

Capstone

The Optics of Wealth: How to Avoid Alienating the Public as a Wealthy Public Figure

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Abstract

Throughout this work, pop culture and public opinion of celebrity and influencer wealth, behavior, and public image are addressed. Research set out to find current public opinion of wealth, perceptions of celebrities and influencers, prior research on the topic, a historical context, and current trends in social media and pop culture. A lack of prior research on public opinion of celebrity and influencer wealth, philanthropy, and activism meant there was and still is a gap to fill in this field of knowledge. Methodology of primary research was a survey, comprised of 28 questions which received 107 respondents. Responses were generally characterized by a somewhat to very negative response to celebrity and influencer wealth and extravagance, and a somewhat to very positive response to philanthropy and speaking out on social issues. Findings can be used in the future to create a code of conduct and a guide to best practices for wealthy public figures and the public relations professionals who guide them. Recommendations include decreasing frequency of public displays of conspicuous consumption, and increasing involvement in social responsibility, which includes donations to nonprofits, volunteering, and speaking out on social issues.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

How do people respond to seeing others succeed? Although some of the most well-known and admired people in our culture have reached levels of wealth the average person never will, one must wonder whether being publicly wealthy can hurt their image and persona, causing these public figures to be on the receiving end of criticism, resentment, and negative perceptions.

Whether a wealthy public figure is showing off a new purchase, sharing an extravagant birthday party, or simply existing while wealthy, there is always the risk of backlash and criticism from sections of the public. Throughout Covid-19, specifically, many wealthy public figures experienced backlash for enjoying the privileges that being wealthy during a pandemic bought them. From rapid testing to party “safely,” to travelling to a private island for a 40th birthday (in the case of Kim Kardashian), a number of conversations about public figures on social media, television, and pop-culture news were characterized by a growing resentment for those who could buy freedom in a time of lockdowns.

Beyond looking at a growing negative reaction to content about wealth, there are also higher expectations for how public figures engage in social responsibility and social issues. These public figures are now held to a higher standard and risk alienating the public even when acting with the best intentions. A popular school of thought with many on social media is that these figures should be using their privilege and resources for the betterment of society, more than for showing a lavish lifestyle on social media and in the news. A push towards more engagement with nonprofits and social issues creates opportunities for even more missteps and being perceived as tone deaf. Not only are wealthy public figures discouraged from showcasing

their wealth in certain ways, their attempts to do good must also be authentic, educated, and well-executed—without appearing overly produced.

For public relations professionals involved in individual reputation management, this issue is increasingly more relevant. From traditional celebrities to celebrity CEOs, the issue of wealth has become a public relations hazard. Public relations professionals cannot assume that wealth will be seen as a positive or neutral trait—for substantial sections of the public, it is an alienating and negative feature. The purpose of this paper is to ascertain exactly how public relations professionals can prevent backlash, maintain relatability, and promote a positive image of the wealthy individuals they represent.

1.2 Problem statement, Research Questions, and Hypothesis

The problem is, then, if prominent individuals make their success too apparent, this can alienate segments of the public, causing feelings of distaste and criticism towards their success and opulence, especially in times of hardship and income inequality. How exactly do public relations professionals approach this issue and prevent these public figures from alienating the public and, instead, earn actual good will and social capital?

Research that will gain some insight and guidance begins with examples of people who have, at some point, alienated the public. What are recent examples of celebrities and public figures getting backlash from the media and the public for sharing their extravagant lifestyles? What were similarities between these cases, what were sentiments in the press and social media, and can public relations professionals learn how to avoid or address such missteps in the future?

Then, the next vital question is what makes people respond negatively to the success of others? At what point does envy of a public figure become a hazard for their persona, and how can public relations professionals avoid that ill will? How much of the population views

extravagant displays of wealth to be entertaining and aspirational—in a positive way—versus negatively viewing such displays as gauche, insensitive, and distasteful. Will people who have a negative view of public displays of wealth from certain figures have a negative view of all such displays, or is there something about a public figure that makes others happy for their success, versus resentful of it? Again, of course, how can public relations professionals dissuade such resentment?

What are the expectations today for public figures to engage in social responsibility, and are some forms of engagement superior to others? Is simply donating large sums of money sufficient or does volunteering precious time earn more good will? What are examples of the public figures who do it right, versus those who miss the mark? Does “giving back” create enough of a positive image with the public to minimize negative reactions to public wealth and privilege in a time where such things are subjects of scorn on social media with certain demographics?

Finally, a historical context and analysis of changing social media trends will also be provided, giving insight into how the past can inform the future, and how rising trends might reveal some broader, rising social beliefs in younger demographics.

The main overarching question here is how can public relations professionals give their clients the best chance at maintaining relatability, likability, and minimizing the chance of backlash? Is there a certain way to earn enough good will with the public to prove yourself worthy of success in the public’s eyes, and—if so—how do public figures do so? Rather than simply showing their wealth to the public and accepting the backlash as inevitable, influencers and celebrities that share their extravagant lifestyles on social media and through the press can

show themselves authentically contributing to social causes to help prevent alienating the public, minimize backlash, and promote positive engagement.

1.3 Purpose, goals, and objectives

The purpose is to reveal how public figures can maximize good will with the public and minimize the chance of backlash for existing as a prominent individual with wealth. The goals of secondary research are mainly to gain background and insight into the issue from a cultural lens, as very little research has been done into this topic with the intent to find public opinion or advise public relations professionals. The main goal when it comes to collecting primary research, then, is to provide public relations professionals with useful data, insight, and a basis for building a code of conduct and a guide to best practices for the wealthy public individuals they advise.

The objective includes finding if authentically contributing to social causes and engaging in social issues will affect public opinion, or if engaged demographics will not be swayed by such actions. Regardless of if the hypothesis is supported or not, this research will still provide information and data in a field that is greatly lacking research on the opinions of celebrity and influencer wealth, philanthropy, and activism. Before this paper can delve deeper into the issue of how to influence and encourage positive views of these wealthy figures, a review of existing literature can reveal the current state of public opinion between demographics.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 How People View the Wealthy

Views of the wealthy have grown more negative in recent years. Although not a majority, according to a Cato Institute survey of 1700 Americans, 39% of respondents believed that “most wealthy people got rich by ‘taking advantage of other people’” (Ekins, 2019, p. 44). For respondents under 30, that number jumps up to 52% believing rich people’s wealth comes from taking advantage of others (Ekins, 2019). Public relations professionals should be prepared to address these growing sentiments in case this trend continues.

For Americans ages 18-29, 44% said that they “feel angry when [they] read or hear about very rich people” (Ekins, 2019, p. 44). Meanwhile, 39% said they feel more resentment towards the wealthy than they do admiration (Ekins, 2019). All this implies that being apparently wealthy, especially as a public figure, can alienate certain sections of the public, especially when trying to appeal to younger Americans. These numbers are far lower with older demographics (for the 65+ age group, only 11% feel angry when reading about very rich people, and 16% feel more resentment than admiration of the rich) (Ekins, 2019). While this may imply an increase of these negative views in future generations, it might also be caused by differences in life stages. Not only do people over 65 tend to be more conservative, but they’re also reaching retirement age, and may not feel the kind of envy a young professional just starting out may feel towards the wealthy. Regardless of the cause, public relations professionals should keep these numbers in mind when appealing to different demographics and keep an eye on whether the trend continues to increase, or cycles through generations as an aspect of youth.

According to Pew Research data from 2021, negative views towards billionaires grew compared to the previous year. By 2021, about 29% of Americans believe that individuals being

worth over a billion dollars is a bad thing for the country, compared to only 23% in January of 2020 (Daniller, 2021). The trend of young adults having higher rates of negative attitudes towards the wealthy continues, with 50% of people ages 18-30 agreeing that individuals being worth over a billion dollars is bad for the country, compared to 39% the previous year (Daniller, 2021).

Additionally, 21% of Americans agreed with the statement, “Those who are very rich and want more and more power are to blame for many of the major problems in the world, such as financial or humanitarian issues” (Zitelmann, 2020, p. 169).

Pew Research shows that some people associate the wealthy with positive traits as well as negative ones, with 43% of Americans believing the rich are more intelligent and 42% believing they’re hardworking (Parker, 2012). As for negative associations, 55% of survey responders believe the wealthy to be greedier than average, and only 11% believe rich people are more likely to be honest (Parker, 2012).

2.2 Psychology of Envy of Success

Although possibly influenced by distaste for inequality and injustice, it would be misleading to say negative sentiments towards that rich—including a desire to watch them fall from grace—aren’t also influenced by envy. Psychologist Niels van de Ven and others distinguished between benign envy and malicious envy, with benign envy being motivational and malicious envy being demotivating and, in some cases, including wishing ill on the objects of envy (Smith, 2014). Although benign envy is interesting in its encouraging and aspirational nature, malicious envy is what publicly wealthy individuals and the public relations professionals that represent them must be wary of.

People are reluctant to admit they experience envy frequently—if at all. In a survey of 18,000 adults, “[a] Almost 54% of respondents awarded themselves the lowest scores for envy,” with only 3.6% of respondents admitting to being envious frequently (Zitelmann 2019).

Anthropologist George W. Foster speculates that this aversion to admitting to envy is because envy is the direct result of feeling inferior—and few want to admit to feeling inferior (Zitelmann, 2019). To avoid feeling insecure in their own abilities, many people when envying another’s wealth will believe the object of their envy to be unworthy, undeserving, or only wealthy due to luck (Zitelmann, 2019).

With that in mind, interestingly, successful individuals often credit luck as their reason for success just as some of their disparagers would dismiss their success on the same grounds. Zitelmann claims this isn’t proof of success only being based on luck but is a pre-emptive defense against envy (2019). In a study in the *Frontiers in Psychology* journal, surveys revealed that people were more likely to experience malicious envy if they deemed their object of envy to be “undeserving” or what they had (Bolló et al., 2020). The question, then, for public relations professionals is: how to convince the public that wealthy clients are deserving of what they have?

