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## Experts, parents worry kids are under the influence of celebrity

BY STACY NICK  
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Call it the "Paris Effect."

Young Hollywood stars - many too young to legally get into bars - are photographed partying it up every night of the week.

Nobody thinks twice about it - except maybe the stars' impressionable young fan base. And the media when said star is busted for a DUI.

"It's become almost chic for a celebrity to have a mug shot on the Smoking Gun Web site," said Doug Morgan with Colorado Parents Against Drunk Driving. "Their fame increases and there are rarely any consequences."

In the past six months, there has been a slew of Hollywood ingénues getting a different set of headshots - at police stations with a set of numbers underneath.

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In the past few months alone, the celebrity DUI list has exploded: Paris Hilton, Nicole Richie, Lindsay Lohan, Eve, Tracy Morgan and even squeaky-clean "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" host Ty Pennington have all had recent run-ins with the law for drinking and driving.

Fort Collins mom Marsha Soyffer wonders what impact these reports will have on her two teenagers, especially as the offending celebs are younger and more influential.

"They joke about it," Soyffer said of her kids' reactions. "Suddenly drinking and driving or going to rehab is funny."

Elyse Soyffer, 16, knows drinking and driving is not a joke but admits that it has become almost habit to flip to the celeb news section of the newspaper or to E! online to find out who the latest star to get busted will be.

"It almost makes them more real," Soyffer said.

But how "real" is this depiction?

When the stars walk away without consequences to their freedom or their pocketbooks, the message becomes clear that a DUI is no big deal, Marsha Soyffer said.

Lindsay Lohan, who turns 21 today, was arrested May 26 and faces charges of driving under the influence and possession of cocaine.

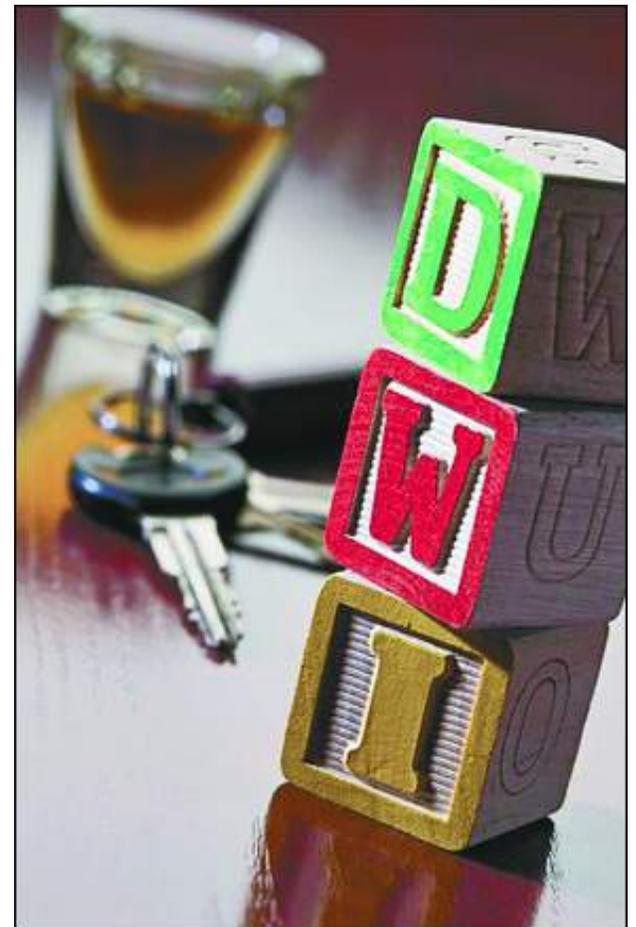
Despite her arrest, Lohan's latest film, "Georgia Rule," released just two weeks prior to the incident, remained in the top 10 box office films.

Lohan's arrest didn't keep Elyse Soyffer from going to see the movie, but the star was the main reason she went to see it in the first place.

