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# The Cost of Being a Celebrity on Mental Health

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**Funding:** No specific funding was received for this work.

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

## Abstract

The pursuit of fame, though often glamorized, exacts a toll on the mental well-being of celebrities. Intense scrutiny and a loss of privacy leave individuals feeling exposed and under constant pressure. The expectation to conform to societal standards and maintain a flawless image fuels self-doubt and a fear of failure. Paradoxically, fame can lead to isolation as genuine connections become elusive, fostering loneliness and emotional detachment. Mental health stigma adds another layer of complexity, with celebrities often hesitant to seek help due to concerns about public perception. The fear of fading into obscurity propels individuals to overwork, leading to burnout and anxiety. Negative public perception, shaped by media coverage, can trigger shame and guilt, impacting self-worth. Striking a balance between authenticity and a carefully curated image becomes a constant struggle, fostering internal conflicts and identity crises. Success and failure carry their emotional weight, with the pressure to sustain achievement and the emotional devastation of setbacks.

**Keywords:** Celebrities; Suicide; Well-Being; Mental Health; Social Media.

## Introduction

In today's sophisticated world of social media, we find ourselves more and more drowned into a virtual reality. In this global community, we are led by an increasing number of people at the spotlight, called "celebrities". You might think celebrities are significant because they have inherent skills, talents, genius, or even achievements. In fact, however, most celebrities seem not to have achieved very much, and they can often be rather talentless. Celebrities matter not because of who they are but because of what they represent. It is the meanings that become attached to celebrities as they appear in the media that form their currency in the circulation of popular culture (Ward, 2011). Our fixation on and devotion to celebrity culture might be no more than a delusion. We create a glorious picture of fame that does not even exist in real life. Fame is an evergreen, often tragic subject for the camera; we're all familiar with a star, often female, falling from icon to ire, dogged by delusion, caving to the pressure of others' expectations or opinions (Horton, 2021).

Historically from the world of celebrities, we have heard some unforgettable stories like the career trajectories of the

American actress Marilyn Monroe who died at the age of thirty-six as a result of suicide in 1962. The story of Marilyn Monroe was the starting point of my study into the celebrity world: “Why a huge number of celebrities end up with mental sufferings in their career path?”. Hence, I took the initiative to choose this controversial subject for my article.

As a TV host for a cinematic show on ifilm and former reporter of Fajr International Film festival in 2020, I have conducted some interviews with a considerable number of prominent celebrities in the Iranian cinema. This experience gave me the chance to take a closer look at celebrity lives and what it really means to be a celebrity. Within the public sphere, celebrities hold an incredibly special position in the society and to the majority, they are known to be the ideals. The reason most people hold this view boils down to the fact that they never were in a celebrity’s position to experience what they really go through in their lives. We are constantly exposed to the huge glamorous picture drawn by media displaying a brilliant fake image of celebrities to make us believe they lead an unexceptionally happy perfect life. Therefore, it is beyond our imagination to wake up to the belief that they are no more than “ordinary” people. This means that just like every human, they have their own pain and sufferings. But do they really lead an ordinary life?

From what I have experienced and the stories reflecting the lived experiences of those swimming in the sea of celebrity culture every day, I have come to the realization that in fact, celebrities suffer more than what we can imagine. This article explores the dark side and the challenges associated with celebrity status and how being a celebrity is indeed more of a tragedy than a pleasure.

## Celebrity Status

Celebrity is ubiquitous; it has come to dominate media discourses in every field of life, from sports and politics to the arts and the environment. In fact, we don’t just know about celebrities—we may well have somehow formed opinions about them. Celebrity culture actively invites us to form a view and make a judgment (Ward 2011). Celebrities captivate the public imagination for diverse reasons, contributing to their enduring appeal across cultures and societies. One significant factor is the aspirational lifestyle they often embody, showcasing luxurious homes, glamorous events, and high-profile careers. This allure allows individuals to live vicariously through celebrities, adding a touch of fantasy to their own lives. Furthermore, celebrities gain appeal through their notable talents and remarkable achievements in fields such as acting, music, sports, or other areas. Recognition of exceptional skills and accomplishments contributes to their status as individuals who have reached the pinnacle of their craft, garnering admiration from fans.

Celebrities provide a form of escapism, offering entertainment through movies, music, or other performances. This allows people to momentarily detach from the challenges of everyday life, immersing themselves in the captivating world of their favorite stars. Identification and relatability also play a crucial role in celebrity appeal. Some celebrities resonate with the public due to relatable qualities or shared experiences, creating a sense of connection and emotional bond. Additionally, cultural influence is significant, as celebrities become icons shaping and reflecting societal values, trends, and even influencing social and political movements.

