteem) may be affected by how that person believes society

views their body” (p. 106). Thus, we see the constant physical transformation of Michael Jackson’s appearance as he grew into his career, much the same as Britney’s appearance transformed throughout her career.

Despite their efforts to build self-esteem and appease the public through beautification the tabloid media’s insatiable demand for controversy persisted, and they often pinpointed physical appearance as a source for more controversy. Regardless of what they did, escaping the demeaning clutches of the headlines proved impossible. Perhaps their actions which were most likely perceived as self-improvements were in fact degrading, and the opinions of the press made that clear. Benabou and Triole noted, “Psychologists have long suggested that self-handicapping is often a self-esteem maintenance strategy (instinctive or deliberate), directed both at oneself and at others” (2002, p. 882). These actions can lead to a form of denial that Benabou and Triole define as time inconsistency. They state, “Time inconsistency (e.g. hyperbolic discounting), the current self has a vested interest in the self-confidence of future selves, as it helps counter their natural tendency to quit too easily” (2002, p. 873). They go on to later support their claim when they describe behaviors of denial which can lead to self-destructive behavior when they state, “Conversely, he can eschew situations that remind him of bad news...He can work unusually hard to ‘forget’...or even use drugs and alcohol” (2002, p. 887).

Celebrity use of drugs and alcohol among other forms of self-destructive behavior, if not justified, can certainly be explained as a form of rational behavior (irrational as it may seem), based on the given living situation celebrities like Michael Jackson, Britney Spears, and Amy Winehouse experienced. As they found themselves victims of circumstance brought about by their own efforts they reacted in ways that the general public might find it hard to understand; yet it all seemed so tragic that it was too hard to look away.

### **PART III: WILLINGLY PARTICIPATING IN THE CONUNDRUM ITSELF**

In an effort to shed light on the phenomenon of hyperbolic discounting I looked closely into the lives, upbringing, and careers of Michael, Amy, and Britney. I found many things in common amongst all three superstars, and one thing they all had in common was they began their careers at a very young age. Both Michael and Britney were thrust into the entertainment industry at an age where the rest of the adolescent world would not be old enough to be hired for their first job. When their peers were likely playing schoolyard games and developing in a more traditional way, Michael and Britney were attending meetings with managers, and rehearsing material for upwards of 14 hours a day. Amy experienced more of a traditional upbringing. Her talents weren't discovered and promoted by the record industry until around the age of sixteen (Kapadia, 2015). Nonetheless, all three began to grasp an understanding of the early stages of celebrity life prior to a complete maturation of the human body and mind. Their lives were fast forwarded to a lifestyle that many mature adults have a hard time handling (i.e. Curt Cobain, Bradley Nowell, and Layne Staley). Certainly a credit to their talent, all three thrived as pop stars. They learned and grew within the entertainment industry, and each produced multiple top selling albums, and broke records through their hard work and determination. At this point the line becomes blurred between personal determination and the goals of the record industry, and my assumption is the goals of the record industry are quickly adopted by its participants, but at what cost?

At the ripe age of four years old Michael Jackson began practicing with his brothers, and by age six the Jackson Five began performing and winning in local talent shows around the Gary

Indiana area (Taraborrelli, 2009). During an interview with *Time* magazine Joseph (Michael's father) stated, "When I found out that my kids were interested in becoming entertainers, I really went to work with them. When the other kids would be out on the street playing games, my boys were in the house working, trying to learn how to be something in life, do something with their lives" (Taraborrelli, 2009 p. 19). Later in his career, Michael would often complain about missing out on his childhood. In a conversation with his sister Latoya, she did her best to convince Michael that he had a more fulfilling childhood than most children. To which Michael exclaimed, "No, it was horrible. I had a terrible childhood. All of that performing. All that recording. The fans took over my life. I never got to play. It was awful" (Taraborrelli, 2009 p. 451). Despite his lack of childhood, (in Michael's point of view) he went on to have a very fruitful career surpassing record sales once set by the Beatles. Michael blossomed within his career, as a performer, to become the highest grossing pop superstar of all time (Halperin, 2015). He had more money than he knew what to do with. He had multiple properties throughout the world. His most notable property dubbed Neverland Ranch had a fully functional amusement park on the property. There were multiple guest houses which were often occupied by the family members of Michael's "special friends." Throughout the course of his career, Michael would befriend many children who he would often invite over to Neverland Ranch to play and frequently sleep over. During an interview documented by Randy Taraborrelli Michael stated,

One of my favorite pastimes is being with children, talking to them and playing with them. Children know a lot of secrets and it is difficult to get them to tell. Children are incredible. They go through a brilliant phase, but then when they reach a certain age, they lose it. My most creative moments have almost always come when I am with children. When I am with them, the music comes to me as easily as breathing. When I'm tired or bored, children revive me. Two brown eyes

look at me so profoundly, so innocently, and I murmur, this child is a song. (2009, p. 450)

Michael's relationships with children spurred the largest controversy of his career, with allegations of child molestation brought about by the parents of one of Michael's "special friends." Throughout this ordeal Michael was constantly hounded by paparazzi, and the media rumor mills functioned on overdrive. Despite a Not Guilty verdict of all charges Michael's reputation was permanently tarnished, and Michael suffered health problems as a result. Taraborrelli wrote, "Rather than relish his new independence, Michael had sunk into a deep depression, often suffering from panic attacks and insomnia as if traumatized by the trial" (2009 p. 688). Based on the pain Michael experienced due to his depression and physical pain associated with many physical alterations he made throughout his career Michael medicated to the point of cardiac arrest in June of 2009 (Taraborrelli, 2009).

