

# ATTENTION CAPITAL

Celebrity, social media, and the true currency of America's digital economy



# The true currency of our modern era isn't Bitcoin or Ethereum: it's **attention.**

In an age of information overload, the ability to capture and sustain public focus has become an invaluable resource. And understanding how this resource functions is critical for brands looking to navigate a world in which attention spans are dwindling and the competition for eyeballs is more intense than ever before.

Thanks to social media, almost all of us are now active participants in this attention economy. But celebrities and public figures, standing as they do at the intersection of entertainment, influence, and commerce, are its central axes; the poles around which this economy revolves. By understanding how celebrities wield their influence and mobilize their fan bases, we can unlock deep insight into the nature of

attention and the role that it plays in powering the modern media ecosystem.

This paper, therefore, aims to shed light on attention capital—and, specifically, how the concept has been molded and reshaped by social media and the 24-hour news cycle. Through an in-depth analysis of how and why consumers pay attention to celebrities—across fields ranging from music and sports to business and politics—and how that attention converts to measurable action and engagement, we will reveal the inner workings of the attention economy, and what lessons it holds for brands, marketers, and content creators looking to generate and sustain public attention.

## AT A GLANCE

Three key takeaways

### 1

“Attention,” in the context of celebrities and public figures, represents more than just interest or awareness; rather, it speaks to the ability for those celebrities to convert interest into meaningful engagement and measurable action.

### 2

There’s a fundamental paradox at the heart of the modern attention economy. To command attention in the age of social media, celebrities are required to be both timeless and of-the-moment; to maintain a persistent and distinctive personal brand that is independent of the cultural zeitgeist, but also able to evolve with it in a way that ensures evergreen relevance.

### 3

While many celebrities are capable of harnessing scandal and drama as a tool for building attention capital, controversy by itself is not enough to guarantee cultural relevance. But by understanding the interplay of relevance and controversy, we can better understand the central dynamics that govern the attention economy.

### IN THIS REPORT, YOU'LL FIND...

The meaning of “attention,” and why it matters

The key dynamics that drive the modern attention economy

The relationship between controversy and cultural relevance in the age of social media

The factors that drive public attention across the key cultural domains of film & TV, music, sports, business & technology, and politics

Key lessons for brands looking to create effective celebrity partnerships and find the right brand ambassadors

# Attention capital can best be understood as the ability to convert *interest* into **action**



Much of our day-to-day life is spent alternating between a multitude of screens of varying sizes. From the moment we wake and check Instagram or TikTok, to shuffling drowsily in front of a computer screen to kick off our working day, and concluding it by the TV screen to binge the latest episodes of our favorite show, our relationship with these screens has resulted in a constant push and pull for our attention.

their show of choice *while* scrolling through social media simultaneously; they dubbed it, “multiscreening.” While it originally sounded alarm bells, it also signaled to media conglomerates and content creators worldwide that they now had to ramp up their content production to compete and work twice as hard to gain consumer attention and even harder to retain it.

The concept of competing for attention is not a foreign one in the media landscape, with many debating the “multi-screen effect”<sup>1</sup> since the inception of social media. In the early 2010s researchers identified that more consumers were now watching

And no class of people better embodies the constant scramble for public attention than celebrities. Celebrities who truly understand the dynamics of attention in the digital age have been able to catapult themselves to new levels of

international fame and develop a once unimaginable level of commitment and dedication among their fan bases.

Just look, for example, at the recent success of Taylor’s Swift’s Eras Tour movie. Through her masterful direction of public attention and ability to activate the passions of her fans, Swift was able to propel the film to the biggest opening for a concert movie in Hollywood history.<sup>2</sup> And by taking the movie directly to cinemas during the height of her tour buzz—pushing back against studios who wanted to pursue a traditional marketing cycle and distribute it next Summer—she demonstrated how intense periods of public attention can be monetized and

capitalized on in unconventional ways.<sup>3</sup>

But what exactly do we mean by “attention capital” in the context of our relationship to celebrities and public figures?

Brian Moeran, a leading scholar and writer on the creative industries highlights that, “celebrities operate at the intersection between commerce and culture.”<sup>4</sup> Celebrities, he argues, sustain their position in society by satiating a public demand for media narratives while oscillating between “economic production and consumption.” Production, in this sense, refers to the phenomenon by which cultural products associated with celebrities become more than just reflections, but true extensions of their personhood. And through their role in mediating consumers’ interactions with culture, celebrities become anchors between different fields of cultural production spanning music, film, TV, or even politics (to name just a few).

Capital, broadly defined, is anything that gives a person or entity value or competitive advantage. While a celebrity’s capital can be partially defined in financial terms—the value of endorsement deals, ticket revenues from concerts, box office performance, etc.—that only tells part of the story. Van Krieken (another scholar in this field) argues that celebrities harness a more metaphysical kind of capital, namely *attention*.<sup>5</sup> And for many celebrities, this form of capital represents both their most valuable asset and the mechanism through which they are able to maintain public influence and cultural relevance.