2.3 Social Media and “Eat the Rich”

Taken from the 18th century Geneva philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s quote “When the people shall have nothing more to eat, they will eat the rich,” a growing sentiment and common phrase among social media is “Eat the Rich.” Generally, a response to seeing extravagant displays of wealth—or sometimes, just the wealthy existing—this slogan “can be seen in captions, videos, and even as a spoken phrase. Rallies and protests have seen signs with the words “eat the rich” written upon them and cities have heard the ring of those words in the

form of chants” (Presnall, 2020). Meanwhile, the “the #guillotine2020 hashtag [was also] jumping” in the spring of 2020 (Hess, 2020).

But why has this sentiment grown? Well, one reason proposed is the growing wealth inequality in the U.S. Some speculate that as millennials came of age during the 2008 recession, while Gen Z enters the workforce in the wake of Covid-19, an economically crippling pandemic, both have been primed to have a complicated relationship with wealth and how they view the wealthy. These generations are even more aware of the growing gap between the top 1% and the bottom 99%. The rich are getting richer, compared to “1989 [when] the top 1 percent held almost 30 percent of the United States wealth. In 2016, this number is about 40 percent” (Presnall, 2020).

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when many were unable to work, instead relying on government-issued stimulus checks and unemployment insurance benefits, social media sites began seeing “Eat the Rich” trending more than before. TikTok, for example, saw a trend where users created videos “where they act out actually “eating” the rich” (Rennex, 2020). The trend was characterized by TikTok users pretending to eat a wealthy victim with a “comrade,” but at one point the user would notice that their accomplice had some signifier of wealth (be it an expensive pair of jeans or a slip up admitting going on an expensive vacation) and the user would move to eat their former co-cannibal (Rennex, 2020).

When faced with trends showcasing wealth on TikTok, people respond to videos of “Fleets of luxury cars, indoor pools to lounge in, home movie theaters, private gyms with rows of treadmills, rococo furniture in white leather, Jacuzzis, and block-long mansions” with a “mix of envy and revulsion” (Lavin et al., 2019). While the wealthy on TikTok posted content showing their extravagant lifestyles as part of a “Rich Boy Check Challenge,” low-income users

responded under the hashtag “#eattherich,” showcasing their less glamorous lives to highlight inequality. One user posted a video of her “tiny bathroom with a moldy-looking toilet. Another young woman scanned a meager room shrouded in darkness; a third tied a shoelace” around her waist to make thrifted pants fit when she didn’t own a belt (Lavin et al., 2019).

There’s market enough for these slogans that Etsy sellers provide “‘Eat the Rich’ dinner plates; on Redbubble, a customizable merchandise site, there are countless items for sale with the slogan, and several have replaced the hammer in the hammer-and-sickle of Communism with a fork” (Lavin et al., 2019).

Billionaires have become increasingly the targets of activism and ridicule. In August 2020, protestors “responded to a report that Amazon founder Jeff Bezos is the first man to be worth \$200 billion by building a guillotine in front of his Washington house” (Rowan, 2020). According to Chris Smalls—a former Amazon employee—the point of the display was to fight for a \$30 minimum wage, and take a shot at wealth inequality, “Give a good reason why we don’t deserve a \$30 minimum wage when this man makes \$4,000 a second,” he said (Rowan, 2020).

2.4 The Label of “Nepotism Baby”

Another rising object of scorn on social media is the “Nepotism Baby.” The term “or its shortened version ‘nepo baby’ are the children of celebrities who are following in the . . . footsteps of their parents and pursuing careers in the spotlight” (Laws et al., 2022). The prominent hashtag “#nepotismbaby” social media has focused on mocking celebrities who were born into successful families, rather than being sufficiently self-made. (Laws et al., 2022). Nepotism babies have been placed into one of two groups, those social media users have deemed worthy of their success, and admire despite the potential benefits of nepotism, and those deemed unworthy. The dividing factor? Perceived talent.

Examples include Maude Apatow, “who plays Lexi in Euphoria, has become the latest poster child of nepotism babies who are getting it right, following in the footsteps of Dakota Johnson, Elizabeth Olsen and Zoë Kravitz” (Laws et al., 2022). In contrast, “many have taken issue with how [Kendall Jenner] became such a successful model in the blink of an eye, working in an industry known for seeing disadvantaged women struggling” (Malivindi 2022). Another example of a “nepotism baby” labelled as undeserving is Brooklyn Beckham, son of famous soccer player David Beckham and former Spice Girl Victoria Beckham, who was given “a cooking segment on the Today Show to show off his culinary 'talents'” despite having no real experience as a chef (Malivindi 2022). The consensus on social media was that "If he didn't have famous parents, this would never have been given air time" (Malivindi 2022).

The trending scorn of nepotism babies serves as one more example of a distaste for privileged public figures. Although Hollywood nepotism is nothing new, the debate surrounding the phenomenon on social media is more prevalent than ever. Nepotism babies may be a specific type of public figure, but they prove as a quite clear example of how the public divides and decides the difference between those seen as deserving versus undeserving of their success.

2.5 Examples of Backlash in Pop Culture

These are more than just jokes and hot topics on social media, they're representative of evidence of a genuine growing resentment towards apparent wealth. The Internet is ready to metaphorically cannibalize influencers and celebrities that—in the eyes of the masses—fail to be sensitive, humble, or tactful enough in the ways they share their luxurious lives and rich people problems. Although people have had issues with displays of wealth in the past, many notable examples occurred throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. With people locked in their homes, envy and distaste built up to a boiling point towards the freedom and privileges wealth bought in a

time of quarantine, lockdowns, and unemployment. Some believed the pandemic to be the final straw causing the Kardashians to lose “the capacity to balance relatability and spectacle” once and for all (Kornhaber, 2020).

The Kardashian-Jenner family, specifically, were at the center of many controversies and backlash throughout the pandemic. Stars of a long-running hit show (*Keeping up with the Kardashians*, 2007-2021), and founders of brands like Skims, KKW Beauty, Kylie Cosmetics, and more—the Kardashian-Jenners have a combined net worth of several billion USD and hundreds of million Instagram followers (McDowell, 2021). Their success is well-known and commonly discussed in contemporary American pop culture, and though much of the attention they receive for their successes is positive, they also experience backlash for being overly extravagant, tone-deaf, and contributing to unrealistic standards of beauty and lifestyle.

Kim Kardashian specifically saw backlash for her elaborate birthday bash amid lockdowns. She flew dozens of people to a private island, and while “about 220,000 Americans had died from the coronavirus and 11 million were unemployed, Kim spammed social media with photos of beach banquets and boat rides” (Kornhaber, 2020). The backlash was swift and brutal.

Social media “users paired Kardashian’s photo captions with images of cursed paradises: the *Fyre Festival*, a *Game of Thrones* wedding hall, a *Midsommar* ceremony, Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*” (Kornhaber, 2020). Other responses were characterized by rage and distaste without the attempt to make humor of the situation. Kim’s statement that she was grateful to feel normal in such trying times was met with special vitriol—first, many argued, what kind of normal is a private jet trip to a private island? Second, sentiments like a Tweet stating “You know what would have felt normal for me, Kim? Not having to say goodbye to my

mother over FaceTime as she was dying of COVID ... Rubbing in this in our faces is cruel & clueless” garnered a lot of engagement, sympathy, and agreement (Kornhaber, 2020).

Kim Kardashian faced another wave of backlash in 2022 when she claimed that “nobody wants to work these days” while giving business advice (Brockington, 2022). This comment went viral and received many negative responses on social media. One response was a Tweet stating, “I wish I was born rich so I could be self-made,” receiving over 40,000 likes and nearly 3,000 Retweets (Brockington, 2022). Many comments online were characterized by the belief that if “Kim Kardashian would spend time with real people . . . she’d see many holding down 2 jobs and still being unable to afford their own place or even a smidgen of the luxuries she has,” (Brockington, 2022). For many people, the wealthy sharing how they believe others can build success—especially when attempting to share this advice in a “tough love” tone—comes across as tone deaf, privileged, and out of touch.

Kendall Jenner, Kim Kardashian’s younger half-sister and prominent model, faced her own birthday-related controversy less than a week after her sister’s (Campbell, 2020). Jenner faced criticism for throwing a lavish party with no one wearing masks or social distancing, along with installing “a ‘no social media’ rule so people wouldn’t find out about it” (Campbell, 2020). A party full of influencers and celebrities held at a hotel is no way to keep something under wraps, however, and backlash on social media soon began. One user expressed frustration that “the attendees are rich celebrities who couldn’t care less about thousands of people dying every day . . . and they’re out there partying” (Campbell, 2020). Users expressing outrage that celebrities and influencers were able to live and party as if the pandemic wasn’t happening around them was a common thread of reaction to celebrity behavior. While those “who chose to party despite public-health guidelines faced backlash from their followers and fans. Many

apologized and then continued partying,” creating a cycle of misbehavior and apologies with no real change (Dodgson and Mendez II, 2021).

Similarly, a social media influencer Arielle Charnas faced backlash when, after testing positive for Covid-19 in March 2020, retreated to the Hamptons (Griffith, 2020). The controversy began when, in a time where Covid tests were reserved for a select few who fit certain criteria, she had acquired a test through her friend, Dr. Jake Deutsch (Griffith, 2020). The premise of the backlash was that Charnas “was privileged and had received preferential treatment at a time when many sick people, including healthcare workers, were unable to get diagnoses” (Griffith, 2020). To make matters worse for Charnas, she began posting photos of herself from the Hamptons shortly after testing positive for Covid-19. Some “were so upset by Charnas' decision to uproot her family that they contacted Nordstrom, the retailer she had collaborated with for a clothing collection last year” (Griffith, 2020). The backlash wasn't limited merely to critical comments on her page—people began targeting her career and allegedly sending death threats.

