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Celebrity Culture

From A to Z: Fame, Disposability, and the Relevance Paradox

Every time I scroll through TikTok's For You Page, I am flooded with an endless array of new faces and fresh blood. Yet, I am acutely aware of the impending arc of these characters: there's the viral moment, the tacky merchandise drop, maybe a brand collaboration or two, and then...nothing. Once the hype has subsided, the Z-lister fades into obscurity, becoming just another pawn in the algorithm's chess game. Fueled by younger generations' shortening attention spans, the celebrity economy has entered a fragile state. The consumer now absorbs content at an accelerating rate that only gets faster each year, and the resulting disposability cycle this has produced has no chance at slowing down.

This conflicting relationship between the celebrity and consumer produces the myth that—to succeed—the celebrity must accumulate an extensive amount of social capital that transforms them into a household name. However, recent trends and celebrities have repeatedly shown that it's far more complicated than that. Celebrity culture has turned into a disposability cycle that makes it increasingly difficult for them to stay relevant within the attention economy. Yet, in mastering this loop, it forces celebrities to continue producing content in rapid succession to avoid falling off the mainstream, creating a relevance paradox that ultimately imprisons celebrities.

This paradox has become so ingrained within our attention economy that it orchestrates a cycle that restricts the time Z-list celebrities can exist within the public sphere. In his book *Consuming Life*, Zygmunt Bauman observes how our media landscape inhabits “pointillist time,” time that is “broken up, or even pulverized, into a multitude of ‘eternal instants.’”¹ In other words, younger generations primarily consume media in isolated moments. For them, watching a two-hour film at the cinema has them squirming in their seats, but scrolling for two hours on social media has scarcely become second nature. In response to this, celebrities and brands have shifted their strategies to appease this new pace of media consumption. If a social media clip is not interesting within the first three seconds, our generation is inclined to swipe away, jumping to another instant of pointillist time upon which the cycle repeats itself. As a result, this consumerist behavior has ultimately created the Z-list celebrity—constructing the idea that, to earn celebrity currency, influencers must be willing to commodify their identities to appeal to the masses.

Attention has become a form of cash itself, overtaking any form of economic production, particularly for smaller brands and social media influencers. In turn, the amount of social capital a clip generates is rendered through the metrics of likes, comments, and followers. To attract this quantified form of attention, the commercialization of identities is becoming progressively standard, if not vital, for achieving status in our culture. Media scholar P. David Marshall describes this process as the “normalization of the commodification of the individual” that has emerged as a response to “consumer capitalism.”² Prior to the digital age, selling the self was once exclusive to the stars on the big screen, but has since become the norm. To put it simply,

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 32.

² P. David Marshall, “The Commodified Celebrity-Self: Industrialized Agency and the Contemporary Attention Economy,” *Popular Communication* 19, no. 3 (2021): 168.

Bauman's description of the attention economy as pointillist has created the conditions that have allowed for self-commodification to become normalized.

Within these conditions, Generation Z is the first age group to have grown up inside of the attention economy, rather than simply watching it develop. By inheriting this environment, we have allowed ourselves to become the biggest consumers of popular media as well as the hardest generation to capture the attention of—particularly within the worlds of Instagram and TikTok. We experience both media and celebrities in fragmented, pointillist bursts that allow for Z-list celebrities and influencers to be possible in the first place. Marshall coins this democratization as the “will-to-visibility,” a culture in which building a number of likes and followers “is naturalized and normalized” in the same fashion through which the entertainment industry operates.³ Thus, achieving even the smallest amount of celebrity status becomes remarkably difficult and produces disposability within our media culture.

When the viral moment for a “creator” has passed, they simply recede into the oversaturated sea of content—becoming forgotten unless they manage to produce another successful hit that allows them to resurface. Yet, this ebb and flow of celebrities is orchestrated by the social media algorithms, not the consumer. Whether we ask for it or not, we are delivered novelty and fresh, new faces that make it difficult for celebrities to maintain exposure beyond a singular, viral video. This creates a feedback loop that nobody consciously chooses but everyone participates in. The attention economy is the race car and social media is the stadium—we are trapped circling a loop, seeing new faces in the stands every time we zoom by. This is the exact science behind TikTok's For You Page and Instagram's recommended posts. They are specifically engineered to capitalize on these shortened attention spans which prevent Z-list celebrities from being able to sustain a substantial amount of celebrity capital. Through this, the

³ Marshall, "Commodified Celebrity-Self," 172.

attention economy puppeteers a highly structured fame cycle that seemingly perpetuates itself across media platforms.