Attention, therefore, needs to be understood as more than simply public interest or awareness. Rather, it

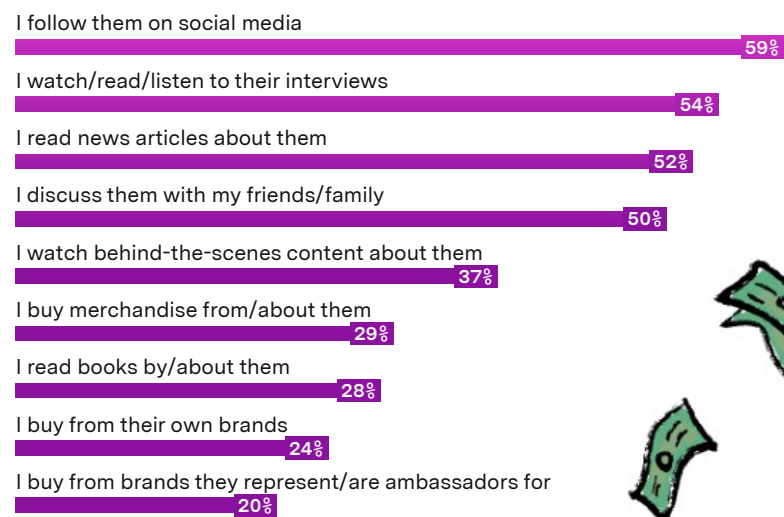
**represents the ability for a public figure to convert that interest into tangible action that aligns with that celebrity’s particular mode of cultural production.** The ability, in other words, to harness the gaze of the masses and translate it to meaningful engagement: purchasing tickets to a movie, tuning into a football game, streaming a new album, or even voting in an election. And, in the long-run, to create a sense of deep and enduring *fan*ship.

While there have always been many different channels through which celebrities can direct and harness

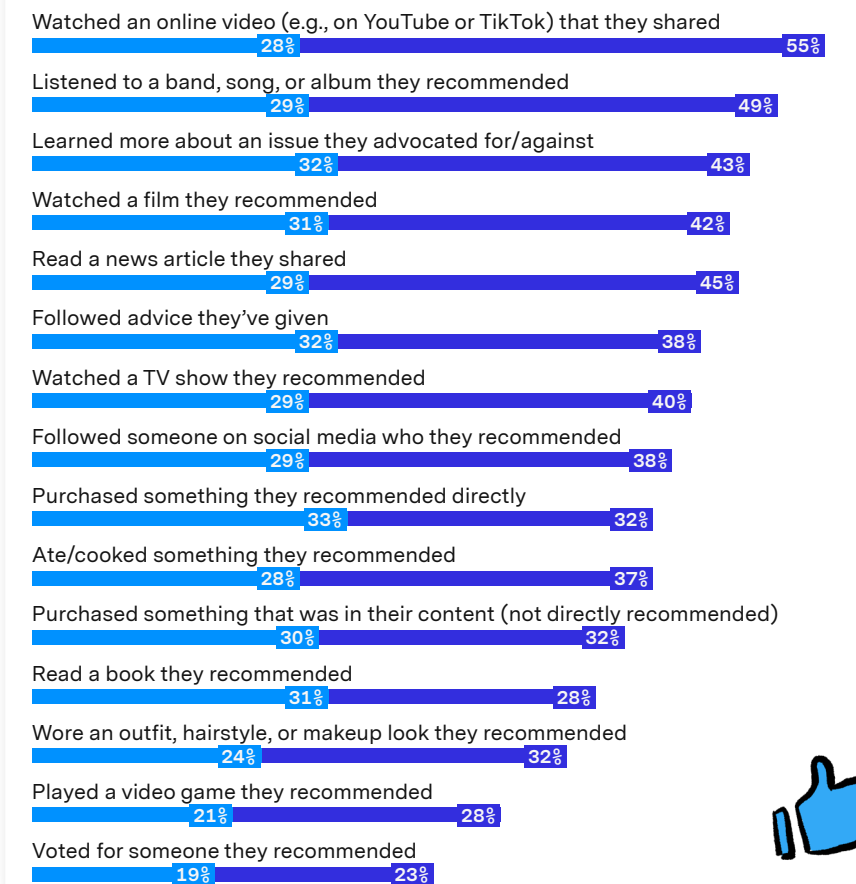
attention, social media—the ascendant medium of the new century—represented a true changing of the game. For the first time, celebrities were able to build and cash-in their attention capital through direct interactions with the public—unimpeded by traditional media gatekeepers.

Accordingly, the rest of this paper sets out to unpack the drivers and the power of attention capital in the post-social media world: what differentiates celebrities who have it from those that don’t? And what can that tell us about the nature of attention in today’s society?