2.6 The Decline of “Flex” Culture

For every action is an equal and opposite reaction. The expectation of one decade is the next decade's version of embarrassing.

“Flexing” is defined as to “outwardly brag about one's clothing, body, lifestyle, car, house, really anything that people attach ego to” (“What is ‘Flexing’? And Why You Shouldn't,” 2020). “Flex Culture” is the prevalence of this behavior on social media, with influencers and common social media users alike engaging in competitive, repetitive “flexing” behavior for attention and admiration. In economics, this concept is referred to as “Conspicuous Consumption”—a term coined by Thomas Veblen in 1899 which refers to “the public

consumption or usage of costly goods, services, or leisure activities out of the conscious or unconscious motive to display or enhance one's own social status" (Hammerl and Kradschnig, p. 1). Flex culture is by no means a new phenomenon, but social media has allowed individuals to share this conspicuous consumption more easily, and view others as they partake in the same behavior. More than ever, people are exposed to extravagance every day on their social media platforms, and while this has been a popular form of content on social media since its beginning, many are beginning to experience flexing burnout.

Although many still see flexing as aspirational, others have begun to see the practice as gauche. Pelc notes that recent years have seen a rise in "'inconspicuous consumption': a spurning of loud labels or transparent attempts to impress, matched by an embrace of 'sustainability', 'purpose' and 'wellness' as the new markers of distinction" (2021). Although perhaps overly idealistic, bioethicist Peter Singer believes that "This could be the last generation that flaunts their wealth" (Pelc, 2021). Although, this could just be a dip in conspicuous consumption in reaction to an overabundance. It seems likely that inconspicuous consumption could be another trend meant to fade, but for now, it's a trend public relations professionals must be aware of and address.

While logomania and flexing obvious designer pieces ruled fashion in the early 2000s and 2010s, "coded luxury . . . has recently had a bit of a Renaissance in modern culture" (Twersky 2022). If clothes covered in the Louis Vuitton monogram print are conspicuous consumption, then coded luxury refers to inconspicuous consumption. Reserved for those in-the-know with subtle tastes, coded luxury brands sell "beautifully made everyday staples—white t-shirts, crewneck sweaters, and tailored blazers often so inconspicuous, they could easily be mistaken as coming from a shop like Gap," yet they are only affordable for consumers with

thousands to spare on each piece (Twersky 2022). Brands that once relied heavily on the popularity of their logos “are [now] also providing options for their more coded-inclined customers” in their 2022 collections (Twersky 2022). On social media, hiding wealth in plain sight has become more admirable than flexing well-known signs of wealth.

However, engaging in coded luxury is still a form of conspicuous consumption, just not one understood by the masses. Coded luxury achieves exactly what flexing is meant to—showcasing your wealth, status, and prestige. However, the code of wearing items only recognizable to those in the know has created almost a shield around individuals engaging in this behavior. In most cases, the only people who will recognize coded luxury as a “flex” are, themselves, able to afford these items. Coded luxury gains social capital with those in the same class, without alienating individuals outside of it. According to Twersky, “[p]art of the allure attached to coded luxury brands is that knowing about them, (and owning them), enters you into a sort of elite club.” (2022).

Additionally, flexing may prove to be a socially alienating behavior. A 2019 study in the *Social Psychological and Personality Science* journal revealed that, although people assumed apparent displays of wealth would attract more friends, it turned out that “from the perspective of would-be friends, individuals who display high-status markers are found to be less attractive as new friends than those with neutral status markers” (Garcia, Weaver, and Chen, p. 1).

2.7 A Historical Context

Opulence in the Gilded Age, a term coined by Mark Twain in his novel of the same name in 1873 to describe the economic boom of the post-revolutionary war period to the turn of the 20th century, shares many parallels to now (Page, 1992). Conspicuous consumption defined this time, which—as stated earlier—is a term coined by Thorstein Veblen in 1899 to describe wealthy

individuals displaying their wealth in extravagant ways to attempt to achieve a higher social status. An example would be “the behavior of people like Mrs. Cornelius Sherman Martin, who hosted a ball [in 1885] for 900 that the hosts were proud to disclose cost \$370,000,” which is equivalent to over \$10 million in 2022 (“A Century of Wealth,” 1999). This extravagance in exchange for social capital and prominence is reminiscent of showcasing wealth on social media in exchange for likes, admiration, and followers. The urge to flaunt what one can (and sometimes what one can’t) afford to prompt admiration, envy, and attention from others is not a new one of the social media age.

Christine Page notes that this behavior predates the Gilded Age, arguing that “the desire to conspicuously consume dates back to tribal times when men possessed women and slaves as trophies of their status” (p. 82, 1992). But what and how people conspicuously consume has changed through time and varies from culture to culture. Although at one point, only aristocracy were eligible to engage in the highest level of the game, The Gilded Age marked a point where capitalists truly began to make their mark. Criticism and defense of this behavior has existed for centuries. While some, like Marx, may argue this ostentatious display of wealth is an unfortunate result of capitalism, others counter that consumption is a form of self-expression that people can use to define their identities and place in the world (Page, 1992).

According to Page, the birth of conspicuous consumption culture in America was the “competition between the old and new rich [that] took place during the Gilded Age” (1992). Extravagance in this age led to more in the next, with the “advent of the department store, which further allowed the middle class to purchase status through the possession of luxury and/or frivolous merchandise” (Page, 1992). Conspicuous consumption was no longer just for aristocrats or robber barons, consumerism became a central part of American culture. More

people participating only heightened the pressure to take part, due to the bandwagon effect and the desire to “keep up with the Joneses” (Page, 1992). Yet, as things become more popular with lower classes, others may choose to take themselves out of the practice. The previously discussed concepts of inconspicuous consumption and coded luxury are not new, either. Page notes that “as lavish spending has become commonplace, i.e. 'vulgar' (Galbraith, 1984), the rich have needed to find other venues to advertise their success” (1992). Proving superiority to the masses, apparently, is a constantly evolving game, then and now.

Parallels can also be made between 2022 and that of the hyper-consumption of the 1980s. Page states “[t]he flashy consumption of the 1980's, like many fashions, wore itself out by 1990” (1992). When facing harder economic times following the 80s, Boomers moved focus from self-indulgence to community, family, and environment. Although this could be simply a pattern in economic trends or a natural part of young generations reaching a certain milestone of adulthood, it's possible America is facing a similar effect with Millennials and Gen Z. In 1992, Page argued that “[f]lagrancy is out, and philanthropy is in. Status is bestowed to those who 'do' rather than those that 'have.'" Then, she poses the question “whether this revival of social awareness is just a passing fancy or if it is a permanent trend” (Page, 1992). From the perspective of 2022, a revival of social awareness is exactly what the culture is experiencing today.

Although this might have proved true for established, white, middle-class Americans, this doesn't entirely or accurately describe the entire culture of the 90s. Especially in the 80s and 90s, when hip-hop culture sparked logomania and turned conspicuous fashion consumption into what it is today. Although logomania may be a common part of luxury fashion now, it was a Harlem-based designer and haberdasher known as Dapper Dan who is “responsible for popularizing the aesthetic trope” (Stringham, 2021). While “the '80s were known for opulent excess, the 1990s

saw peak logomania as consumers used branding like Fendi's double 'F' monogram on bags, clothes, even strollers, to assert the status, and that magic that Day so knowingly talked about" (Stringham, 2021). Sub-cultures will always exist, and conspicuous consumption may evolve, but will likely always exist in one form or another. For publicly wealthy individuals, however, the culture may have reached a point where this conspicuous consumption is a hazard for their public image rather than an expected part of their public persona.

2.8 Socialist Generations

Alongside growing public vocalizations against the rich, statistics show that Millennials and Gen Z are currently more accepting of socialism than older generations. Whether this is a feature of these generations that will stand the tests of time, or a fleeting characteristic of youth and younger individuals often being further left, is something the future will reveal. For now, however, public relations professionals attempting to appeal to these age ranges must keep in mind these demographics possess a heightened sympathy for socialism and negative assumptions about the wealthy.

Niemietz (2021) found that younger people were more likely to associate socialism with positive terms like "equal" and "fair," less likely to associate with "failure" compared to older generations. Additionally, younger people were more likely to associate capitalism with "terms such as 'exploitative', 'unfair', 'the rich' and 'corporations'" (Niemietz, 2021, p.7).

Over 70% of young people surveyed agreed that climate change, racism, greed, materialism, and selfishness were—at least in part—fueled by a capitalist economic system. (Niemietz, 2021). And although some may argue that generations in the past have been further left in their younger years before drifting back to the center or right, Niemientz (2021) counters, "There are no detectable differences between the economic attitudes of people in their late teens

and people in their early 40s. It is no longer true that people ‘grow out’ of socialist ideas as they get older” (p. 6). Although Niemientz may claim this about people in their early 40s, it might prove to be untrue as those individuals pass the age of 45. Research has found that “people become more conservative by about 45 years old” (Kuta, 2020). With “age 45 [being] the rough average of when most people have drifted far enough right to no longer be considered liberal. The rightward drift slowed down past age 45, but did not stop” (Kuta, 2020). As the oldest millennials are 41 as of 2022, it will be interesting to check up on these statistics again in 5 to 10 years.

In 2019, a Gallup Poll found that only 50% of young adults viewed capitalism positively, a stark drop from 66% in 2010 (Saad, 2019). Considering previous generations, only 30% of Baby Boomers and 34% of Gen Xers have a positive view of socialism, compared to 50% of Millennials having a positive opinion of the economic system (Saad, 2019).

Of course, this isn’t the first time American youth culture has been tightly linked with further left political beliefs. The 60s and 70s, specifically, “triggered transformations that have resonated for more than half a century. Black freedom movements and uprisings, women's liberation, gay liberation, Native American, Chicano, and Asian American struggles yielded profound legal and cultural changes” (“New Left and Antiwar Movement History and Geography”). During that period, youth culture was characterized highly-motivated student activists, and included anti-Vietnam War strikes on college campuses and the formation of Students for a Democratic Society—one of the most prominent organizations of the “New Left” (“New Left and Antiwar Movement History and Geography”).