In a similar fashion Britney Spears began her career at a very early age. In her documentary *Britney Spears Unbreakable*, Sonia Anderson (2013) noted, "... by age six [Britney] had won Miss Talent Central States, and by the age of eight, with a national televised appearance of Star Search already under her belt, Britney was taken to audition for the Disney TV show *The New Mickey Mouse Club*" (General Entertainment Co. Ltd, min. 8:27). She was not accepted to the show due to her young age, but was referred to a New York talent agency by the show's casting director (Anderson, 2013). Much the same as Michael, Britney was encouraged to perform by her parents who went to great lengths to insure her success in the entertainment industry. They declared bankruptcy prior to Britney's debut on *The Mickey Mouse Club* at age eleven (Anderson, 2013). The show only aired for two years leaving Britney to pursue other avenues for fame and fortune. At age fifteen Britney partnered with Larry Rudolph who negotiated a deal with Max Martin at Jive Records who had already written Britney's smash

hit ...*Baby One More Time* (Anderson 2013). Similar to many pop artists Britney began her career, as a pop star, performing material that was written for her as opposed to by her. Many of Michael's hits began in the same way. With Britney's first hit she grew into a roll defined by well choreographed dance moves and a sex appeal that would be synonymous with her image throughout the rest of her career. Anderson (2013) stated, "From the outset, Britney's sex appeal was an important part of her image, and she was marketed as a teenage Lolita. The video for ...*Baby One More Time* has set her well on her way to becoming an international sex symbol" (General Entertainment Co. Ltd, min. 12:15). Britney's first three albums performed at number 1 in the pop charts prior to the star's age of twenty (Anderson, 2013). Despite Britney's fast paced rise to stardom she was not infallible, and perhaps more vulnerable due to the fact. Seemingly, as fast as Britney's career took off her career crumbled, and for her fans and onlookers alike the viewing public found it hard to look away. Anderson stated in regard to the captivating end of Britney's career, "Within one drama filled week she had two tattoos, checked in and out of rehab twice, and shaved off her hair. Like all of Britney's acts this one hit the headlines" (General Entertainment Co. Ltd, 2013, min. 35:51). Since 2007 Britney has worked to reestablish her relationship with her children, and in 2016 she debuted a comeback album. On a brighter note, she is the one pop culture icon researched in this study who is striving to regain the success she experienced earlier in her career.

As somewhat of an anomaly to this study Amy Winehouse was not pushed into the entertainment industry at the young age of six. When interviewed about her career Amy stated, "Singing has always been important to me, but I never thought I would end up singing. I'll be a singer... but I never thought it would be a career choice" (On the Corner Films, 2015, min. 2:14). To further the anomaly all of her performed material was her own. She was never pushed into show business by her parents and was never cultivated into the star she was by her managers

or producers, but the outcome of her short lived career ended much the same as Michael's and Britney's, tragically and very much in the public eye. In an interview with Britain's late night talk show host Jonathan Ross she was asked about her management company S Club 7. In regard to this company that once managed the Spice Girls Ross asked, "Have they tried to mold you in any way? Have people asked you to do things; to change the way you look; the way you speak or behave" (On the Corner Films, 2015, min. 19:32)? To which Amy exclaimed, "Yeah one of them tried to mold me into a big triangle shape, and I went no! No, I've got my own style, and if someone has so much of something already there is very little you can add" (On the Corner Films, 2015, min. 19:38). Amy had control of her material and her image from an early point within her career, and the image of her as a self-destructive rock star was brought on by her own behavior as well. The freedom and money to support addictive drug consumption and alcoholism ultimately ended Amy's career in 2011 (Hearsum, 2012). It wasn't simply the freedom and bankroll that led to Amy's abuse of drugs and alcohol. From an early age Amy was diagnosed with depression, and was prescribed Seroxat by her doctor (Kapadia, 2015). When asked about her diagnosis Amy stated, "I don't think I knew what depression was. I knew I felt funny sometimes, and I was different. I think it's a musician thing. That's why I write music" (On the Corner Films, 2015, min. 22:38).

Amy's point of view, of the lifestyle of a musician, was very much influenced by musicians of the past and present whose rock star lifestyle has led to the abuse of drugs and alcohol. The influence that pop culture icons have over the general viewing public aids to legitimize research on this subject.

Hearsum (2012) states, "In news value terms, coverage of popular musicians often emphasizes three recurring themes, made famous by the Ian Dury and the Blockheads song, 'Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll' (1976)" (p. 182). Dr. Drew Pinsky and S. Mark Young (2009)



reiterated what Hearsom stated when they wrote, “Celebrities today are as likely to be recognized for their bodies, rap sheets, and rehab stints as they are for their talents or résumés” (Loc. 69). Unfortunately, celebrities would not experience fame without our attention, and gossip articles exposing the misbehavior of celebrities only works to increase the amount of attention each celebrity receives. Tabloid media, supported by public consumption, has created a catch twenty-two situation where celebrities experience the negative health effects of a “Rock and Roll Lifestyle,” or lack the attention of the general public if they choose to abstain. Pinsky and Young (2009) lament,

In the past, most celebrities worked hard to keep their more reckless or dangerous private behavior under wraps, concerned that excessive drinking, drug abuse, and other vices might tarnish their public profile and thus their careers. Today things have changed. Tabloid coverage may seem to be the most immediate path to building one’s career, and most publicity-hungry celebrities and wannabes are only too willing to expose their unhealthy behavior in order to keep the cameras, and the public’s attention, riveted on their lives. (Loc. 110)

