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**POP
ARTISTS**

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“POP ARTISTS
SHOULD BE
JUDGED ON THEIR
WORK, NOT THEIR
LIFESTYLE”**

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INTRODUCTION

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Michael Jackson’s death in 2009 prompted much discussion over how the pop-star should be remembered – as ‘Wacko Jacko’, the tabloid figure famed for his erratic behaviour, extreme plastic surgery and accusations of child abuse, or as an extraordinary talent who produced an exceptional body of work over his musical career? [Ref: [The Times](#)]. The question is whether pop artists should be judged on their work, or on their behaviour and lifestyle. Whilst many artists are celebrated for the work they produce, the coverage given to the likes of Pete Doherty and Amy Winehouse suggests that their work is but the support act to their many personal dramas. [Ref: [Independent](#)] Is this focus on lifestyle damaging? Is it a necessary side-effect of many artists’ alleged status as role models for the young and impressionable? Are pop stars today victims of a celebrity culture, or do they have themselves to blame for becoming a part of it? Does focus on an artist’s lifestyle damage their work?

KEY TERMS

[Celebrity culture](#)

[Private Life](#)

[The nature of fame](#)

[Andy Warhol and the cult\(ure\) of personality](#)



POP ARTISTS:

“Pop artists should be judged on their work, not their lifestyle”



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Does focus on an artist's lifestyle damage their work?

The death of Michael Jackson has also prompted debate over whether his work was damaged by 'the tawdry freak show that his life had become' [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Cult singer-songwriter Patti Smith [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] is damning of the media's lack of restraint with regard to divulging artists' lifestyles, claiming that it 'creates an addiction' that diverts people from appreciating artists' work, [Ref: [The Times](#)] with Shingai Shoniwa (of The Noisettes) adding that the media 'don't seem to want artists to do the job of entertaining and emancipating people' but are more interested in making them suffer: 'the more problems you have, the more records you're going to sell.' With many pop stars, perhaps most notably Britney Spears, under 24-hour scrutiny by paparazzi and press in order to fill the bloated pages of internet gossip and celebrity magazines, increasingly it seems as if pop stars can no longer get away with anything or live ordinary lives. However, there are historical precedent to this discussion: the 'cult of personality' created by artists such as Oscar Wilde and Lord Byron, who were in many ways the 'pop stars' of their time, can be seen to be as influential and lasting as their work [Ref: [The Times](#)] The private lives of some pop stars have inspired new, original art works, ranging from music biopics to paintings, which display the benefits that this knowledge can give, when placed in the right hands. [Ref: [The Times](#)] Many also suggest that since artists utilise and manipulate their own public images to create publicity, they therefore make themselves complicit players in the game of celebrity culture. Is it fair that they should be able to market their private lives when it suits them and then claim invasions of privacy when it doesn't?

Role models?

One reason for the scrutiny of artists' lifestyles is that they are widely regarded as role models for young people. In 2005, Michael Howard, then leader of the Conservative Party, condemned Peter Doherty as a bad role model for children due to the singer's highly publicised drug habits, [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] but also hit out at the media for giving Doherty "celebrity coverage" and "the impression that drug-taking is cool." Doherty's perceived influence was enough that police banned his band Babyshambles from headlining the Moonfest festival in 2008, fearing that his performance would cause violence. [Ref: [Sky News](#)] If the result of young people idolising pop stars is that they imitate their behaviour, then it could be argued that the quality of their music becomes irrelevant. Journalist Sonia Poulton has stated that, despite her love of rap, she now aware that rap music that "celebrates violence" also makes the "Thug Life" lifestyle of rappers such as the now deceased Tupac Shakur dangerously appealing to its "many young impressionable followers". However, is the pop star 'role model' in itself a media creation? It is unclear whether or not musicians really have any impact on the behaviour of their fans, or whether this is a false perception that unfairly assumes the naivety of young music fans. [Ref: [BBC News](#)] Even if artists are role models, is this enough to justify the exploitation of their conduct and private lives by the media? Is it right that, as Michael Jackson stated in an interview, 'becoming successful means that you become a prisoner'? [Ref: [The First Post](#)]



Can pop artists be judged solely on their work?

For those who think that artists should be judged on the merits of their work alone, there is an assumption that it is possible to divorce a celebrity's work from his or her personal life.

But is this relationship quite so clear cut? Moses Alubala, a member of the Kenyan choir that sang at US President Obama's inauguration, states that one of music's greatest attributes is that though it, 'you are able to learn about someone's lifestyle'. [Ref: [The Times](#)] As all art is born from the mind of the artist, it is more than likely that it will be influenced by their experiences and reflect their lifestyle in some fashion. To some artists themselves, their lifestyle is as, if not more, important than their actual work – it is an artist's task to be, in the words of Marc Almond, 'flawed and extinguishable, but never mediocre'. [Ref: [Independent](#)] For many, the highs and lows of an artist's lifestyle provoke their interest and also allow them to better relate to the artist, and thus have a greater understanding and appreciation of their work, as evidenced by the strong demand for celebrity biographies. It is also possible that a greater understanding of artists' private lives acts to humanise these figures, and to prevent the kind of ignorant idolization of musicians that could lead to the imitation of their mistakes. However, the focus on the private lives of artists has been criticized for creating a shallow cult of celebrity which idolizes 'talentless non-entities who are famous merely for being famous'. [Ref: [BBC News](#)] The fear is that if the attention is on the lifestyle, the work can all too easily slip from view.