The rise of social media -which will be my focus later in this article- has made celebrities more accessible than ever,

fostering a closer connection between stars and fans. Direct engagement through platforms like Instagram and Twitter enables celebrities to share glimpses of their daily lives, thoughts, and behind-the-scenes moments, enhancing their relatability. Mystique and intrigue contribute to the appeal of celebrities. The -supposedly- limited access to their private lives, combined with occasional glimpses into their world, creates a sense of fascination and curiosity among the public. Moreover, extensive media coverage, including interviews, red carpet events, and magazine features, reinforces the visibility of celebrities, keeping them in the public consciousness.

Despite the apparent significance of the celebrity-fan relationship, celebrity worship is adoration that is conducted at a distance; it is parasocial in nature. Yet events such as the death of Diana demonstrate the extent to which certain celebrity figures carry an enduring symbolic significance. This significance is an indication that the relationship that people have with celebrities may operate as a source of identification and indeed identity. The relationship between cultural identity and the celebrity, however, is not always straightforward. The deaths of Michael Jackson and Jade Goody revealed something of this complexity. The division over the media coverage of the deaths of these two celebrities demonstrates how celebrities mean different things to different people. In fact, individuals may even feel conflicted in their own views of a particular celebrity. This kind of ambivalent or conflicted relationship between the fan and the celebrity can be described as a tension between “identification” and “disidentification.” Fans have a “give and take” with a range of media figures. Fans relate to celebrities by including them in the construction of “imaginary worlds” (Ward, 2011, p. 27-28)

Celebrity has long held the potential to be both liberating and constraining (Sternheimer, 2011). You might hold the view that when you are famous, you are in a position where you have the freedom to literally do what you can imagine. What if you are told, as a celebrity, you would one day wish if you could ever live back the life of an ordinary?

## The Dark Side of Celebrity Life

When a celebrity, you are constantly striving to meet everyone’s taste and hence lose control of your own life. As written in an article in the *Guardian*: “The pressure of maintaining an image for masses of people you don’t know is well-trod territory, especially for female celebrities whose bodies, attractiveness, age, thinness, and desirability are always under scrutiny.” The pressure to always stay visible, the bottomless appetite for new content, the escalating demands for authenticity – these are familiar dynamics to anyone on social media, though experienced in concentrate by celebrities made famous online at mind-boggling speed. “I can’t have one moment where I’m like ‘I don’t wanna do this,’” Bili Eilish, a popular American singer-songwriter, laments. “I have to keep smiling and if I don’t, they hate me and think I’m horrible” (Horton, 2021). This leads to the failure of being yourself and have the freedom to live the life you desire. Therefore, most celebrities end up living their lives more for others than for themselves.

Fame is a prerequisite to tragedy. Mass attention has made the teenage girls paranoid, wary, timid, unable to find fun in their old passions; the job of celebrity seems even more fragile when the talent was being yourself, followed in *Guardian*’s Horton article. Struggling with your new version on the red carpet to be your true self while maintaining that spotless public figure can turn into a serious suffering with prolonged mental and psychological issues in your life.

As constantly visible to the public, celebrities tend to be anxiously obsessive with negative comments about their appearance and actions, as if their mental health is at their fans' hands. In other words, feeling good or bad is dependent upon their fans' reactions and how they managed to play their role to astonish the viewers. As mentions Shahghasemi (2022) in his course for Celebrity Studies in the University of Tehran: On social media, when celebrities receive hundreds of positive feedbacks and one negative, they end up desperately mad at that one negative comment. This is how they lead their lives under constant stress and strains at an overwhelming amount.

Within the film industry, well-known actors and directors face a different set of pressures, including being unable to reach out for help. Bollywood actors also face a ticking clock, with a relatively short window to achieve success, which makes it an intensely competitive industry. The wide reach of social media has added to the feeling of living under constant scrutiny, says Amit Behl, film and TV actor. "It's like always being on high alert" (N Khan, 2020).

More concerning is that medical studies have pointed out that addiction is a common cause of death among celebrities (ÁgnesZsila, Gábor Orosz, Lynn E. McCutcheon, ZsoltDemetrovics, 2020). As mentioned earlier, in the example of Marilyn Monroe, when mentally devastated by their celebrity status all through their lives, at the end of their career path, many celebrities are known to die of drug overdose or committing suicide.

## Celebrities and Suicide

People make the decision to take their own lives every day, which is a tragic part of the reality we live in. But it can seem like celebrity suicides occur at a higher rate than people who aren't famous or have a following. (Robb-Dover, 2020).