Not only does the discourse surrounding immoral behavior of our closest remodels help to uphold our moral code (i.e. when we position ourselves as the other in this situation), but the same behavior aids in degrading that same code when that type of behavior is idolized. Today’s adolescents’ are much more apt to mirror the dangerous behavior of celebrities in an effort to experience levels of fame themselves by promoting such behavior through social media platforms and YouTube channels (Pinsky & Young, 2009). Unfortunately, the more such self-degrading behavior is covered and promoted through mass public consumption, and *gotcha* journalism tactics the more this type of behavior will persist, which is the opposite of the original intended communal effect associated with gossip of this nature. The problem associated with

tabloid gossip was eloquently described by Deborah Orr (2011) in her article describing celebrity and self-consciousness. She wrote,

Currently, the way the press covers addicts is barbaric, like bear-bating or throwing a witch in a pond to see if she will sink or swim. It has to stop... The current trend towards 'open season' on high-profile substance abusers is cruel, inhumane, shameful and an appallingly bad example to a society that needs, quite urgently, to understand addiction, and how to combat it. (Hearsum, 2012, p. 195)

The public promotion of one's own self degradation certainly falls under the category of inhumane, but the caveat of celebrity self-destruction, though encouraged, is based on personal choice.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Arts-Based Research

As an arts-based inquiry, this study focuses on the process of what it means to come to know. Eisner (2006) wrote in reference to arts-based research, “It is a process that is concerned mainly with the creation of knowledge, or more modestly, with the process of knowing” (p. 9). Arts-based research pulls from many forms of methodology to draw a conclusion. This study began with a basis in personal observation. Positioning myself as an anthropologist, I have reflected on my many years of media consumption to generate questions that were further probed through a combination of tabloid news sources, celebrity biographies, peer reviewed journal articles, and art production.

Marshall and D’Adamo (2011) state, “The arts-based research model borrows from three approaches to learning and pedagogy: experiential learning, inquiry based learning, and project based learning” (p. 14). By instituting multiple approaches to knowledge generation one can come to learn about a subject from a variety of different angles. Thus, allowing the researcher to formulate a well-rounded conclusion to that which is learned.

#### A/R/Tography and Rhizoanalysis

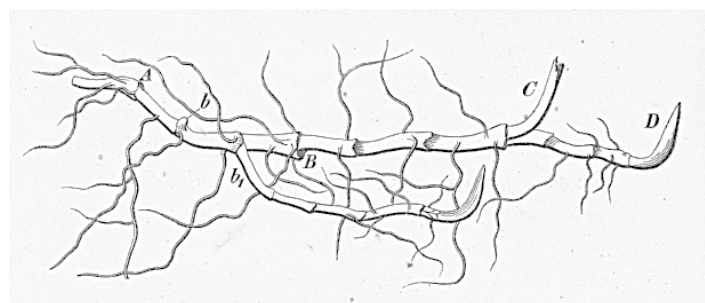


Figure III Rhizome Wikimedia.org

My approach to this study is firmly rooted in the process of arts-based research, but the research, itself, incorporates a fluidity often conceptualized through a diagram of a Rhizome (see Figure 3). Humphreys (2013) describes the metaphor of a rhizome in terms of a Deleuzian theory first described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in 1987. Surin (2016) described Deleuze and Guattari as, “strict immanentists and consistent proponents of an ‘in-the middle’ or ‘in-between’” (p. 403). The rhizome, in this instance, stands as a metaphor for how we come to know. Beyond the image of a root system a rhizome, in philosophical terms, consists of a network of multiple entry points with no beginning or end. If you believe in this concept one can’t help but enter into a process of research without entering into the middle of a study with knowledge to be gained organically in all directions from a multitude of disciplines that reside in the past, present, as well as in the future.

As I have approached an inquiry into pop culture, pop culture icons, and American’s support of the degradation of humanity through media consumption I have entered into this web of human interaction that began long before I was born, and will most likely, progress long after I am gone. As is synonymous with any subject studied, the more one comes to know the more one learns he or she needs to know. This study, similar to rhizome philosophy, has no beginning or end. It stands as a prelude to a lifetime of inquiry where questions, being answered, give rise to questions to be answered. In an effort to better be able to teach my students the benefits of a lifetime of learning I must first immerse myself in the process of a lifetime of learning.

Thus giving rise to the important research method of a/r/tography. A/r/tography, a term first described by Rita Irwin (2004), utilizes A/R/T as an acronym that stands for Artist, Researcher, Teacher. Irwin (2013) states,

*A/r/tography is a research methodology, a creative practice, and a performative pedagogy that lives in the rhizomatic practices of the in-between... A/r/tography*

is concerned with the creative invention of concepts and mapping the intensities experienced in relational, rhizomatic, yet singular, events. (p. 198)

All that is being researched could stand alone as a singular event, but utilizing the metaphorical philosophy of the rhizome, all events have a way of relating to one another. To make sense of it all one must reflect on that which is being learned, and the process of visually representing ideas that arise seems to complement the research process beautifully. Art production serves as a process for “mapping the intensities experienced,” as described by Irwin, and helps guide the researcher to a greater understanding of the relationship between topics within a study (p. 198). Olivia Gude (2009) echoed that statement when she said, “Through making and experiencing art, people generate, apprehend, and hold multiple ways of knowing and being in the world” (p. 6).

### **Data Generation**

In a study concerned with *How We Got Here* I felt a variety of seemingly unrelated topics had to be explored in order to make sense of cultural actions taking place within America today. To document aspects of what it means to be uniquely human I studied archeological records, and theories associated with skeletal structures and artifacts found in past studies. I looked into theories associated with evolutionary biology to help explain how humans may have progressed beyond ancestral species. Many forms of human interaction have been likely explained, if not rationalized, through observed behavior of our closest relatives: primates. Many more of the complexities and nuances associated with the contemporary human condition were better explained through anthropological observations of human behavior. Sociological studies helped to explain the phenomenology associated with human behavior amongst a global economic conglomerate. Biographical sources shed light on the personal behavior exhibited by the individual pop culture icons studied, and psychological studies helped to explain some of the behavior demonstrated by those individuals. While, peer reviewed articles helped to pinpoint and articulate key points exposed through this large variety of resources.

