"Why are *they* a celebrity?" At first glance, this question may be categorized as superficial and doused in jealousy, however upon unpacking it, one can understand how this question can provide a nuanced perspective to how audiences engage with celebrities. The act of asking this question enacts the paradox of the anti-fan. While trying to discredit a celebrity through discourse, the anti-fan further empowers the person's celebrity status by adding to their well-knownness in society. Further, by utilizing the word "*they*" to describe the celebrity, the famous are posited as "others," descriptive of the "close-but-far" relationship between the audience and celebrity. Growing from this basic idea that famous people become celebrities through their complex relations with audiences and media, I want to unpack how these stratified relationships are promoted and manipulated by and for audience performance of values and beliefs.

Media narratives are how people become celebrities in the public sphere. When audiences engage widely with the lived narratives of a person, that person is elevated in status from being of the general public to that of a celebritized image and narrative. This narrative becomes representative of the average person, yet is outside of the publics experience of "us." Neal Gabler further explores how these celebrity narratives grow from public interest in his article "Toward a New Definition of Celebrity." Gabler divides celebrity narratives into two forms: *star-driven* and *plot-driven*. While plot-driven narratives clearly represent discourse surrounding values and beliefs common to culture, such as the American interest in sex and violence or race and gender, star-driven narratives are often read as fluff pieces recounting mundane experiences of a person just because they are a celebrity, though they are grown from ideological narratives of moral and social underpinnings (Gabler). Therefore, *star-driven* narratives are emblematic of desired identities and *plot-driven* narratives represent aspired

actions. Audiences use celebrities as receptacles for what they like or don't like, thus weighing their support and rejection of media narratives to, "reinforce fears and dreams…impose order on experience" (Gabler 12). However, audiences separate themselves from celebrities when they choose to, "watch them, to share them, to consume them, to enjoy them, to bask in their magnificence" (Gabler 15). This audience performance secures their role as "us" in society as the grantors of celebrity status and designators of societal beliefs through the celebration of individuals in the public sphere.

Case studies of Beyoncé and Britney Spears illustrate Gabler's theory of the types of celebrity media narratives in contemporary culture. In Ellis Cashmore's article "Buying Beyoncé," the narrative of Beyoncé is dissected for how her image plays to the ideals of American audiences. Beyoncé's image has developed according to evolving discourse of race in America. Cashmore writes about Beyoncé prior to "Formation" as representing post-racial America as her image ignores race and even transcends it as an iteration of the American ideal that if you work hard, no matter who you are, you can gain societal acceptance and capitalistic success (Cashmore). Further, as American perceptions of race shifted to realize the unfair institutions, the Black Lives Matter rose in media to gain general acceptance and Beyoncé repositioned her racial narrative and released "Formation" at the time when racial discourse was becoming accepted and profitable. While her racial representations appeal to the audience's own beliefs, her unblemished and polished image "[holds] out something we can aspire to" presenting the contradiction of ordinariness and perfection (Gabler 15). Audiences connect to a star-driven narrative of "Queen Bey," buying into the image of her they aspire to tap into the tangibility through consumerism in hope to have a piece of her perceived social perfection.

Erin Meyer's case study of Britney, "'Can You Handle My Truth?': Authenticity and the Celebrity Star Image," explores how audiences engage with the multiplicity of narratives surrounding Britney and come to negotiate her "truth." While celebrities can represent a perpetuated "truth" through their narratives such as Beyoncé representing the American dream and a post-racial America, celebrities themselves as they relate to an audience, transcend personal truth and are employed as images and stories. The idea of the truth of a celebrity is impossible, because a celebrity is "just as constructed as a celebrity's public performances" (Meyers 893). Celebrity itself is "performance art" (Gabler 8) and "like any work of art, celebrity is the product of a process," (Gabler 10) where personalities construct careers that fit their brand and even construct their personal lives. Media portrayals, become extensions of their branded selves similar to fables and myths, where it is based in truth but meant to convey a meaning. Celebrities like Britney who proliferate stories as content-driven narratives, "[allow] the audience to derive pleasure from the ability to construct and reconstruct the star image from a variety of texts in complex and often contradictory ways" (Meyers 894). Audiences thus manipulate the celebrity image and "fill in the gaps" as they may to create a celebrity image that represents their own beliefs and values (Meyers 895).

Case studies of celebrities show how a celebrity can capture, on a large scale, the values of a culture; however, celebrities also represent the beliefs of individuals based on how these individuals engage with celebrities not as a monolithic audience, but rather as unique and individual fans. Jeroen de Kloet and Liesbet van Zoonen explore what it means to engage individually with celebrities through their article "Fan Culture – Performing Difference." Turning the focus from the celebrity to the fan, de Kloet and van Zoonen argue that who someone is a fan of, says less about the celebrity and more about the fan. As much as fans are

concerned with the authenticity of a certain celebrity, fans also find it important they authentically perform as fans. Authenticity is important because celebrities and fan performance is about more than supporting someone; it is how someone's support of a celebrity represents their own sets of values and beliefs. Celebrities are not simply image constructions, but rather constructions of cultural texts. At the simplest level of fandom, defined as *semiotic productivity* by Fiske, consumption of popular culture entails "'the making of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity'" (de Kloet and van Zoonen 325). Using celebrity image as representations of self is simply the beginning of the engaged fan. At greater levels of fan productivity, celebrities become the core of more active means of expressions of self through celebrities' images, such as speaking outwardly and openly about celebrities as through *enunciative productivity* or even using what a celebrity represents to be the basis for producing content that is inspired by image and ideology through *textual productivity* (de Kloet and van Zoonen 325). Fans are not passive consumers, but rather competent and active as they engage with celebrities as well as other fans as a part of cultural discourse.