These tragic deaths are also not limited by lines of work, ranging from boxers, designers, politicians and writers to actors, musicians, and entrepreneurs. (Bureau, 2022)

In every professional field, the glory of being famous comes with a wide range of irreparable costs on one's personal life, leading to deteriorating mental health condition over a lifetime. When going through all the ups and downs on this path, they move on to experience life as empty and free of any meaning. For this reason, at the end of the day, it might be no wonder why celebrities make the decision to end their life. Looking at Marilyn Monroe's suicide story, according to the Los Angeles County Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner, Monroe's doctors stated that she had been "prone to severe fears and frequent depressions" with "abrupt and unpredictable mood changes", and had overdosed several times in the past, possibly intentionally.

Celebrity suicide isn't a concept of the 21st century. Hemingway, one of the most renowned authors of his time, took his own life after battling depression, likely due in part to his failing physical health. World-renowned actor Robin Williams completed suicide in 2014 after a long-term battle with depression and addiction. Sylvia Plath is renowned as one of the most respected poets of her time. Like many artists and creatives, Plath was extremely passionate, and as a result, tortured by some of the circumstances in her life. This led to her suicide at only 30 years of age (Robb-Dover, 2020).

So, what do celebrity suicides have in common with each other? For the most part, there are some risk factors that all

suicides tend to share: substance abuse and addiction, intense grief, mental health conditions and so forth. The Atlantic published an exploration of average life spans of celebrities — specifically, pop musicians — compared to the general population and found that musicians are more likely to die young, and that suicide is a leading cause (Robb-Dover, 2020).

The question most people ask is this, “Why would they want to take their own life, when they had ‘everything’?” But did they have everything, or does it even matter what they had or didn’t have in material possessions and fame? (Cherian, 2018). Holding the view that material possession is the key to happiness, many people might find it hard to grasp how miserable a celebrity life can be.

One potential explanation for why celebrities complete suicide is that fame brings pressure and judgment from people all over the world. When you’re living a life where people pay to see you perform on stage, or in movies, it can be stressful. Actors, musicians, and other celebrities are on the road a lot, away from their family and friends, and this stress can build up (Robb-Dover, 2020). In this case, they are constantly obsessed with how they can live up to the public’s expectations rather than living and enjoying their own life in peace.

There’s also evidence to suggest that many people who become famous have a unique brain chemistry that may put them at higher risk for depression and suicide. Swedish university Karolinska Instituted found that conditions like bipolar disorder were more prevalent in populations of artists, writers, and performers than in the general population, suggesting a link between mental illness and creativity (Robb-Dover, 2020). Some celebrities are prone to depression and bipolar disorder due to incessant media and public scrutiny (Bureau, 2020).

Celebrities, at the height of their fame, are prone to anxiety and depression due to isolation and the feeling of having to meet unreasonable expectations of the public. Many of them suppress emotional pain or stress, instead of facing it or accepting it. Their avoidance strategy and lack of control makes them then go to extreme measures to hide, manage, or suppress this emotional stress. According to the study, suicide is one of many ‘coping’ methods for such individuals, which include drug abuse, alcohol abuse, self-harm, addictions and eating disorders (Cherian, 2018).

The most important factor in a healthy happy mind and life would be relationships – the third tier of Maslow’s hierarchy. Marital relationships and other forms of companionship could even make physical pain mean less, the study says. This would mean even emotional pain, the kind that leads to suicides, could be managed with strong key relationships. (Cherian, 2018). According to this fact about relationships, another significant dark aspect can be witnessed in a celebrity life, which is suffering in relationships. Due to their constant exposure to the public eye, many celebrities find it difficult to stay in a long-term healthy relationship. Due to their separation from where they truly belong, their parents and family, they come to the realization that in fact, they are not genuinely appreciated by any of their fans as they are by their family.

## Social Media Came to Help Celebrities?

Social media has undeniably transformed the landscape of fame and wealth, catapulting celebrities into unprecedented levels of recognition and financial success. In the increasingly interconnected world of us, platforms like Instagram,

Twitter, and TikTok have become powerful tools that allow celebrities to directly connect with their audience, shaping their public image and expanding their fan base. One significant aspect of social media's impact on celebrity culture is the ability for stars to control their narratives. In the past, celebrities relied heavily on traditional media outlets to disseminate information about their lives and projects. Now, through the immediacy of social media, they can share personal moments, promote their work, and engage with fans in real-time. This direct interaction fosters a sense of authenticity, breaking down the perceived barriers between celebrities and their audience. This, however, goes to the degree that celebrities deliberately compromise their private lives (Shahghasemi, 2021) and losing one's privacy can have detrimental effects on one's psychology and life (Aeini, Zohouri & Mousavand, 2023).