As a qualitative arts-based study, the data generated is based on intuition, and is propelled by the thoughts and feelings associated with the researcher, and research conducted based on available literature. In order to know and understand my thoughts and feelings associated with such a monumental process, much of the data generated was produced through a process of reflection associated with art production. In an effort to visually represent all that was being learned throughout this process of study, multiple pieces of art were produced from fall of 2015 to spring of 2017. Each piece represents a rich source of data where individual aspects, found within, relate to the multiple sources of information utilized to make sense within this study. From a two-year production period four key pieces emerged to visually articulate that which was learned.

### **Data Collection**

In an effort to showcase pop star behavior, and our reaction to it I have produced a series of three panels that document the lives of the pop stars within this study. I first had to consider how we come to know celebrities. Rarely are we given a chance to meet and develop personal relationships with these individuals. Yet, somehow a connection is made, and our infatuation for these individuals is allowed to grow over time. The record industry has much to do with public connection. Promotion managers, whose sole job is to insure that their assigned artists reach the broadest audience possible, cut deals with television stations, radio stations, product sponsors, music distribution services such as iTunes, Spotify, and Pandora, and book concerts at venues around the world (Premkumar, 2003). They make it easy for the general public to consume artist's products without ever having to leave the comfort of one's couch. On top of promotion managers doing their job, much of the *inside information* on the lifestyles of the rich and famous is provided by freelance photographers or paparazzi who supply tabloid news sources with up to the second information concerned with the whereabouts and actions of top celebrities (McNamara, 2011). Through the windows represented by our television and computer screens

the viewing public can consume more information about their favorite pop stars than one might ever want to know.

It is this metaphorical window that I chose to represent through large screen clear acrylic panels that mimic a similar aspect ratio to that of a common flat screen television. The panels themselves tend to slightly distort the imagery of the icons being presented through the reflected light of strobe light spotlights positioned directly in front of the image. The strobe light reproduces the lightning quick flashes synonymous with a swarm of paparazzi photographers who the pop stars often find themselves surrounded by in public situations. Within the panels the lives and careers of Michael Jackson, Britney Spears, and Amy Winehouse are documented through a combination of three images each reading left to right. Gathered from tabloid news sources, the images chosen showcase each artist as a child, as a symbol at the height of each artist's career, and as an iconic image describing the downfall of each artist's career. Each subject was specifically chosen due to the highly politicized downfall of their lives/careers. They symbolize the height of superstar status, and the over the top treatment exemplified by paparazzi and the general public alike.

The first panel showcasing Michael Jackson's career (see Figure 4) begins with an image of Michael during his Jackson Five years. Here a young Michael is casually leaning and smiling for the camera. This image, produced in local color, represents Michael's roots, his entrance into the entertainment industry as an innocent child. The image in the center of the panel showcases Michael at a turning point within his career. This image was taken at a show performed during his Dangerous Tour. This particular tour marks the height of Michael Jackson's career, but also the turning point where accusations of child molestation were made public and charges were filed with the court system. The third image on the left showcases Michael very close to the end of his life. During this time Michael was consuming many painkillers, and this particular image

shows Michael's eyes very distant and half open. In this image Michael is leaning barely able to hold his head up. To represent Michael in his later years I chose a similar color pallet to the one used for the image of him as a child in an effort to draw a connection between childhood innocence and his effort to regain it.



Figure IV Michael Jackson Panel

The second panel, which showcases Britney's career (see Figure 5), begins with an innocent image of her performing as a Mouseketeer on the right. She is dressed in modest clothing and appears as one would assume a child would. This image is contrasted by a very revealing image of Britney in a bikini holding a python over her head in the center of the panel. This iconic image represents Britney's provocative career as a singer and dancer. It also represents Britney's vulnerability as a pop star who was very much influenced by her management system. This image, in particular, made headlines due to the fact that Britney appeared awkward, and unable to fully perform her dance moves under the weight of the python, which she had a hard time controlling. The python, itself, appears as a metaphor for the overbearing weight of the record industry forcing Britney to make decisions that she might not have made on her own. The final image of Britney represents the drama filled final week of her career as a pop star where she shaved her own head in an exhausted state in front of a sea of



paparazzi. All images were produced using local color to make each image as recognizable as possible.



Figure V Britney Spears Panel

The third panel, representing Amy Winehouse's (see Figure 6) career begins with an image of her as a teenager. Though, still appearing sweet and innocent, you can see a longing in her expression lending a hint to the depression she experienced at that age. In the center of the panel is an image of Amy commanding the microphone. She stands tall and strong completely in control of her own situation. This image is contrasted by an image, taken by paparazzi, after a long night of partying. She is stumbling over, her eyes are rolling into the back of her head, her makeup is smeared, her hair is disheveled, and her clothes hang loosely around her frail body.



Figure VI Amy Winehouse Panel

Each panel showcases a timeline from beginning to end. There is a hierarchy that plays out with the combination of three images. The flanking left and right images are smaller in stature when compared to the images that showcase each performer at the height of their careers. It becomes very apparent, to the viewer, what made each star appealing and each time they catch a glimpse of the aftermath of a career in show business. With each panel highlighted by a strobe light, the display is intended to be an unsettling experience for the viewer. My hope is the viewer will reflect on what they are feeling when viewing this type of imagery that could potentially lead to a greater discussion revolving around the topic of how we got here.