"I like her movies, usually; this one wasn't very good, though," she said. "I look to stars (as an influence) for haircuts and clothes, not huge life choices like drinking and driving."

But while most experts agree that parents and peers are a child's primary influences, recent studies show celebrities are gaining.

In a 2004 study on the role of media figures on adolescent development, doctors David Giles (Coventry University) and John Maltby (University of Leicester) found that "media figures play an important part in (adolescent identity) development, since they offer a variety of possible selves that a young person might wish to try out and provide exemplars 'of how to think and feel in different circumstances.'"



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 Zoom Photo

With the increase in tabloid coverage of stars' lives - from their most mundane day-to-day activities to their most personal secrets - society has created an illusion of intimacy that gives celebrities increased influence.

Influence comes when you identify with someone, said Jennifer Harman, Colorado State University assistant professor of psychology.

Adolescence is a time when people do a lot of social comparison and try on different identities, said Harman, whose focus is on social psychology. In fact, our identities aren't fully formed until our mid-to-late 20s.

"So the real question is how well do they identify with (the celebrity in question)," Harman said.

Showing that a certain behavior is pervasive can cause people to think that the behavior is normal, Harman said. And if the media attention given to the behavior is enough (or way more than enough in the case of Paris Hilton), it can have an influence.

When the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Paris Hilton is partying and drinking and driving, even if it's not right, then that can become reality. Even if it's not the actual reality, in that person's mind it is, Harman said.

"If we see it on TV often enough, then we think that it happens more frequently than it may really happen," she added.

So how to combat the mass media's love affair with celebrity bad behavior?

"(Adolescents) need to have a positive role model," Harman said, adding that an environment that normalizes how people should behave is also important. "And draw attention to the fact that this clearly isn't normal behavior."

So when teens see celebs drinking and driving and getting away with it, they might think it's that way for everyone.

"They take away your driver's license for a few months and make you pay a fine or do community service, right?" guessed 16-year-old Ali Gibbs, when asked what she thought happened to people arrested for DUIs. "Unless someone gets hurt; then you go to jail."

"(In Hollywood, a star getting a DUI) becomes a big media joke; something for Leno to make fun of," Soyffer said. "What happens when someone gets killed?"



Kevork Djansezian Associated Press

Paris Hilton sits in the audience during the MTV Movie Awards in Los Angeles on June 3. Experts and parents worry that the attention being given to celebrity misdeeds will negatively influence children.

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Then it barely makes the CNN crawler.

In December, actor Lane Garrison ("Prison Break") killed a 17-year-old while driving with a blood alcohol level of 0.20, more than twice the legal amount. The case was just a blip on the media's radar.

When Paris Hilton was pulled over by police in September for driving erratically and subsequently arrested and charged with a DUI, it sparked a news frenzy that reignited every other day.

Hilton is more famous than ever, and Garrison, who will be sentenced Aug. 2 for vehicular manslaughter, has already faded into the background.

"That sends the message to young people that drinking and driving doesn't have consequences," Soyffer said. "It's not about making stars more accountable because of who they are - although they should feel some additional level of personal responsibility to their fans. It's about showing what can happen."

Hilton has not been responsible in using her celebrity to educate, said Mothers Against Drunk Driving President Glynn R. Birch.

"She did not acknowledge how much she drank before getting behind the wheel. She drove on a suspended driver's license and then appealed to the governor for leniency... and continues to not take accountability for her actions," he said. "She should accept full responsibility for her actions, and her conduct during this time should be much more responsible given the vast young audience watching her every move."

Drunken driving kills nearly 14,000 people annually, according to MADD. There are 1.4 million arrests for drunken driving every year.

MADD is calling on Hollywood to clean up its act and for industry leaders to send a strong statement that drunken driving will not be tolerated, Birch said.

"Let's stop the public displays of drunk driving - and, of course, all drunk driving - that not only sends an irresponsible and potentially deadly message, but have become a bad reality show that needs to have the plug pulled."

**STORYCHAT** 

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