Contrasting modern youth politics with this history reveals a currently politically opinionated youth, but perhaps one not as politically active in the “real world.” Politically active people

online are labelled, “Slacktivists,” with “slacktivism” being defined as the perhaps misguided “idea that by liking, sharing, or retweeting something you are helping out” (Fisher, 2020).

Slacktivists when faced with a social issue may, instead of protesting or striking, may take a stand by changing their profile photo, retweeting, or starting a hashtag (Fisher, 2020). Although Millennials and Gen Z may be more comfortable expressing their beliefs on social media than taking to the streets, their views of public figures and company behaviors are greatly shaped by these beliefs. Just as they take to social media to take their own stand, they expect these public figures and companies to do the same.

2.9 The Public Figure and “Personal Social Responsibility”

Whether performative or “slacktivism,” there seems to be a growing expectation for public figures to take a stand—whether in interviews or on social media. Those who don’t engage in this behavior may risk being labelled part of the problem, rather than avoiding backlash from taking sides. Increasingly, people “want celebrities to actually do something about the problems they profess to care about” (Moylan, 2021). On social media, beyond just “covering topics such as lifestyle topics, influencers very recently started to integrate political content in their posts” (Riedl et al., 2021). Just like corporations are expected to take part in Corporate Social Responsibility, prominent public figures are expected to be personally socially responsible. As “climate change, sustainability, zero waste, and political involvement . . . is one of the latest trends taking social media platforms by storm,” influencers and celebrities are expected to participate (Förster, 2020).

For influencers, finding a niche section of content and keeping things light is no longer seen as enough. Young social media users expect more from the people they follow, and content that once did well may now get criticized as gauche, wasteful, and unsustainable. For example,

the trend of social media influencers buying \$800 of cheap clothes to showcase in a haul gets labelled as “rampant, over-the-top consumerism,” (Gan, 2021). While this content may do well in views, comments will often be full of calls to “stop glamorizing over-consumption” (Gan 2021). Instead, many demand a “more conscious approach to buying and consuming products, sustainable vacation options, and fair fashion alternatives” (Förster, 2020). This decision to create more meaningful content isn’t entirely done out of altruism or true belief, however. When content is more meaningful, “whether in an environmental, social, or political sense, [it is better] received by users in the form of clicks and shares” (Förster, 2020).

Social media influencers have also become more involved with philanthropy, with social media creating “new avenues for small scale, targeted relief amplified by passionate digital followers” (Coffey 2020). At its most successful, influencers and celebrities raising funds online not only helps nonprofits, but it also improves public opinion of those who successfully get their fans and followers to contribute. Celebrities “engage in social causes in order to retain (or reclaim) their fame” and maintain good will with the public (Panis and Van Den Bulck, p. 79, 2012). Yet, the public is not unaware of this motivation. When done without finesse, attempts by public figures to improve their image can be seen as calculated, inauthentic, and worthy of mockery by the masses.

2.10 The Hazards of Inauthenticity

Although tactfully taking a stance on prominent social issues might benefit public figures, voicing opinions without tact does more harm than not speaking at all. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, several prominent figures were mocked for speaking on issues from a place of perceived privilege and ignorance.

Daytime TV talk show host and comedian Ellen DeGeneres, for example, came under fire in the headlines for comparing quarantining in her mansion to being in prison. A statement meant to commiserate with the struggles of everyone at the time was instead seen as privileged and offensive while Covid-19 was running rampant through prisons (Coley, 2020). The late Virgil Abloh, founder of streetwear brand Off-White and creative director for Louis Vuitton menswear, “was being memed into a fine dust after posting a screenshot of his paltry fifty-dollar donation to a bail fund” (Coley, 2020).

Videos of celebrities coming together to support a cause also faced mockery more than once. Attempting to lighten people’s moods, actress Gal Gadot brought together a roster of celebrities to sing John Lennon’s “Imagine.” Although it was meant to inspire in trying times, “immediate internet feedback was that it was tone deaf” (Moylan, 2021). Regardless of good intentions, the “general consensus was that a bunch of rich celebrities imagining a world with ‘no possessions’ while people around the country suffered a social, health and economic crisis wasn’t what the world needed at the time” (Moylan, 2021). People did not appreciate the message or who it was coming from at the time—and the “Imagine” video was labelled as performative, self-indulgent, and embarrassing. Social media users “are getting tired of performative activism; they want actual receipts from celebrities trying to do good” (Moylan, 2021).

Another example is the “I Take Responsibility” video, which was labelled as another unwanted celebrity PSA. A video filmed in “a somber black-and-white and scored with saccharine piano, the spot shows Sarah Paulson, Stanley Tucci, Kesha, and others vowing no longer to” engage in behaviors that allow racism to thrive (Coley, 2020). After its release, “many people took to social media to call out the new campaign and compare it to the celebrity sing-a-

long Gal Gadot created during the beginning of quarantine” (Scott, 2020). Although again created with good intentions, people were left wanting and maintained a “desire to push industry leaders [and public figures] toward more decisive action in combatting anti-black racism” (Coley, 2020). The question was, how useful is just a video sharing guilt, and what effect does that have on society? Yet again, the actions of celebrities here were labelled as performative and, above all else, ineffective.

2.11 Examples of Doing it Right

As harmful as it is for public figures when they miss the mark, doing the right thing—in the right way—pays off spectacularly.

Dolly Parton serves as a great example of celebrities doing it right during the pandemic. The country singer was praised across pop culture and throughout social media for donating \$1 million to the production of the Moderna vaccine, all while refusing to jump the line for her own vaccination (Moylean, 2021). It’s this type of socially responsible action that earns good will with the public during a pandemic, more than creating a highly produced video meant to uplift the masses.

In contrast to the “I Take Responsibility” video response, John Boyega’s speech at a Black Lives Matter protest were very well-received, after some initial pushback from fans who disagreed with the movement. The “British actor, who is of Nigerian descent, has been very outspoken in disparaging racism and brutal policing and has voiced support for protests around the world” (Coley, 2020). It’s this consistency and authentic expression of his values and beliefs that set him apart in the eyes of the public from the celebrities speaking only once on the issue in the “I Take Responsibility” video.

Chapter 3

3.1 Research Design and Methodology

The survey was designed and distributed through Qualtrics. A survey was chosen as the most useful form of primary research because the main goal of this study is to ascertain current public opinion and potential ways to influence it. The survey consisted of 28 questions, including questions to distinguish demographics by age, gender, income, and political alignment. Further questions went into social media usage, pop culture interest and knowledge, the perception of wealth, perception of background of wealthy public figures, and different opinions on celebrity and influencer philanthropy and engagement with social issues. The main goal of these questions was to infer whether different behaviors elicited different views of public figures and their success, and how impactful engaging in those behaviors were on respondents' views.

The survey was written around the hypothesis that public figures, influencers, and celebrities that share their extravagant lifestyles on social media and through the press can show themselves authentically contributing to social causes to avoid backlash. Survey questions were designed to discover if these contributions were indeed effective, and if so, which forms of engagement—donations, volunteering, or speaking out on social causes—elicited the strongest, most positive responses. Questions were also included that were meant to gain insight into general feelings about celebrities, influencers, their displays of public wealth, and whether opinions about these figures were impacted by the pandemic.

The survey was sent out in part through individual digital contact, including e-mail and text messages. Additionally, the survey was posted to LinkedIn. All respondents were encouraged to share it with other people they knew to maximize responses. The survey was live

for ten days from April 1, 2022, to April 11, 2022 and received 107 respondents. All respondents were kept anonymous and no names or identifying information was taken.

3.2 Findings

Of 107 respondents, 29 (27.1%) respondents identified as male, while 75 (70.09%) identified as female, and 3 (2.8%) identified as non-binary or third gender. As for the breakdown of age, 66 (61.68%) were between the ages of 18 and 24. 33 (30.84%) were between the ages of 25 and 34. 4 (3.74%) were between the ages of 35 and 44. 2 (1.86%) were between the ages of 45 and 54, 2 (1.86%) were also between the ages of 55 and 64. None were over the age of 65.

Concerning the respondents' income, 37 (34.57%) reported an income below \$25,000 a year. 24 (22.43%) reported an income between \$25,000 and \$50,000. 26 (24.3%) reported an income between \$50,000 and \$100,000. 10 (9.35%) reported an income between \$100,000 and \$200,000. 3 (2.8%) reported an income over \$200,000, and 7 (6.54%) respondents preferred not to share their income.

As for the political affiliation of respondents, 31 (28.97%) considered themselves to be very liberal or left leaning. 36 (33.64%) considered themselves to be moderately liberal or left leaning. 24 (22.43%) considered themselves to be moderate or center. 12 (11.21%) considered themselves to be moderately conservative or right leaning, and 4 (3.74%) selected very conservative or right leaning. When asked if their political views had changed throughout their life, 17 (15.89%) responded that yes, they have become significantly more liberal. 41 (38.32%) respondents said that they had become slightly more liberal. 34 (31.78%) responded that no, their views had not change throughout their life. 13 (12.15%) responded that yes, their views had become slightly more conservative, while 2 (1.87%) responded that their views had become significantly more conservative.

As for social media usage among respondents, 3 (2.8%) reported that they don't use social media. 6 (5.61%) respondents reported that they use it less than once a day, while 35 (32.71%) reported that they use it 1 to 5 times per day. 29 (27.1%) respondents reported using social media 6-10 times per day. 12 (11.21%) respondents reported using social media 11-15 times per day, while 21 (19.63%) reported using it over 15 times a day. When asked if their social media usage increased throughout the pandemic, 74 (69.16%) reported an increase, 12 (11.21%) reported a decrease, and 21 (19.63%) kept up the same level of social media usage.