Finally, in an effort to emphasize the importance of consideration of our own behavior I have produced a life size sculpture of Michael Jackson (see Figure 7), showcased in his later years, crawling from the depths of primordial ooze. In his later years, painkillers had presented an avenue for escape from the pressures associated with a lifetime of celebrity status.



Figure VII Michael Jackson Sculpture

The object of this piece is to place emphasis on the viewpoint that humans inhabited this earth through factors beyond our own power. Happenstance brought us here, and in my opinion it is a sad state of affairs where humans make the choice to alter the gift of life granted to them, and in this case celebrity status, through a series of plastic surgeries and drug addiction. My intention is to impress upon the viewer the notion of *what if*. What if, rather than a beautiful human being emerging onto this planet from the factors that be, a structurally altered drug addict emerged? The purpose of this piece is to lay reference to human behavior today, be it inhumane or not, but also to reference our evolutionary process and make clear that somehow we have brought this upon ourselves.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS

As an educator of students at a high school level, I see the great effects our influential sources of media have on them. As a willing participant in our global economic system, and a consumer of popular culture I understand, first hand, the effects of influence these social drivers have on me. In a contemporary climate where all of life's situations have in some way, shape or form, been mimicked through art, the line between authentic action and that which has been heavily influenced through popular culture is increasingly blurred. Are our actions really our own, or have our actions become a reaction to the influential forces around us?

This is the great power mediated information has over us all. We learn so much through the actions of those documented and celebrated through popular media sources. So much so, that our reaction is to somehow live as they do. To act as they do, wear the same brands, drive the same cars, and join the same social movements important to those celebrities we identify ourselves most closely with, or hold in high regard. A simple driver behind our own actions is based on the notion that if we live and act in a similar fashion to that of our most closely adored celebrities we, someday, may be able to achieve a similar status amongst a society which has outlined for us the top tier of self-actualization within this economic climate we all participate in.

What I am stating is obviously an exaggeration of contemporary human behavior. Not all humans seek celebrity status. I, personally, would not appreciate such attention drawn to my life, but I do desire economic stability and the opportunity to live and act in any way I see fit. Those are aspects I admire when considering the lifestyles of the rich and famous. This arts-based inquiry into the lives of pop culture icons, and consumers' reactions to their products and

actions, is intended to inform those that feel the same way as I do, because those icons we admire stand as figureheads for what one can achieve within this economic system. Our idols, who are ever present in the media, show us what is possible, and news sources intended to inform, show us how we can come to realize those possibilities. My position with this form of inquiry, and the art objects I have produced based on what I have learned through this research process, are centered on the fact that we all must think critically about what is happening around us. We should think critically about what we consume, how we consume, why we consume, and the results associated with our consumption of products, information, and entertainment. What we do matters regardless of our status. We are all drivers in this global economy, and when we consume without thought or care for what our actions represent to the world around us, we further perpetuate the behavior which has lead us to consume in the first place, be it positive or negative.

Hellmueller and Aeschbacher (2010) wrote in regards to tabloid media sources, “They provide visibility and a distribution channel of celebrities’ activities, which contribute to their well-knownness in society” (p. 3). Dr. Drew Pinsky and S. Mark Young (2009) supported that statement when they wrote, “Tabloid coverage may seem to be the most immediate path to building one’s career, and the most publicity-hungry celebrities and wannabes are only too willing to expose their unhealthy behavior in order to keep the cameras, and the public’s attention, riveted on their lives” (Loc 110). Over time the erratic immoral behavior of celebrities has been increasingly documented, and worse yet, increasingly supported through consumption. With efforts by celebrities to remain in the spotlight, by any means necessary, consumption of their products becomes less about supporting one’s artistry, and could stand in support of the behavior that exposed one’s artistry to the general public in the first place, or further yet, in

support of the questionable tactics of the journalists who were in the position to reveal such behavior.

### **Research Problem**

With such a convoluted paradigm of human interaction fashioned in an effort to, not only entertain, but to operate at the top tier of our economic system, the challenge of this study was to discover as many reasons supporting why we operate in such a manner. Many of those reasons have been unearthed through anthropological studies concerned with our origins and behaviors described of our closest ancestors: primates. Others have been provided through studies in pop culture, as well as our current entertainment, and news practices. While many others have been described based on psychological reactions to the situations many celebrities face when in the public eye. Combining those aspects of human existence and growth into a multitrillion dollar global economy helps to paint a broader picture describing how we humans have developed to this point in our civilization. The way we humans operate today, with advances in technology, creature comforts, and the way we acquire such goods, is far removed from the lifestyles of our ancestors. Furthermore, one of the intentions of this study was to discover whether or not the modern human population has strayed so far from its roots that it no longer operates in a humane way.

### **Data Collection**

In an effort to expose my audience to the absurdities of our current contemporary climate, as illustrated by some of the most prolific celebrities of our time, I have produced a series of art objects in an effort to communicate the findings of this arts-based inquiry. By creating works of art, that are intended to expose the audience to seeming irrational behaviors illustrated by a few celebrities self-actualized through economic stability and fame, my intentions were to showcase our developments overtime from an innocent standpoint to the aftereffects of self-destructive

behavior spurred by a lifestyle of excess and exuberant attention. Through participation in a production process that focused so closely on the nuances of physical features, that not only aided to the appeal of such artists, but also helped to illustrate their fall from such a lucrative career, my hope was to be able to gain a greater understanding of the effects on the human body associated with a lifestyle that many aspire to achieve. Furthermore, by meticulously working to express my personal physical features into a life size sculptural work of the late Michael Jackson,



Figure VII Michael Jackson Sculpture

with the aftereffects of plastic surgery and too many painkillers articulated within his facial features, my intention was to communicate to an audience aspiring fame to rethink their path in life. Gathering data on how humans were gifted this life, here on earth, to the point where they achieve ultimate success, and choose to throw it all away in a drugged out stupor is the point.