Social media has created an intensified and hypermodern landscape for this cultural celebrity discourse, developing a new age of celebrity activism, empowered and performed at the fingertips of the social media fan. Victor P. Corona's case study of Lady Gaga in his article "Memory, Monsters, and Lady Gaga," explores the hypermodern positing of the contemporary celebrity has changed how celebrities act to shape their images and narratives. Corona defines hypermodernity as "an accelerated state of western capitalism characterized by 'the culture of the fastest'" (Corona 726). The internet aids the audience in a constant consumption that requires more events, more images, and more spectacle due to "the bridging of the gap and breaking of

this fourth wall" rendered by the constant, close, and incomplete engagements of the celebrities across social media (Harris).

Because hypermodernity requires an increased level of image production at a rate that so outwardly defies organicism and authenticity, fans rather than require individual actions to be of reality accept that, "artifice, if artful, can be even more compelling than the person behind the persona if it forcefully reflects the sullied truths of contemporary life." (Corona 727). Thus, the true image is traded for the truth the image represents. Because longevity is less attainable in this hypermodern landscape, it is "the truth" rather than "the true" which the audience aggressively seeks "individual self-expression" through celebrities that sets them apart in the "cult of the new" (Corona 732). The hypermodern overstimulation of images drives "fandom towards a text…able to work together for a cause" (Harris) to provide stability to a celebrity through social or political truth that speaks to a celebrity as a cultural text.

As audiences cling to the cultural truth behind the hypermodern images and narratives of celebrities, it seems natural that such cultural belief in and reliance on celebrities could leak into the political sphere. John Street addresses this idea of the "celebrity politician" in his article "Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation." Street first divides the celebrity politicians into two categories: *CP1* and *CP2*. *CP1* describes the elected politician who utilizes narratives and images from celebrity culture to build support for his or her political agenda and in some cases even become celebrities themselves (Street 437). *CP2* relates to the celebrity that uses his or her status to voice their opinions regarding political and social issues (Street 438). This comingling of politics and celebrity irritates some people, but why? Both the celebrity and the politician are constructed as objects that represent the values of a culture. Prior to social media, political performance and celebrity performance could, for the most part, be

isolated from each other and understood as different because they existed in different realms of public engagement. However, this discomfort with the celebrity politician comes from the realization that celebrities and politicians are both the same. They both perform for public support. This has always been the case, however the juxtaposition through social media of the celebrity and politician makes it obvious that the public empowers the cultural institutions that govern society. The power of the public is reduced to their response to celebrity performance and the cultural power these performers possess.

As the public creates celebrities, they also construct their own cultural status. But why would the public purposefully relegate themselves to a position of lowered cultural power? To understand this supposed irony of the powerful yet reduced audience, one must address fandom as a social structure in contrast to what fandom means as social representation and expression. Joli Jensen develops how fandom can be understood as a societal structure in her essay "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization." She explores how fans are pathologized and understood as socially defective. Within the fan community there is a separation of "us" and "them" illustrated through identifications of the *fan* versus the *aficionado* (Jensen). A fan is crazed, dangerous, and uncontrolled, whereas an aficionado is knowledgeable, expert, and respected. The use of "fan" is often pejorative and utilized as a projected identification of the "other." This use by the individual of "us" and "them" is how one performs personal identity. Individuals institute these structures of separation regarding "others" and the aspired or despised celebrities "as a way of relieving anxiety" and to "make sense of the world" (Jensen 310, 312). Through stratification of beliefs and projection of values, the individual organizes images in their world to reflect themselves. Constructing the celebrity and structures of fandom by the individual allows the individualize to both rationalize and prove who they believe themselves to be.

Audiences define and manipulate celebrity culture as an extension of their personal performances of their beliefs and values. The core of celebrity culture isn't the celebrity at all, but rather the fan and audience. Individuals are elevated to celebrity status and subsequently tossed from societal favor not because of who they are, but who the audience is. Social media has unmasked and accelerated this process of celebrification allowing hypermodernity to accept and toss representative images of society unparalleled in any other time. While the landscape of contemporary celebrity culture doesn't bring individual celebrities closer to the public, it does bring the idea of celebrity within arm's reach. Who knows whether you or I may be the next celebrity from the flash of a camera or blurb of a recording? But even then, who knows how long our celebrity status will last before the next individual is taken from the audience, transformed from person to celebrity?

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