When asked how often they keep up with news surrounding influencers and celebrities, 12 (11.21%) responded very often, 35 (32.71%) said somewhat often, 16 (14.95%) said neither often nor rarely, 27 (25.23%) said somewhat rarely, while 17 (15.89%) said very rarely. Of those who said very rarely or somewhat rarely, 46.03% said it was because a lack of interest, 9.52% said it was because a lack of time, and 44.44% said it was because of a combination of a lack of interest and time.

When asked what their general feelings on online influencers were, 1 (0.93%) said very positive, 28 (26.17%) said somewhat positive, 33 (30.84%) said neutral, 38 (35.41%) said somewhat negative, and 7 (6.54%) said very negative. When asked on their opinions of traditional celebrities—such as actors, singers, etc.—9 (8.41%) said very positive, 37 (34.58%) said somewhat positive, 53 (49.53%) said neutral, 10 (9.35%) said somewhat negative, and 5 (4.67%) said very negative.

When asked to describe their reaction to celebrities and influencers sharing images of expensive cars, trips, or luxury goods or social media, 2 (1.87%) said their reaction was very positive, 10 (9.35%) said somewhat positive, 38 (35.51%) said neutral, 46 (42.99%) said somewhat negative, and 11 (10.28%) said very negative. When asked how news stories about

celebrity wealth and lifestyles make them feel about the celebrity in question, 1 (0.93%) said very positive, 12 (11.21%) said somewhat positive, 45 (42.06%) said neutral, 42 (39.25%) said somewhat negative, and 7 (6.54%) said very negative.

When asked how news stories about celebrity involvements in nonprofits and social issues make them feel about the celebrity in question, 18 (16.82%) said very positive, 60 (56.07%) said somewhat positive, 22 (20.56%) said neutral, 5 (4.67%) said somewhat negative, and 2 (1.87%) said very negative.

When asked to describe their reaction to news stories about celebrity lifestyles throughout the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to before the pandemic, 9 (8.41%) said they were more positive than before, 45 (42.06%) said they were more negative than before, and 53 (49.53%) said they were roughly the same.

When asked if celebrities or influencers coming from a low-income background affects how they view them and their success, 25 (23.36%) said it very positively affected their view, 51 (47.66%) said it somewhat positively affected their view, 29 (27.1%) said it did not affect their view, 2 (1.87%) said it somewhat negatively affected their view, and none said is very negatively affected their view. When asked if celebrities or influencers coming from a high-income background affects how they view them and their success, 1 (0.93%) said it very positively affected their view, 6 (5.61%) said somewhat positively, 54 (50.47%) said it did not affect their view, 41 (38.32%) said somewhat negatively, and 5 (4.67%) said very negatively.

Next, respondents were asked that when celebrities and influencers have parents or relatives in the industry, how that affects how they view them and their success. 3 (2.8%) said very positively, 6 (5.61%) said somewhat positively, 53 (49.53%) said it did not affect their view, 43 (40.19%) said somewhat negatively, and 2 (1.87%) said very negatively.

When asked how strongly celebrities and influencers donating to causes that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers, 16 (14.95%) said very strongly affects their view, 37 (34.58%) said somewhat strongly, 46 (42.99%) said slightly affects their view, and 8 (7.48%) said does not affect their view. When asked how positively celebrities and influencers donating to causes that they care about impacted their view of them, 15 (14.02%) said very positively, 71 (66.36%) said somewhat positively, 15 (14.02%) said neither positively nor negatively, 4 (3.74%) said somewhat negatively, and 1 (0.93%) said extremely negatively.

When asked how strongly celebrities and influencers volunteering their time to contribute to causes that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers, 21 (19.63%) said very strongly affects their view, 40 (37.38%) said somewhat strongly, 37 (34.58%) said slightly affects their view, and 8 (7.48%) said that it did not affect their view. When asked how positively celebrities and influencers volunteering their time to contribute to causes that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers, 25 (23.36%) said extremely positively affects their view, 60 (56.07%) said somewhat positively, 19 (17.76%) said neither positively nor negatively, 3 (2.8%) said somewhat negatively, and none said extremely negatively.

When asked how strongly celebrities and influencers using their platforms to speak out on social issues that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers, 22 (20.56%) said very strongly affects their view, 43 (40.19%) said somewhat strongly affects their view, 33 (30.84%) said slightly affects their view, and 9 (8.41%) said it did not affect their view. When asked how positively celebrities and influencers using their platforms to speak out on social issues that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers, 19 (17.76%) said extremely positively, 61 (57.01%) said somewhat positively, 23 (21.5%) said

neither positively nor negatively, 4 (3.74%) said somewhat negatively, and none said extremely negatively.

When asked if they view celebrities and influencers that come from low-income backgrounds as more deserving of their success compared to those born into wealth, 22 (20.56%) said significantly more deserving, 42 (39.25%) said somewhat more deserving, 39 (36.45%) and neither more nor less deserving, 3 (2.8%) said somewhat less deserving, and 1 (0.93%) said significantly less deserving. When asked if they view celebrities who volunteer for causes that they consider important as more or less deserving of their success, compared to those who don't, 11 (10.28%) said significantly more deserving, 32 (29.91%) said somewhat more deserving, 57 (53.27%) said neither more nor less deserving, 5 (4.67%) said somewhat less deserving, and 2 (1.87%) said significantly less deserving. When asked if they view celebrities who donate to causes that they consider important as more or less deserving of their success, compared to those who don't, 6 (5.61%) said significantly more deserving, 38 (35.51%) said somewhat more deserving, 58 (54.2%) said neither more nor less deserving, 5 (4.67%) said somewhat less deserving, and none said significantly less deserving.

When asked if they view celebrities who speak out on social issues that they consider important as more or less deserving of their success, 10 (9.35%) said significantly more deserving, 30 (28.04%) said somewhat more deserving, 62 (57.94%) said neither more nor less deserving, 4 (3.74%) said somewhat less deserving, and 1 (0.93%) said significantly less deserving.

3.3 Analysis

These results gave some insight into public opinion of online influencers, celebrities, and how different aspects of their behavior and background impact individuals' views of these public

figures. Comparing results of this survey to previous research is difficult, because very little published research on this exact topic exists, especially looking at public opinion or including online influencers.

When starting to analyze the implications of these results, it seems that online influencers received more negative perceptions than traditional celebrities. Comparing the results of the general opinions of these two groups reveals that while only 0.93% of respondents had a very positive view of online influencers, 8.41% had a very positive view of traditional celebrities. This difference continues with 26.17% have a somewhat positive view of influencers, and 34.58% having a somewhat positive view of traditional celebrities. Then, while 35.41% said that they had a somewhat negative view of influencers, and 6.54% said that they had a very negative view—only 9.35% had a somewhat negative view of traditional celebrities, and 4.67% said they had a very negative view.

This could be the result of several different causes, perhaps a combination of issues. One is that influencers might be engaging in more publicly alienating behavior than traditional celebrities do and fail to engage in enough behaviors that earn good will with the public. Another cause could be that online influencers, when compared to traditional celebrities, are a newer part of the culture, and it will take time for them to be respected or admired in the same way. Another reason could be is that many people believe that celebrities are successful because they possess a type of exceptional talent, while online influencers are mainly interpreted as only being talented at promoting themselves through social media platforms. Traditional celebrities are also more likely to work with public relations professionals to maintain positive public perception, in comparison to online influencers who may be working alone or with a very limited team. This

could also imply that online influencers must implement more goodwill-earning behaviors to work against this comparatively higher negative perception of their profession.

Concerning the perception of public shows of wealth, when asked to describe their reaction to celebrities and influencers sharing images of expensive cars, trips, or luxury goods on social media, 1.87% of respondents said their reaction was very positive, 9.35% said somewhat positive, 35.51% said neutral, 42.99% said somewhat negative, and 10.28% said very negative. What this data reveals about celebrity and influencer behavior is that, although sharing images of these things may gain impressions, views, and engagement, it's also more likely to gain somewhat negative to very negative reactions, and only causes somewhat positive to very positive reactions with 11.22% of respondents. The suggestion here is that celebrities and influencers should carefully consider when sharing images of expensive trips, cars, and luxury goods is necessary, and when the views on content are not worth causing negative reactions.

Similarly, when asked how news stories about celebrity wealth and lifestyles make them feel about the celebrity in question, 0.93% said very positive, 11.21% said somewhat positive, 42.06% said neutral, 39.25% said somewhat negative, and 6.54% said very negative. Although the largest section of respondents reported feeling neutral, combined, more said somewhat negative to very negative. The implication here is that while some might still believe no press is bad press, being consistently in the media mainly because of wealth and lifestyle is more likely to earn ill will from the public than positive attention. The goal, then, is to gain attention for something more positive—such as philanthropy, volunteering, or engaging in social issues.

When asked how news stories about celebrity involvements in nonprofits and social issues make them feel about the celebrity in question, 16.82% said very positive, 56.07% said somewhat positive, 20.56% said neutral, 4.67% said somewhat negative, and 1.87% said very

negative. Reactions to stories on philanthropy and engagement in social issues were more positive than the reactions to stories on celebrity wealth and lifestyles were negative. Although bad and outrage-inducing behavior is more likely to get a story than feel-good behavior, it's still important to note that, as expected, celebrities engaging in socially responsible behavior can gain positive reactions from the public when it is covered in the press.

When asked to describe their reaction to news stories about celebrity lifestyles throughout the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to before the pandemic, 8.41% said they were more positive than before, 42.06% said they were more negative than before, and 49.53% said they were roughly the same. Although more said that their views were roughly the same, 42.06% of respondents saying they have a more negative view of celebrities due to media coverage of their lifestyles through the Covid-19 pandemic is very significant. The question then is, what about their behavior alienated such a strong portion of the public, and how can public figures and the public relations professionals who guide them prevent causing more damage to their image, or even undo some of that damage?