### **Theories That Inform Data Analysis**

Smith-Shank (2004) argued, “Ordinary objects, places, and events are visually loaded aesthetic signifiers, and they have the power to inform, modify desires, and educate” (Buffington & Wilson-McKay, 2013, p. 191). The data gathered within this arts-based study seeks to do just that. Through analysis of art objects created throughout this research process, the object is to discover how such objects visually work to inform, educate, and potentially work to modify one’s desires and aspirations to realize celebrity status in their lives. If successful these works will expose the pitfalls accompanying such aspirations, and promote realizations associated with one’s participation in a consumer driven society. For one aspect is to curb one’s aspirations of fame, but also to consider one’s role in the promotion of fame in general. Olivia Gude (2009) in her Lowenfeld Lecture stated, “Through the process of making and re-making the story, the image-the student/artist/maker makes self” (p. 2). By realizing my role in the process of promoting fame through consumption of mediated content, and stories of self-degradation, supported through the reflective role of the production process, my hope is to explicitly communicate to my audience the dangers associated with such participation. In order to do this effectively I must put myself in one’s shoes, per say, as illustrated by my sculptural work. Though this concludes my initial research, my intention is more art objects will emerge that will help to further cement my intentions with my audience. Elliot Eisner reinforced these claims when he wrote, “Often in the very process of representation new ideas will emerge that are then themselves the subject of expressive aims” (2006, p. 13). The end products associated with this process warrant analysis, but by no means represent all there is to discover within this type of research. Rather they represent the beginning of that which can be discovered and communicated through an arts-based research scenario.



## **LAYERS OF DATA AND ANALYSIS**

### **Human Life Reflected**

Our presence here on earth is illustrated, quite commonly, through an evolutionary timeline. Much of what we have come to know about ourselves is due to our relation to our closest ancestors: primates. Gazzaniga (2008) wrote, “This was the view held by Darwin, who wrote, ‘The difference between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind’” (p. 11). Whether, we humans, have directly evolved from primates will most likely forever be debated. There are scholars, like Darwin, who directly support the notion that hominids are an evolved species from our primate relatives, and many of our physical features as well as communal way of life certainly help to support this notion. However, those that study the evolutionary process of hominids were not privy to witness, first hand, the growth and development from one species to the next. There are many gaps between archeological findings of early hominid remains that leave room for debate when concerned with our specific origins, and much of our religious thought is based on the possibility of another explanation. Be that as it may, the fact that humans have grown, adapted, and evolved over time to meet the many challenges associated with conquering this world as our own remains.

The awesome power of cultivating the earth for agricultural purposes, coupled with technological advances to make our lives more efficient and easier, has afforded us the freedom to pursue many diverse ventures. With this freedom, humans have experimented with ways of occupying our time, and thus the birth of the entertainment industry. From its inception, the entertainment industry has grown, or evolved to meet the demands of consumers, and it is my opinion that a growth mindset, associated with every aspect of our lives, has lead us to this point

where we have evolved so far from our origins that we are no longer acting in humane ways. In an effort to constantly keep things fresh and new we are constantly trying to top what we have done to produce the next best thing. Unfortunately, in the entertainment industry where the actions of individuals keep the general public glued to their screens, the evolution of celebrity behavior has blossomed into actions being documented and portrayed for shock value to keep us all wondering what will happen next. Pinsky and Young (2009) thoroughly articulated this particular situation when they wrote:

The more a celebrity attracts the attention of the media, the more famous he or she becomes. The more dysfunctional the celebrity behaves. The more interest he or she generates from the tabloids. The more the audience finds out, the more we want to know. And the cost of it all-to the vulnerable celebrities on one side of the mirror, and the impressionable viewers on the other-is impossible to estimate.

(Loc. 609-611)

To illustrate this process of growth, from celebrated entertainer to one who remains in the public eye due to extreme action, as opposed to artistry, I have produced four works of art that all focus on human growth and development through the lens of the consumer who is privy to witness many of the intimate details of the lives of the pop culture icons they adore. From an evolutionary standpoint, I chose to ignore debates surrounding whether humans were spawned from apes, and visually focus on the fact that our presence, here on earth, was happen stance. To showcase this, I created a life size bust of a drugged out Michael Jackson emerging onto this earth seemingly from nothing. Through viewing this image, a process of reflection takes place. The question is, with our presence here on earth, happen stance as it may be, do we want our lives to grow and evolve to the point where we appear as drugged out and forlorn as Michael Jackson was towards the end of his life.

To further emphasize the growth from adored celebrity to strung out junkie I have produced a series of paintings that illustrate the careers of Amy Winehouse, Michael Jackson, and Britney Spears from childhood, to superstar, to celebrities at the end of their ropes, so to speak. Each star appears innocent and impressionable at a young age, much the same as all children do. Through these images the viewers see the possibility in each person. Relating the potential they see in their own children, or children of relatives, to the childhood imagery of the celebrity before them. In chronological order from left to right, each icon transitions from innocent child to superstar sex symbol. At this stage the viewers see the outcome of childhood grooming, and experience the aftermath of the potential each child had. The images of superstar self-actualization are appealing, but somewhat disturbing in the way they were represented through broken shapes of value represented through a variety of local colors. Each image is somewhat separated from the image of the sexy superstar we have in our heads. This disruption is further emphasized with an image of each icon realizing the dramatic outcome of continually trying to top one's self. The final image, on the evolutionary timeline of each celebrity's career, showcases an image far removed from the superstar we adored to one we just can't look away from.