ESSENTIAL READING

Michael Jackson: Genius or child abuser?

Dan Cairns *The Times* 28 June 2008

Focus: The new decadence: Rock & Roll: All the best stars are a mess

Charles Shaar Murray *Independent* 5 February 2005

FOR

Jacko was off the wall, but I'll rock with him

Sophia Heawood *Independent* 28 June 2009

Wait, Beth Ditto sings, too?

Kate Harding *Salon* 19 June 2009

The role of the artist

Miranda Sawyer *Observer* 11 November 2007

Leave Lindsay Lohan alone

Nick Johnstone *Guardian* 24 November 2006

Our gossip-hungry culture is as immature as those it demonizes

Deborah Orr *Independent* 24 September 2005

AGAINST

Hip hop and Violence: 'I have to ask myself – did I help promote violence?'

Sonia Poulton *Independent* 10 July 2009

Voices of change: emblem of Obama's heritage

Ben Machell *The Times* 27 June 2009

Is Biggie Smalls a worthy role model? Hell, no

Lindsay Johns *The Times* 12 February 2009

The brand of Oscar Wilde

Giles Brandreth *The Times* 6 April 2008

Let Amy Winehouse do drugs

Mark Ravenhill *Guardian* 3 September 2007

IN DEPTH

For all Michael Jackson's flaws he was the greatest entertainer of his age

Richard Williams *Guardian* 26 June 2009

Slaves to fame

Patrick West *Culture Wars* 23 October 2008

Patti Smith, Juliette Lewis and Shingai Shoniwa on rock stardom

Sophie Heawood *The Times* 19 October 2007

Control and I'm Not There avoid the biopic pitfalls

Jessica Winter *Slate* 10 October 2007

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BACKGROUNDERS

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Bookworm David Gray learns rock history through biographies
Spinner 3 August 2009

Clapton : The Autobiography
Jeff Clutterbuck *Daily Vault*

Hardcore fans say Britney Spears saved them
Jessica Bannet *Newsweek* 22 July 2009

Celebrity culture and the right to privacy
Science Museum

Alexis Petridis reviews the Gossip's new album, Music for Men
Alexis Petridis *Guardian* 12 June 2009

Should Britney Spears be under her father's control?
Christopher Goodwin *The Times* 7 June 2009

Have celebrities finally snapped?
Guardian 4 May 2009

Prophet and loss – How the web's hottest gossip empire lost it's
mojo
Tim Walker and Alexis Ashman *Independent* 8 January 2009

Hey Gawker, Leave the Travoltas alone
New York Magazine 5 January 2009

Should Pop Stars be role models?
Pop Music Scene 14 July 2008

Media intrusion: sharing the blame
Nicholas Jones *Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom* 05
February 2008

Is it OK to like R Kelly?
Sam Richards *Guardian* 20 March 2007

Why I love celebrity culture
Guardian 21 February 2007

Miss Britney, CEO
Michael Wuebben *CBS News* 11 January 2007



IN THE NEWS

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Judge sentences Chris Brown to five years probation

Guardian 25 August 2009

Kanye West: "Fame is like cigarettes with no surgeon general warning"

New York Times 31 July 2009

Lady Gaga: "I make soulless electro-pop"

Guardian 2 July 2009

Paul Theroux remembers shy Jacko

First Post 29 June 2009

The music will be his legacy

Independent 27 June 2009

Chris Brown pleads guilty to Rihanna assault

Guardian 23 June 2009

Amy Winehouse wins court ban on paparazzi at her home

Guardian 1 May 2009

Chris Brown and Rhianna – Singer condemns domestic violence

Telegraph 10 February 2009

Doherty 'one of rocks greatest'

BBC News 8 February 2009

"I've felt famous my whole life"

Guardian 21 January 2009

Amy Winehouse 'shot down' in name of art Cristina Ruiz

The Times 9 November 2008

Festival Pulled over Doherty Ban

Sky News 20 August 2008

How rap music has gone from condemning drug music to glorifying it

Daily Mail 2 April 2008

Celebrity culture 'harms pupils'

BBC News 14 March 2008

X Fails to hit the spot

Scotsman 23 November 2007

Teens see parents as role models

BBC News 7 January 2007

Doherty sets bad example, say Howard

Telegraph 25 February 2005

Fears over lure of rap's violence and obscenity

Telegraph 21 August 2000



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THINKING DEEPLY
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