A possible option is donating to nonprofits. When asked how strongly celebrities and influencers donating to causes that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers, 14.95% said it very strongly affects their view, 34.58% said somewhat strongly, 42.99% said slightly affects their view, 7.48% said does not affect their view. Although most overall said it only slightly affected their view, encouraging a slightly more positive view of a public figure can be very helpful, especially when combined with the 34.58% whose view will be somewhat strongly affected, and the 14.95% whose view will be very strongly affected.

Now that we know how strongly donating to nonprofits affected the views of respondents, the question turns to how positive reactions are. When asked how positively

celebrities and influencers donating to causes that they care about impacted their view of them, 14.02% said extremely positively, 66.36% said somewhat positively, 14.02% said neither positively nor negatively, 3.74% said somewhat negatively, and 0.93% said extremely negatively. With a combined 80.38% of respondents having a somewhat positive to very positive view of celebrities and influencers donating to relevant nonprofits, this reveals that this behavior is greatly beneficial to the public image of these figures.

When asked how strongly celebrities and influencers volunteering their time to contribute to causes that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers, 19.63% said very strongly affects their view, 37.38% said somewhat strongly, 34.58% said slightly affects their view, and 7.48% said that it did not affect their view. Compared to how strongly people reacted to celebrities and influencers donating, it seems that volunteering elicited a slightly stronger response. Although the same number of respondents said that it did not affect their view, more said it very strongly and somewhat strongly influenced their opinion of the celebrity in question. The difference was not large but is still interesting to note—and could be because volunteering may be seen as more effort than a publicly wealthy individual donating a sum of money.

Interestingly, when asked how positively celebrities and influencers volunteering their time to contribute to causes that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers, 23.36% said extremely positively affects their view, 56.07% said somewhat positively, 17.76% said neither positively nor negatively, 2.8% said somewhat negatively, and none said extremely negatively. So, while responses to how strongly celebrities and influencers volunteering impacted their view leaned towards stronger, fewer respondents said that volunteering prompted a somewhat positive to extremely positive response—79.43% compared

to 80.38%—of course, this is a very small difference and is likely insignificant, it's still interesting to compare the two.

When asked how strongly celebrities and influencers using their platforms to speak out on social issues that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers, 20.56% said that it very strongly affects their view, 40.19% said somewhat strongly affects their view, 30.84% said slightly affects their view, and 8.41% said it did not affect their view. This is more people saying that speaking out on social issues very strongly or somewhat strongly affects their view, compared to donations or volunteering. Again, when comparing the responses the differences were present but slight.

When asked how positively celebrities and influencers using their platforms to speak out on social issues that they care about impacted their view of said celebrities and influencers 17.76% said extremely positively, 57.01% said somewhat positively, 21.5% said neither positively nor negatively, 3.74% said somewhat negatively, and none said extremely negatively. Compared to both volunteering and donations, this action prompted the least positive response, with only 74.77% of respondents saying celebrities and influencers speaking out on social issues extremely positively or somewhat positively affected their view.

When comparing how respondents reacted to these three potential actions of celebrities and influencers, donations caused the most positive response (80.38% saying extremely positive or somewhat positive perception of donations), then volunteering (79.43% saying extremely positive or somewhat positive perception), and then speaking out on social issues (74.77% saying extremely positive or somewhat positive perception.) The implication here is that although donations and volunteering are nearly tied for how positively they affect public opinion, speaking out on social issues lags behind—although it is still largely seen as positive. As

donations and volunteering nearly tied for first place, it could be implied that those actions should be prioritized over speaking out on social issues—if the celebrity or influencer in question can't engage in all three actions.

Interestingly, however, the results for how strongly respondents' views were impacted by these behaviors was the inverse of this ranking. For speaking out on social issues, 60.75% of respondents said it somewhat strongly to very strongly impacted their view, for volunteering that number was 57.01%, and for donating that number was 49.53%. So, although people may react more positively to donations and volunteering, it's speaking out on social issues that elicits the strongest reaction. For the greatest positive reaction from the public, celebrities and influencers should donate to nonprofits. For the strongest reaction—that is still positive—they should speak out on social issues.

As previously discussed in the literature review section concerning the psychology of envy, envy turns malicious more often when people view a person's success as “undeserved.” The question then is, which actions and aspects of a celebrity or influencer's public persona make them seem more deserving than others?

When asked if they view celebrities who volunteer for causes that they consider important as more or less deserving of their success, compared to those who don't, 10.28% said significantly more deserving, 29.91% said somewhat more deserving, 53.27% said neither more nor less deserving, 4.67% said somewhat less deserving, and 1.87% said significantly less deserving. Although the majority of respondents said that celebrities and influencers volunteering doesn't change how they view whether they're deserving of success, 40.19% saying that celebrities and influencers volunteering made them significantly more deserving to somewhat more deserving of success is certainly a significant number.

When asked if they view celebrities who donate to causes that they consider important as more or less deserving of their success, compared to those who don't, 5.61% said significantly more deserving, 35.51% said somewhat more deserving, 54.2% said neither more nor less deserving, 4.67% said somewhat less deserving, and none said significantly less deserving. Again, while the majority said donating didn't affect how deserving of success that they believed a celebrity or influencer to be, 41.12% saying that those who do donate are significantly more deserving to somewhat more deserving of success is a substantial part of the population.

When asked if they view celebrities who speak out on social issues that they consider important as more or less deserving of their success, 9.35% said significantly more deserving, 28.04% said somewhat more deserving, 57.94% said neither more nor less deserving, 3.74% said somewhat less deserving, and 0.93% said significantly less deserving. As seen earlier, speaking out on social issues elicited the least positive response. Although still significant, 37.39% saying that speaking out on social issues makes them view celebrities and influencers as significantly more deserving to somewhat more deserving of success is still less than either donating or volunteering.

As this trend continues, while also needing further research to see if it does, this could imply that the public may see speaking out on social issues as slightly less effective and less necessary coming from wealthy public figures. Of course, engaging in all three positive socially responsible behaviors would be ideal for a celebrity or influencer attempting to earn good will with the public, if necessary, donating and volunteering can be prioritized over speaking on social issues. Or, if a public figure wants to avoid voicing their opinions in general, they can still have a very effective approach to eliciting positive responses from the public through donations and volunteering.

When looking at background's effect on public image compared to actions, respondents were asked if celebrities or influencers coming from a low-income background affects how they view them and their success. 23.36% said it very positively affected their view, 47.66% said it somewhat positively affected their view, 27.1% said it did not affect their view, 1.87% said it somewhat negatively affected their view, and none said is very negatively affected their view. When asked if celebrities or influencers coming from a high-income background affects how they view them and their success, 0.93% said it very positively affected their view, 5.61% said somewhat positively, 50.47% said it did not affect their view, 38.32% said somewhat negatively, and 4.67% said very negatively.

When looking at these answers, although roughly half of respondents said it did not affect their view if celebrities and influencers were from low or high-income backgrounds, it seems like being from a high-income background is a somewhat alienating trait for a significant part of the population (42.99% saying they view it somewhat negatively to very negatively.) Meanwhile, coming from a low-income background seems to be an endearing trait to a significant portion of the population, with 52.33% of the population saying they view celebrities and influencers coming from a low-income background somewhat positively to very positively.

As for whether the public views celebrities and influencers that come from low-income backgrounds as more deserving of their success compared to those born into wealth, 20.56% said significantly more deserving, 39.25% said somewhat more deserving, 36.45% and neither more nor less deserving, 2.8% said somewhat less deserving, 0.93% said significantly less deserving. With 59.81% of respondents saying that these celebrities and influencers coming from low-income backgrounds are somewhat to significantly more deserving of their success, it could imply that the perception that someone has worked hard for their success is viewed positively.

As noted previously, from a psychological perspective, envy is less likely to be malicious if the object of envy is seen as deserving of their success. So, influencers and celebrities from low-income backgrounds might be more likely to avoid malicious envy and the risks that come alongside being a maliciously envied public figure.

Now, what can public relations professionals do with this information? A low-income background shouldn't be fabricated for the chance of improving public image. Not only is that morally dubious, once a celebrity's or influencer's true roots are revealed, the attempt to hide their background will hurt their image more than hiding it ever helped. What can be controlled are engagements in behaviors that earn good will, like donating, volunteering, and speaking out on social issues. The implication from these answers on celebrity and influencer background, however, is that those from high-income backgrounds may have to engage more in socially responsible behaviors to be as well perceived as their counterparts from low-income backgrounds. In other words, those from high-income backgrounds might have to put in more effort to be seen as just as deserving.

This concept also relates to the topic of "Nepotism Babies," which was introduced in the literature review. When respondents were asked how celebrities and influencers having parents or relatives in the industry affects how they view them and their success, 2.8% of respondents said very positively, 5.61% said somewhat positively, 49.53% said it did not affect their view, 40.19% said somewhat negatively, and 1.87% said very negatively

Again, while 49.53% of respondents said that it did not affect their view, 42.06% saying that it somewhat negatively to very negatively impacted their opinion of the celebrity or influencer in question is a significant portion of the population that cannot be ignored. The way to address this issue is much the same—although these public figures should not hide or lie about

their backgrounds, they can engage more actively in socially responsible behaviors, and will likely have to engage in more of these behaviors than their counterparts who are not related to people “in the industry,” to maintain a positive public image and counteract some of the ill will that may come their way for being a “nepotism baby.”

As for how different demographics differed in their answers throughout the surveys, differences between the responses of different genders varied very little. There was not enough diversity of age to properly generalize about the differences of views between age groups. For respondents making less than \$25,000 a year, displays of and stories about celebrity wealth elicited a more negative response than average. They also had stronger, more positive responses to celebrities and influencers donating and volunteering, compared to overall data. Their responses to celebrities coming from low-income backgrounds was also more positive compared to responses overall. Respondents with yearly incomes between \$25,000 and \$50,000 chose more neutral responses towards displays and news stories about wealth, but still had significantly positive views of donations, volunteering, and speaking out on social issues.

