

Keeping up with self-made star Kim Kardashian

BY CHRISTINE KEARNEY, REUTERS JULY 9, 2010



A sex tape may have propelled Kim Kardashian to notoriety, but her deft use of social networking and reality TV since then have made the tabloid star the prototype of a new "aspirational celebrity," experts say.

Photograph by: Stan Honda, AFP/Getty Images

NEW YORK - A sex tape may have propelled Kim Kardashian to notoriety, but her deft use of social networking and reality TV since then have made the tabloid star the prototype of a new "aspirational celebrity," experts say.

Once Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan ruled the scene. But these days Kardashian gets the wall-to-wall coverage. She has her own reality TV show, is consistently featured in celebrity magazine stories and just last week saw her much discussed curves refashioned into a Madame Tussauds wax figure.

While many Americans may be stumped as to why exactly Kardashian is famous, celebrity watchers think it's pretty clear. The 29-year-old's rise to stardom marks a shift in the making of a celebrity from old criteria of hailing from a famous or wealthy family (Hilton) or finding success in movies, TV and music (Lohan) to being famous simply for being famous.

Kardashian has built herself into a brand through social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter and her own fan site kimkardashian.celebuzz.com. Her clever online messages engage fans, while other stars post tedious comments about new projects, People magazine Senior Editor David Caplan said.

Her web site is currently ranked first among all talent sites with 24 million views and 1.5 million unique users monthly, according to her publisher Buzzmedia.

"When she first came onto the scene there would be stories saying, 'Who is Kim Kardashian?'" said Caplan.

Now, he said, "fans feel connected to her, they read about what she is doing on Twitter and she in turn asks fans a question. She will ask 'Hey how should I wear my hair today?...that endears herself with fans."

"From there she has really been able to create a brand. Kim is now an aspirational celebrity. She has this lifestyle that everyone wants," he said.

Kardashian often Tweets controversial messages that gain publicity, such as her recent complaints about a woman breast feeding in public, which drew wide media coverage.

"FAMOUS FOR BEING FAMOUS"

Experts say the Web and reality TV can propel celebrities to instant fame like never before. And Kardashian herself is not bothered if people think she is "famous for being famous."

"I don't think that is a negative statement. People do say that. But I pride myself on working hard. I am a business store owner, I am in the fashion world," Kardashian told Reuters at the launch of her wax figure at Madame Tussauds in New York, wearing a hot pink dress with a plunging neckline to match her wax figure.

Before commanding big paychecks for nightclub appearances, tabloid magazine shoots, reality TV shows, fashion lines, her own fragrance and diet products, there was little of the old ways of making it in showbiz to suggest her rise to stardom.

Her father was a Los Angeles lawyer who worked on the O.J. Simpson trial, and somewhat like her friend Hilton, Kardashian was perhaps best known for hitting Hollywood's nightclubs. She once dated U.S. singer Ray J, but then came the Internet sex tape and posing naked for Playboy magazine.

Caplan noted her accessibility to the media and tabloids, her dating life and her Armenian heritage helped gain "a following that spans different ethnicities and groups. She is also very popular with guys as well as girls."

She now stars with her sisters, Khloe and Kourtney, and manager mother Kris Jenner, in reality TV show "Keeping up with the Kardashians."

"Reality stars are it today. It's everywhere. You turn on the television and every single show is a reality star television show. Kim is sort of the epitome of it," said Madame Tussauds general manager Janine DiGiacchino.

Kardashian's spokeswoman, Jill Fritzo said in an e-mail about her client's fame, "I don't think she needs to create or forge any 'ways' to become famous. She already is."

CHANGING TIMES AND CELEBRITIES

The list of those who have attained celebrity status for no particular reason has grown immensely from the days of the likes of Edie Sedgwick, who became a media sensation as Andy Warhol's muse and was dubbed an 'It Girl', experts said.

Back in the 1950s and '60s, celebrities were molded by the Hollywood studios rather than self-made, said author Henry Scott, whose book "Shocking True Story" chronicled the rise of America's first tabloid magazine "Confidential" in the '50s.

Actresses like Kim Novak were products of the studio system, while others outside Hollywood were little known.

"They certainly didn't rise to the level of fame of Kim Kardashian," he said.

Since then, the advent of the Internet and hundreds of cable TV channels hungry for content have marked a big shift in who graces celebrity magazine covers.

"People who are famous for being famous is a whole phenomenon that is quite remarkable and has everything to do with the Internet and 24-hour cable," said pop culture analyst and professor Elayne Rapping. "Almost anybody can (now) make themselves famous."

For her part, Kardashian said it doesn't bother her that she might not be known for her business accomplishments.

"You just kind of have to laugh, because they clearly don't know anything about me or pay attention to what I really do," she said with a shrug and a smile.

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