Figure IV Michael Jackson Panel



Figure V Britney Spears Panel



Figure VI Amy Winehouse Panel

The purpose of each piece is intended to communicate our growth as human beings from a standpoint of ultimate potential to one where that potential is all too easily thrown away. From

each piece the viewer takes away the idea that evolving to meet our potential has great benefits. However, evolving beyond one's potential could have dire consequences.

### **Gossip, and Negative Rhetoric: The Paparazzi Effect**

Our entertainment industry has grown through a form of information transmission commonly known as gossip. In relation to our closest ancestors, gossip is thought to have replaced physical grooming observed in primate communities (Gazzaniga, 2008, p. 95). Our desire to expose moral perpetuities brings us closer to one another, and reinforces personal point of views associated with human action. Gossip works to validate our points of view, and brings like-minded individuals closer together reinforcing community. Gossip, like everything else we experience, has grown to meet its potential as support of a community, but when emphasized through mediated news sources built on entertainment, the need to constantly top the previous story has allowed the benefit of gossip to grow beyond its potential to bring a community together and rather degrade it instead. This is illustrated in Gazzaniga's statement, "Material for the evening news is everywhere, and for some reason we want to know about the problems, not the joys of the human condition" (2008, p. 113).

Not only does he pinpoint how our news sources today predominantly focus on the negative, but he illustrates the fact that it is us who support the media's focus on the negative. Our consumption of the negative stories, produced for shock value, further perpetuates negative stories produced for shock value. No industry has capitalized on this phenomenon more than our tabloid industry. Krista Tippett (2016) remarks, "The 'news' is defined as the extraordinary events of the day, but it is most often translated as the extraordinarily terrible events of the day. And in an immersive 24/7 news cycle, we internalize the deluge of bad news as the norm—the real truth of who we are and what we're up against as a species" (p. 4). The ever present "news story," framed as news based on its shock value and potential for big ratings, certainly takes its

toll on the viewing public, and based on the commonality of these types of “news stories” the most common after effect is the acceptance of the notion that this is the way it is. That this is how celebrities live, day in and day out, effectively glamorizing immoral behavior that encourages the general public to act in the same way for the sake of appearing cool and glamorous too. Pinsky and Young (2009) wrote a book entitled *The Mirror Effect: How Celebrity Narcissism is Seducing America*. In their book they discuss how the actions, we witness from celebrities, encourage others to act in the same way, and they attributed this to the growth of tabloid “news sources” when they stated:

In these years, consumers flipping through a tabloid magazine or watching an entertainment news show were increasingly confronted with candid reports of famous people in unflattering, often disturbing, situations. The behavior of troubled celebrities, which pointed to very real problems with substances or other serious issues, began to seem common among the rich and famous. As such dysfunctional behavior was accepted as par for the course, the coverage showed a lack of concern for the actual well-being of the stars themselves. (Loc. 557-559)

In an effort to exploit this phenomenon of news gossip attributing to the degradation of human treatment by, paparazzi, as supported by the consumer, I focused on how we acquire celebrity imagery in three large scale paintings. Each painting was produced on panels of Plexiglas cut to a similar aspect ratio of a flat screen television, or computer monitor. The images produced on each panel are images gathered from tabloid sources obtrusively lit by strobe lights that mimic the flashes of paparazzi cameras. In one way this action of acquiring imagery from tabloid sources helps to emphasize a mode of consumption of celebrity gossip, but in another way, this action is typically the only means available for acquiring celebrity imagery outside of being in a position to document celebrity action ourselves. This illustrates the crux of our

situation as consumers. In an effort to learn about celebrities we admire, one has little option beyond tabloid “news sources” to acquire information concerned with subjects of interest. The pieces I have produced don’t address alternative entertainment sources available, that treat persons of interest in a respectful manner, but rather are intended to inform in an unsettling way current modes of entertainment acquisition.

### **Personal Desires of Achieving Fame and Fortune: A Fabricated Lifestyle**

For the audience of my pieces, my main concern was addressing young adults who have grown to this point in their lives surrounded by an ever-present entertainment industry. When I first entered my teaching career *Jersey Shore* was a popular television show on MTV. I remember middle school age students talking, dressing, and acting like the characters documented in that show. I say characters, because that is all they really are. Their actions, and the scenarios each one found him or herself in, were very much dictated by the producers of the show labeled as reality television. One unfortunate result of Reality TV is based on the use of the word real, easily persuaded audiences, from preteen to early adults, are often convinced that what is being depicted in these shows is in fact a representation of real life. Reality TV shows coupled with tabloid news sources further emphasizes that the party lifestyle is very much real and within reach.

Pinsky and Young (2009) warned, “The celebrity lifestyle has become a subject of aspiration for the rest of us...Our willingness to accept, admire, and even emulate these stars’ behavior – without understanding or acknowledging its underpinnings in narcissism – is causing damage to our relationships, our families, and the fabric of society” (Loc, 233-237) There is danger in our acceptance of such behavior, in our consumption of such behavior, and in our buy in of such behavior. There is a reason why consumption of drugs and alcohol, and participation

in the party scene has long been viewed as a detriment to society, there are real consequences to adopting such a lifestyle.