Respondents making between \$50,000 and \$100,000 a year had largely the same response breakdown compared to overall responses. Those making \$100,000 to \$200,000 a year were more likely to have a neutral response to displays of celebrity wealth compared to other income brackets. They were also more likely to be neutral on the topic of celebrities and influencers being from low or high-income backgrounds.

Only 3 respondents reported having a yearly income over \$200,000 so generalization about their responses can’t really be made. Additionally, the 3 respondents that did participate usually had split responses—each respondent picking a different answer from the others.

When looking at differences between political affiliations, very liberal/left-leaning respondents were more likely to have a somewhat negative view of public displays of wealth and news stories about celebrity wealth and lifestyles than respondents overall. They also had more positive reactions to celebrity involvement in nonprofits and social issues, while having stronger negative reactions to celebrities coming from high-income backgrounds and famous families.

Moderately liberal/left-leaning respondents largely had responses in line with the average breakdown but did have a stronger positive reaction to celebrity and influencer engagement and contribution to nonprofits and social issues. Center/independent respondents were more likely to have a neutral response on most answers surrounding their reactions to celebrity wealth and background. However, they still had a largely positive reaction to public figures donating and volunteering that was in line with the rest of respondents.

Moderately conservative/right-leaning respondents had a more neutral response to news stories on either celebrity wealth or their involvement in nonprofits and social issues, compared to other demographics. They were also significantly more likely to have a neutral response to celebrities and influencers speaking out on issues that matter to them. Along with this, they were more likely to say that low-income public figures were neither more nor less deserving of their success compared to those born into wealth. This continued with the other questions around if certain behaviors (including donating, volunteering, and speaking out on social issues) made public figures more deserving of their success, they were more likely to select neither more nor less deserving than respondents overall.

Very conservative/right-leaning respondents were also more likely to have neutral responses to celebrities sharing extravagant displays of wealth and news stories covering their wealth and lifestyles. They were again more likely to respond neutrally to celebrities and

influencers engaging with and contributing to nonprofits and social issues. When asked if being from a low-income background, donating to nonprofits, volunteering, or speaking on social issues made public figures more deserving of their success, they were more likely to respond with neither more nor less deserving.

So, overall, it seems that the left-leaning individuals are more likely to be influenced positively by celebrities and influencers donating to nonprofits, volunteering, and speaking out on social issues, while right-leaning respondents are more likely to report that they were not influenced positively or negatively by these factors.

These differences may be a result of only 107 responses being collected, but if any of these trends continue in future research, it can influence how reputation management plans differ depending on target audiences and key demographics.

Chapter 4 Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

4.1 Limitations

Limitations for this survey include number of respondents, demographic makeup of respondents, and time constraints. With only 107 respondents, this data is not sufficient to accurately generalize about public opinion. This is especially true for this study because demographic makeups were so heavily skewed towards young adult, female, low-income respondents. If there were more respondents—and more respondents from different life stages and socioeconomic situations—these results would have provided much more vital information that could be used to approach an array of demographics.

Time constraints also affected results. As the survey could only be open for ten days, that limited the amount of time for collecting responses. The timeline also forced for a narrower focus for the survey and more time would have allowed for a broader collection of public opinion concerning all wealthy public figures, including prominent CEOs, without losing the quality or depth of the research.

4.2 Recommendations for Further Research

Further research should follow up with a similar, but perhaps longer and more detailed, survey sent out to a larger, more diverse sample of respondents. Questions should also include asking about public opinion of celebrities and influencers actively taking part in activism for relevant social causes, verses just using their platforms to speak on the issue. Much like actively volunteering was compared to donating for this survey, engaging in activism compared to just celebrities and influencers sharing their opinions should also be compared in the future.

In general, this field of research is under-studied, and very little peer-reviewed information can be found on the public opinion of celebrities, influencers, public perception of

extravagant displays of wealth, and the effect of socially responsible behavior. The recommendation for further research is that more research be done, with more resources, and more time.

Future research should also include all publicly wealthy figures, including prominent CEOs and people who don't fall under the traditional celebrity of influencer umbrella. This information would be useful to public relations professional in the field of reputation management beyond celebrities and influencers.

Focus groups would also be a very useful form of qualitative data as it would give insight into more complex, personal reasons for why individuals feel the way they do about wealthy public figures and their behavior. This would be a useful addition to any research collected through surveys, as it can give some perspective beyond quantitative data.

Chapter 5 Contribution to the Field

As very little research has been done on the public perception of wealth or celebrity and influencer activism and philanthropy, this study has provided a start to further understand public opinion and perception of these figures and their behaviors. This research can provide a basis and starting point for more in-depth research on the topic, but still provides insight by itself.

This research fills a gap of knowledge and study in the field as very little information can be found on public opinion of influencers, public displays of wealth, news coverage of celebrity lifestyles, and the familial background of influencers and celebrities. The survey results also gave information relevant to our current pop cultural landscape in 2022, by looking at how news stories surrounding celebrities and influencers during the Covid-19 pandemic affected their view of said public figures—with a significant portion of respondents saying their perception of these prominent figures was worse after the pandemic. This gives some insight into how watching public figures live by a different set of rules in a time of lockdowns can create a significant amount of ill will and negative perception. This subject would also be interesting to research in another future time of widespread struggle, to see if the trend continues and wealthy public figure's images continue to degrade in periods where the general population is experiencing hard times.

Information collected from respondents seemed to support the original hypothesis that influencers and celebrities that share their extravagant lifestyles on social media and through the press can show themselves authentically contributing to social causes to help prevent alienating the public, minimize backlash, and promote positive engagement. As discussed throughout results analysis, a significant portion of respondents had a somewhat positive to very positive reaction to celebrities and influencers donating to nonprofits, volunteering, and speaking out on

social issues. Additionally, a significant portion of respondents also viewed celebrities and influencers that engaged in these socially responsible behaviors as more deserving of their success.

All these results give insight into what public relations professionals involved in reputational management should do to maintain a positive public image of the wealthy public figures they represent, and hopefully, earn enough good will to prevent them from being a target of scorn.

First, publicly wealthy figures should be careful of how and when they share images of themselves on expensive trips, with luxury goods, or generally living an extravagant lifestyle. Although this content can gain a lot of engagement—and in some cases may be seen as aspirational instead of inducing malicious envy—it shouldn't be the only thing they post about. When looking at increasingly negative reactions to “flex culture,” alongside a significant portion of respondents having a negative reaction to this form of social media content, publicly wealthy figures are recommended to keep it subtle, humble, and non-conspicuous when possible.

Next, publicly wealthy figures are encouraged to be authentically, personally socially responsible. Primary research revealed that respondents had the most positive reaction to donating to nonprofits, then volunteering, and then speaking out on social issues. This provides a code of conduct for prominent wealthy figures to be advised to follow. While all gained a significant positive reaction, this also give some insight into which types of social responsibility should be prioritized. Donating only barely beat volunteering, so while donating may be the most effective one by a slight margin, both together would be the most effective. Speaking out on social issues, while still receiving a substantially positive reaction, lagged behind the other two. Although it might become more important in the future as people expect celebrities and

influencers to be more politically active, as it is now, it seems vital in the current pop culture landscape that donating and volunteering be prioritized over speaking on social issues, if it isn't possible to engage in all.

Additionally, survey results revealed a significantly negative reaction to celebrities and influencers from high-income backgrounds or families "in the industry." If people continue to discuss and negatively view "nepotism babies," it seems that this branch of publicly wealthy figures must try harder and be more socially responsible than their counterparts from average backgrounds. To counteract the ill-will that may come from the public for being from an apparently privileged background, it should be recommended that these figures be on the best possible behavior and work to be as authentically socially responsible as they can manage, including activism and philanthropy.

All this serves to create a code of conduct that can be used to shape social media strategies, communications plans, and crisis prevention strategy. This information should be used to shape the social media content put out for public wealthy individuals, focusing on an emphasis on content that isn't alienating in its extravagance, alongside a substantial but not overwhelming amount of content focusing on philanthropy and being politically active. Although this is something that needs to be tested to see what the ideal breakdown of social media content is for these figures, it seems likely that minimizing posts about expensive, trips, cars, luxury goods, and extravagant lifestyles would have a positive impact on the figure's public image. Any communications plan meant to improve the public image of a celebrity, influencer, or publicly wealthy figure should also keep the importance of personal social responsibility in mind.

When looking at the backlash that publicly wealthy figures have faced in the past, it seems that many of their issues stemmed from a failure to consider public opinion or reaction

prior to their actions. So, this research is also relevant to preventing a crisis of image for these prominent individuals. The implication is that consistently socially responsible behavior can earn enough good will with the public to prevent backlash. Hopefully, not only will this good will partially shield these public figures in the event of a misstep, but also a commitment to consistent social responsibility may guide public figures' behavior enough to prevent offensive behavior from the start.

With all this considered, public relations professionals can move forward with a better understanding of public opinion on and reaction to celebrity and influencer wealth and behavior. While this does fill a gap in market research, especially from a public relation perspective, further research on more forms of social responsibility, including a larger and more diverse sample of respondents, would be ideal for reputation management professionals in the future.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

After looking at growing negative sentiment towards the wealthy on social media, the current political landscape, and examples of backlash in pop culture, it seems apparent that publicly wealthy individuals are facing an increasingly hostile environment towards their usual behavior. The public has begun to expect more from these prominent figures, but what kind of behaviors should be avoided, and which ones should be prioritized? Can celebrities and influencers prevent alienating the public, minimize backlash, and promote positive engagement through personal social responsibility?