Monetization opportunities on social media further contribute to the financial prosperity of celebrities. Most people seem to be unable to use social media properly (Sabbar & Matheson, 2019; Sabbar & Hyun, 2016) and celebrities can benefit from user's continuous presence on social media. Platforms like YouTube enable content creators, including celebrities, to generate income through ad revenue and sponsorships. Instagram influencers, often celebrities in their own right, leverage their large following to secure lucrative brand partnerships. These avenues provide additional streams of income, bolstering the financial portfolios of those in the public eye. Surprisingly, the quality of life for most humans decline when they become rich (Shahghasemi, 2022; Peterson, 2018).

Moreover, the viral nature of content on social media can propel relatively unknown individuals to overnight stardom. From viral challenges to trending hashtags, the dynamics of social media enable celebrities to capture the public's attention swiftly. This democratization of fame allows lucky individuals, who might have been overlooked in traditional entertainment structures, to carve out their own niche and attain both fame and financial success. This arena is fiercely competitive and in it there is no much room for ethical considerations; therefore, celebrities sometime use unethical means to get famous (see for example Shahghasemi, 2020 & 2020).

While the benefits are evident, it's essential to acknowledge the drawbacks of this newfound celebrity status through social media. The constant scrutiny and pressure to maintain a curated online presence can take a toll on mental health. The blurred line between personal and public life also raises questions about privacy, as celebrities navigate the challenge of balancing authenticity with the need for a controlled image. While these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for fame and direct interaction with fans, the toll on celebrities' mental health is a pressing concern that cannot be ignored (Lee, 2019).

One of the primary challenges stems from the relentless scrutiny celebrities face on social media. Every aspect of their lives, from personal relationships to daily activities, is subject to public scrutiny (McNamara, 2011). The constant judgment and commentary, often fueled by anonymity, can be emotionally taxing, leading to heightened stress levels and anxiety. This perpetual state of observation creates an environment where celebrities may feel compelled to conform to societal expectations, sacrificing their authenticity in the process.

The pressure to project an idealized image exacerbates the challenges celebrities face. Social media platforms are flooded with meticulously crafted content, portraying a polished and flawless version of celebrities' lives (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). This curated facade, while visually appealing (Aris et al., 2023), can distance them from their own

reality, fostering a sense of disconnection between their public persona and their authentic selves. The fear of falling short of these unrealistic standards can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (Nosrati et al., 2023).

Moreover, the instant and widespread dissemination of information on social media magnifies the impact of negative events or criticism. A single misstep, whether real or perceived, can escalate into a full-blown public scandal within minutes. The fear of public backlash and damage to their reputation adds an immense burden to celebrities, intensifying the strain on their mental well-being.

The 24/7 nature of social media engagement also blurs the boundaries between work and personal life for celebrities. The constant demand for content and interaction leaves little room for downtime or privacy. This lack of respite can lead to burnout and exhaustion, affecting not only their mental health but also their overall quality of life (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard & Berg, 2013).

In response to these challenges, some celebrities have been outspoken about the impact of social media on their mental well-being. Discussions surrounding mental health in the public sphere are gradually destigmatizing these issues, encouraging a more compassionate and understanding approach to the struggles faced by those in the limelight.

## Conclusion

The concept of the *objet petit a* is central to Lacan's theory of desire, which arguably represents his major contribution to psychoanalysis. It is an expression of the lack inherent in human beings, whose incompleteness and early helplessness produce a quest for fulfillment beyond the satisfaction of biological needs. The *objet petit a* is a fantasy that functions as the cause of desire; as such, it determines whether desire will be expressed within the limits of the pleasure principle or "beyond," in pursuit of an unlimited *jouissance*, an impossible and even deadly enjoyment. It's an object that points to the unattainable; a surplus of joy that relates to anguish, lack, fantasy, desire, and our "other" desires. In other words, it's the object of the cause of desire or the window that shows its absence (Kirshner, 2005).

All in all, as human, we are always looking for something in life while experiencing the constant feeling that something is missing. Before becoming a celebrity, they imagine that gaining public recognition and being on the spotlight would fulfill their desires and thus make them happy. After they have tried it all, rich, famous, and popular, they come to the realization that they have experienced life at max and there's nothing more brilliant to look forward to. In other words, their journey has come to an end and, perhaps for many of them, nothing can alleviate their pain but suicide.

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