Figure VI Amy Winehouse Panel

The consequences of which, depicted in my paintings, are based on images of each celebrity visibly breaking down before our eyes. Amy Winehouse is depicted as falling over, her eyes rolling to the back of her head, her clothes are disheveled, and loosely hanging from her body. She is pictured as incoherent, yet still in the public eye. Britney Spears, whose entire superstar career is based on her musical performances and physical imagery, sits in a barber shop wearing an oversized hoodie, appearing forlorn moments after shaving her own head. Michael Jackson, toward the end of his career and life, could barely hold up his own head. His eyes appear black and sunken in as he holds an awkward smile for the camera. Each image depicts the all too common outcome of an excessive lifestyle in the public eye. To further emphasize my point, but also to illustrate our desires to achieve a lifestyle that could potentially end our stay on earth, I have placed myself in the position of Michael at the end of his life. With my body dimensions entering this space from a primordial puddle I am illustrating to the audience a



reminder that we have been granted the gift of life. By replacing my face with that of Michael Jackson's while hopped up on painkillers I am reminding my audience that this is often a desired outcome of our lives here on earth. Through viewing each piece individually, as well as together as a set, the audience leaves with an unsettling reflection intended to remind one another of the gift of life, and to promote positive treatment of others as well as ourselves as we create goals and aspirations for financial success and leisure activity. The purpose is to ground celebrity action under the umbrella of reality as opposed to the commodity point of view applied to human beings experiencing celebrity stature.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Concluding Thoughts**

The purpose of this study is to raise awareness of our current state of affairs associated with consumption of mediated content at a hap hazardous level. The aim is to motivate my audience to think critically about the consequences associated with the support of an industry that treats celebrated individuals as commodities rather than the human beings they are. The consequences of supporting the self-destructive behavior of celebrities not only glorifies that behavior, and teaches future generations that that type of behavior is okay, but also acts as a distraction from real world problems that exist among our local communities as well as within nations abroad. Amongst a global community, what happens else ware affects us here at home, and avoiding those situations where our viewpoints can make a difference works to further degrade the living situations of all of humanity. It is all to easy too feel better about ourselves, because we are not acting as erratically as Paris Hilton in the eyes of the camera, but failure to recognize that companies as well as Paris Hilton herself are profiting from that exposure, and our attention to that behavior further perpetuates that behavior, perhaps on a more extreme level the next time it occurs.

#### **Are Our Actions Inhumane?**

The basis for this study was built on the assumption that our actions, as gatherers of information, seek to degrade our current state of being by exposing the pitfalls of others, in particular those that we hold in high regard, whether intentionally or otherwise. Some scholars like Deborah Orr state plainly that the encouragement of self-destructive behavior for monetary

gain is in fact an inhumane act (Hearsum, 2012). Though, I see her point, and agree with her statement, I also have come to understand through this research process the important role that gossip plays when fostering relationships among individuals within a collective society. While, we hominids, have successfully separated ourselves from the animal world our primate ancestors reside in, much of our behavior can be legitimized, in simple terms, when compared and contrasted with primate communities. Furthermore, human psychological studies have helped to describe self-destructive behavior among celebrities as a means of coping with the daily pressures they experience. To that end, my opinion as to whether gossip media circles and unbridled public support of the pressures applied to celebrated individuals is inhumane, I feel remains debatable. Through this research process I have come to understand how our behavior is rooted in our desire to be active participants among a collective society. However, as individuals seeking economic gain, among the same collective society, our aspirations to continually grow and innovate, amid a contemporary arena of extremes, has pushed our actions beyond the general pursuit of happiness to one that thrives on the downfall of others. Whether our actions could at that point be described as inhumane remains unclear, but they certainly aren't productive in supporting our community as a whole, and in my opinion serve no purpose beyond the erosion of the moral code our founding fathers outlined for us.

### **The Role of the Public**

Patrick Parnaby and Vincent Sacco (2004) wrote, "The desire to be famous has become a North American cultural obsession (Brandy 1986) that now challenges, or at least parallels, the imperative of achieving personal economic success" (p. 2). Celebrities, in that regard, represent the height at which one could potentially reach according to economic measures. Beyond economic success, celebrated individuals appear on the surface to represent the height one could reach socially as well, which pinpoints major milestones we all hold in high regard in our pursuit

towards self-actualization. There are many pros associated with celebrated status among our contemporary society. Pinsky and Young (2009) state, “The celebrity lifestyle has become a subject of aspiration for the rest of us. We have created entire industries to help us wear what the star’s wear, drink what they drink, party like they party” (Loc. 233). Much of what is consumed in these instances, in my opinion, is based on the simple notion that loafers and white socks (as worn by Michael Jackson) might look good on me, or I would look great in those glasses worn by Britney, but the implication associated with that purchase is the consumer stands in support of the brand that Britney, Michael, and Amy represent. That purchase not only supports celebrities’ artistic accomplishments, but their elicit encounters with sex and drugs as well. Our consumption of the latest news story regarding those we adore supports the same implications, “and the public, increasingly unsure where entertainment ends and exploitation begins, consumes such imagery without thinking twice” (Pinsky & Young, 2009, Loc. 115). Items, today, can be consumed so easily that we rarely have to think twice about them, or that which we legitimize through such a simple act.

In the case of public celebrity endorsement not only are we supporting the positive aspects of their careers, but the negative ones as well, and the actions of those who seek to exploit such negative behavior, and the actions of those who seek to mimic such behavior, and the actions of those who get away with immoral behavior (i.e. politicians) because we are so preoccupied with the actions of our favorite celebrities to notice. The implications associated with the seemingly simple act of participation in our contemporary consumer society are great, far reaching, and it is imperative that we take our actions into consideration when consuming the things that we do.

### **Potential for Further Research**

This arts-based study merely seeks to raise awareness of our contemporary living situation we all participate in, and support on some level. The next step would be finding a solution to the problem. My hope is raising awareness will lead to action where alternative media sources are produced, and supported by the general public due to respectful documentation of the individual celebrities we adore. Furthermore, studies into the effects of the distraction tabloid media, and reality TV represent are currently being conducted. Regardless of your approach, the research means nothing without change. Our actions matter, and being thoughtful of our actions coupled with our desires is the point behind this project.

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