It is within the fame cycle that the faded celebrity, coined by Chris Rojek as the “celetoid,” emerges as a significant figure.⁴ The celetoid is defined as a celebrity that rises to popularity rapidly and then quickly disappears from public consciousness once the virality has passed. This downfall happens quite dramatically—a descending spiral in popularity that crashes as quickly as the initial ascent. This entire sequence can be better understood through Ruth A. Deller’s fame cycle in which she argues that “fame operates on a cyclical basis.”⁵ Within her timeline, celetoids that fail to achieve a level of longevity reserved for the A-listers become resigned to being known as “post-celebrities.”⁶

Ariel Rebecca Martin (known professionally as “Baby Ariel”) is a personality that rose to extreme popularity with the rise of Musical.ly, a social media app predating TikTok. At her peak in 2016, she accumulated upwards of fifteen million views per video. However, when Musical.ly was famously rebranded to TikTok, she failed to maintain her status within the attention economy and submerged back underwater. Now, she barely hits one million views.⁷ Although Deller constructed her fame cycle with reality television at the forefront, Baby Ariel is an ideal example of a post-celebrity that experienced a full arc. Her Achilles’ heel was not a scandal or personal failure by any means. Rather, it was a systemic, structural change that led to her disposal from the attention economy. In essence, Baby Ariel and Deller’s fame cycle, from pre-celebrity to post-celebrity, mirror Bauman’s pointillist time. For a moment, she managed to capture the attention of millions. Today, a subtle recognition might pass through users that

⁴ Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 21.

⁵ Ruth A. Deller, “Star Image, Celebrity Reality Television and the Fame Cycle,” *Celebrity Studies* 7, no. 3 (2016): 374.

⁶ Deller, “Star Image,” 376.

⁷ Baby Ariel, *TikTok profile*, accessed March 10, 2026, <https://www.tiktok.com/@babyariel>.

happen to be presented algorithmically with one of her videos. She ultimately had a moment in the spotlight before disappearing as quickly as she arrived.

Rare celebrities that manage to stay afloat and master the disposability cycle are met with a predicament of their own—how to remain visible for as long as possible. In order to maintain their longevity, celebrities have to move at the same speed as the attention economy or else they risk meeting the same fate as the aforementioned post-celebrity. To do so though, they have to consistently produce fresh and innovative content. The irony here is that, sometimes, it does not actually matter whether the content is “good,” just as long as their name is being used during cultural conversations across media platforms.

There is no better example of this than Taylor Swift—a global phenomenon who has managed to produce content at an unparalleled speed that grows her personal brand and gratifies her fans’ shortening attention spans. From critically-acclaimed studio albums to music documentaries to a record-smashing world tour, Swift has been known for churning out projects ever since the COVID-19 pandemic. With each new project she releases, there is a palpable shift in tone that captures the attention and awe of her millions of followers repeatedly. Through this, she has tamed the content wave and has since learned how to ride it year after year.

With all of this constant exposure though, Swift has now found herself trapped in a cycle of her own. Now that she has mastered the formula, where does she go from here? She has established that, to survive the imposing disposability cycle, she must feed into it. Yet, perpetually feeding into it only increases the rate at which her “Swifties” consume her content. Even someone who has dominated the media landscape finds the attention economy inescapable. To put this into perspective, Swift released her eleventh studio album *The Tortured Poets*

Department in April 2024, an extensive project that boasts a grand total of thirty-one songs.⁸ A mere eighteen months later, Swift dropped her twelfth studio album, having also just closed her world-renowned *The Eras Tour*. Although the reception for this album was rather poor, fans across social media already began speculating what her next, calculated move would be.⁹ In mastering the attention economy, Swift has now become expected to continue producing content at the same rate at which her fans are moving from one instant moment to another. Put simply, she is now chained to her own doing—constantly chasing the next pointillist moment.

From the celestoid to the A-listers, our attention economy has proven that, on both sides of the screen, there is no winner in our celebrity culture. The Z-listers get disposed of, the Taylor Swifts of the world get confined, and the audience is trapped in the algorithmic loop that propels them from one moment to the next. Without ever signing up for it, Generation Z has been placed in the driver's seat of a rapidly accelerating car with no speedometer. Subconsciously, we are driving the disposability cycle and leaving celebrities vulnerable to our endlessly changing wants and desires. Having grown up in a culture where popularity is simultaneously seen as both a goal and a trap, we have witnessed millions of Z-listers accumulate and lose social capital at our fingertips. And yet, we have grown accustomed to expecting our favorite celebrities to fulfill our most insatiable desires—caging them to constantly produce more content. Designing these conditions ourselves ultimately closes the loop completely. In constructing our own cultural prison, how do we then learn to escape it?

⁸ Lindsay Zoladz, "Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department* Review," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/19/arts/music/taylor-swift-album-tortured-poets-department-review.html>.

⁹ James Hibberd, "Taylor Swift's *The Life of a Showgirl* Critic Reviews," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 3, 2025, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/music/music-news/taylor-swift-the-life-of-a-showgirl-critic-reviews-1236392461/>.

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