Findings revealed that a significant portion of the public did hold negative perceptions of public figures showcasing their wealth on social media, alongside negative reactions to news stories covering celebrity wealth and lifestyles. This aligns with sentiment on social media discussed throughout secondary research, alongside existing data on how the wealthy are viewed. Having more specific information on exactly how public displays of wealth are viewed—especially on social media as part of “flex culture”—however, is a gap in research that these survey results began to fill. These results have revealed that rather than being purely aspirational, content based on conspicuous consumption can be alienating.

Beyond this, the survey results also revealed a consistent negative response to celebrities and influencers born into wealth and famous families, which serves to provide some data around the public opinion of “nepotism babies,” which, while a trending topic on social media throughout 2021 and 2022, has not been researched or put into qualitative data. Findings also revealed a preference for celebrities and influencers from a “low-income” background, revealing that the public will generally view those they see as “self-made” more favorably, while those

who seemingly had an advantageous background might have to work harder to earn the good will of the public.

When looking at which socially responsible behaviors were the most effective in prompting positive public opinion, it seems that donating to nonprofits, volunteering, and speaking out on social issues all prompted a positive reaction from a significant portion of the public. There were slight differences between the three, with speaking out on social issues lagging behind donations and volunteering in positive responses.

When looking at how to prevent malicious envy from the public, a form of envy that is less likely if the object of envy is seen as deserving their success, participants were also asked which actions made a public figure more deserving of their success. Again, it seems that donating, volunteering, and speaking out on social issues all made a significant portion of the public more likely to say these figures are more deserving of their success. With positive reactions to these actions confirmed, it appears that the hypothesis was largely supported by the results of the survey.

This information can be used as a guideline for public relations professionals in the field of reputation management to form a code of conduct for their publicly wealthy clients to prevent backlash and promote good will and positive engagement. More research needs to be done to better understand differences in demographic responses, which actions are the most effective, and to ensure that these results weren't skewed due to a lack of respondents. Additionally, public relations professionals can look to real world examples of who is doing it wrong, and who is doing it right. It is always recommended to keep up with the news, who is being criticized, and who is being praised. Learn from both the wins and the failures of others.

The most important things to keep in mind moving forward are that, in the current pop culture landscape of 2022, it appears that “flex culture,” conspicuous consumption, and unsustainability are out. To thrive as a publicly wealthy figure in the modern world, there needs to be a pivot away from the hyper-consumerist content that, for some, defines and fills social media culture. It will take a concerted effort, but these prominently wealthy individuals must be authentically engaging in social responsibility if they wish to earn enough good will with the public to avoid backlash and malicious envy. Whether this is merely a trend arising from a strong reaction to a consumption and extravagance-based celebrity and influencer culture, or change meant to stay is something only time will reveal. For now, regardless of the longevity of this change, it is time to adapt to current public opinions, and earn good will by doing good. While “flex culture” and conspicuous consumption may be seen as gauche rather than aspirational, it's less likely that being socially responsible will go out of style.

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Appendices

Survey Questions

Q1: Please select your gender:

- a) Male (1)
- b) Female (2)
- c) Non-binary / third gender (3)
- d) Prefer not to say (4)

Q2: Please select your age:

- a) 18-24 (1)
- b) 25-34 (2)
- c) 35-44 (3)
- d) 45-54 (4)
- e) 55-64 (5)
- f) 65+ (6)

Q3: Please select your household income:

- a) Less than \$25,000 (1)
- b) \$25,000 - \$50,000 (2)
- c) \$50,000 - \$100,000 (3)
- d) \$100,000 - \$200,000 (4)
- e) \$200,000+ (5)
- f) Prefer not to say (6)

Q4: How would you describe your political views?

- a) Very liberal/left leaning (1)

- b) Moderately liberal/left leaning (2)
- c) Center/independent (3)
- d) Moderately conservative/right leaning (4)
- e) Very conservative/right leaning (5)

Q5: Have your politics changed throughout your life?

- a) Yes, they have become significantly more liberal (1)
- b) Yes, they have become slightly more liberal (2)
- c) No, they have stayed the same (3)
- d) Yes, they have become slightly more conservative (4)
- e) Yes, they have become significantly more conservative (5)

Q6: How often do you check social media?

- a) I don't use social media (1)
- b) Less than once a day (2)
- c) 1-5 times a day (3)
- d) 6-10 times a day (4)
- e) 11-15 times a day (5)
- f) 15+ times a day (6)

Q7: How often do you keep up with news surrounding influencers and celebrities?

- a) Very often (1)
- b) Somewhat often (2)
- c) Neither often nor rarely (3)
- d) Somewhat rarely (4)
- e) Very rarely (5)

Q8: If somewhat rarely or very rarely, why?

- a) Lack of interest (1)
 - b) Lack of time (2)
 - c) A combination of lack of interest/time (3)
 - d) I keep up with news surrounding influencers and celebrities (4)
 - e) Other, please elaborate (5)
-

Q9: Did your social media usage increase, decrease, or stay the same throughout the pandemic?

- a) Increase (1)
- b) Decrease (2)
- c) Stayed the same (3)

Q10: What are your general feelings towards online influencers?

- a) Very positive (1)
- b) Somewhat positive (2)
- c) Neutral (3)
- d) Somewhat negative (4)
- e) Very negative (5)

Q11: What are your general feelings towards traditional celebrities (actors, singers, etc.?)

- a) Very positive (1)
- b) Somewhat positive (2)
- c) Neutral (3)
- d) Somewhat negative (4)
- e) Very negative (5)

Q12: How would you describe your reaction to celebrities and influencers sharing images of expensive cars/trips/luxury goods on social media?

- a) Very positive (1)
- b) Somewhat positive (2)
- c) Neutral (3)
- d) Somewhat negative (4)
- e) Very negative (5)

Q13: How do news stories about celebrity wealth and lifestyles make you feel about the celebrity in question?

- a) Very positive (1)
- b) Somewhat positive (2)
- c) Neutral (3)
- d) Somewhat negative (4)
- e) Very negative (5)

Q14: How do news stories about celebrity involvement in nonprofits and social issues make you feel about the celebrity in question?

- a) Very positive (1)
- b) Somewhat positive (2)
- c) Neutral (3)
- d) Somewhat negative (4)
- e) Very negative (5)

Q15: How would you describe your reaction to news stories about celebrity lifestyles throughout the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to before the pandemic?

- a) More positive than before (1)
- b) More negative than before (2)
- c) Roughly the same (3)

Q16: When celebrities or influencers come from a low-income background does that affect how you view them and their success?

- a) Yes, very positively (1)
- b) Yes, somewhat positively (2)
- c) No, neither positively nor negatively (3)
- d) Yes, somewhat negatively (4)
- e) Yes, very negatively (5)

Q17: When celebrities or influencers come from a high-income background does that affect how you view them and their success?

- a) Yes, very positively (1)
- b) Yes, somewhat positively (2)
- c) No, neither positively nor negatively (3)
- d) Yes, somewhat negatively (4)
- e) Yes, very negatively (5)

Q18: When celebrities or influencers have parents or relatives that are celebrities themselves or “in the industry,” does that affect how you view them and their success?

- a) Yes, very positively (1)
- b) Yes, somewhat positively (2)
- c) No, neither positively nor negatively (3)
- d) Yes, somewhat negatively (4)

e) Yes, very negatively (5)

Q19: When celebrities or influencers donate to causes that you care about, how strongly does that impact your view of them?

a) Very strongly affects my view (1)

b) Somewhat strongly affects my view (2)

c) Slightly affects my view (3)

d) Does not affect my view (4)

Q20: When celebrities or influencers donate to causes that you care about, how positively does that impact your view of them?

a) Extremely positive (1)

b) Somewhat positive (2)

c) Neither positive nor negative (3)

d) Somewhat negative (4)

e) Extremely negative (5)

Q21: When celebrities or influencers volunteer their time to contribute to causes that you care about, how strongly does that impact your view of them?

a) Very strongly affects my view (1)

b) Somewhat strongly affects my view (2)

c) Slightly affects my view (3)

d) Does not affect my view (4)

Q22: When celebrities or influencers volunteer their time to contribute to causes that you care about, how positively does that impact your view of them?

a) Extremely positive (1)

- b) Somewhat positive (2)
- c) Neither positive nor negative (3)
- d) Somewhat negative (4)
- e) Extremely negative (5)

Q23: When celebrities or influencers use their platforms to speak on social issues that you care about, how strongly does that impact your view of them?

- a) Very strongly affects my view (1)
- b) Somewhat strongly affects my view (2)
- c) Slightly affects my view (3)
- d) Does not affect my view (4)

Q24: When celebrities or influencers use their platforms to speak on social issues that you care about, how positively does that impact your view of them?

- a) Extremely positive (1)
- b) Somewhat positive (2)
- c) Neither positive nor negative (3)
- d) Somewhat negative (4)
- e) Extremely negative (5)

Q25: Do you view celebrities and influencers that came from low-income backgrounds as more or less deserving of their success compared to those born into wealth?

- a) Significantly more deserving (1)
- b) Somewhat more deserving (2)
- c) Neither more nor less deserving (3)
- d) Somewhat less deserving (4)

e) Significantly less deserving (5)

Q26: Do you view celebrities and influencers that volunteer for causes you consider important as more or less deserving of their success, compared to those who don't?

a) Significantly more deserving (1)

b) Somewhat more deserving (2)

c) Neither more nor less deserving (3)

d) Somewhat less deserving (4)

e) Significantly less deserving (5)

Q27: Do you view celebrities and influencers that donate to causes you consider important as more or less deserving of their success, compared to those who don't?

a) Significantly more deserving (1)

b) Somewhat more deserving (2)

c) Neither more nor less deserving (3)

d) Somewhat less deserving (4)

e) Significantly less deserving (5)

Q28: Do you view celebrities and influencers that speak on social issues you consider important as more or less deserving of their success, compared to those who don't?

a) Significantly more deserving (1)

b) Somewhat more deserving (2)

c) Neither more nor less deserving (3)

d) Somewhat less deserving (4)

e) Significantly less deserving (5)