## Q: How do you engage with the celebrities that you pay attention to?



## Q: What actions have you taken because a celebrity you follow on social media recommended it?



<sup>1</sup>Bloomberg, “TV competing with other screens to hold viewers’ attention,” Bloomberg Media Distribution, January 28, 2014 <sup>2</sup>Nicole Sperling, “Taylor Swift’s ‘Eras’ Is Easily the Biggest Concert Film Opening Ever,” The New York Times, October 15, 2023 <sup>3</sup>Rebecca Rubin, Brent Lang, “How Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour Concert Film Scrambled (and Saved) the Fall Movie Season,” Variety, October 10, 2023 <sup>4</sup>Brian Moeran, “Celebrities, culture, and a name economy,” Copenhagen Business School, 2001 <sup>5</sup>Robert Van Krieken, “Celebrity Society: The Struggle for Attention,” Routledge, 2019

# Understanding the “attention paradox”

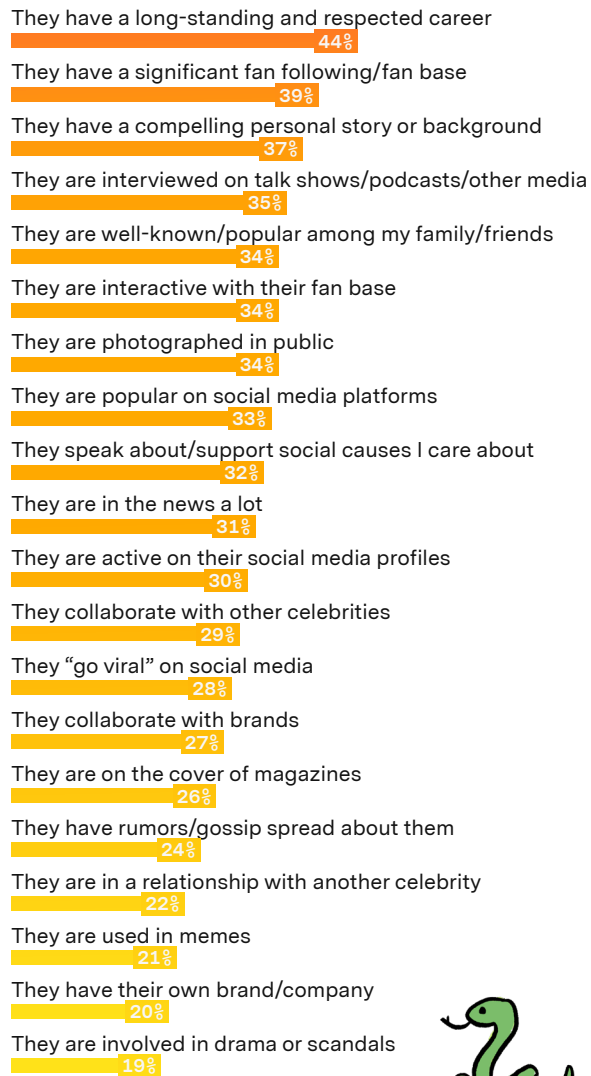
Generating and sustaining attention requires celebrities to be both timeless and of-the-moment

For the vast majority of celebrities, attention capital is not something that can be generated overnight. When social media users were asked to describe the types of celebrities they tend to pay the most attention to, the most common responses were that they “had a long-standing and respected career” and that they had accrued a “significant following or fan base”—outstripping more timely factors such as their presence in the news, their involvement in drama, or their brand collaborations.

This makes sense if we consider attention to be, at its core, a measure of potential action. In many cases, the kinds of actions through which people are most likely to engage with a celebrity require some level of financial or temporal commitment. Celebrities who have been around longer and justified their status as public figures through consistent demonstration of creative talent have an inherent level of credibility that, for consumers, makes them a “safe bet” when deciding how to spend their time or dollars.

Fandom can be another vehicle by which celebrities can establish this level of credibility: if consumers can see that there’s a sizable community of people already paying attention to

**Q: How would you describe the celebrities you pay the most attention to?**

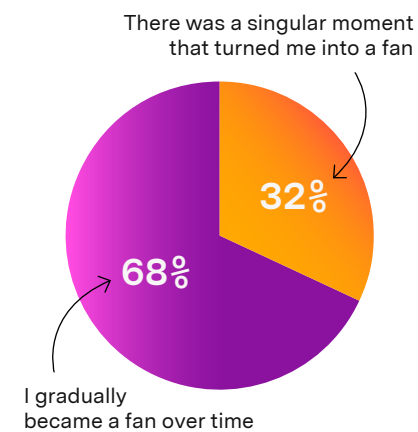


a given celebrity and engaging with them, that creates a licensing effect through which it becomes more socially acceptable for them, too, to begin paying close attention to the celebrity in question.

But fandom likewise takes time to properly develop. Among social media users who consider themselves a “fan” of at least one celebrity, more than two thirds—68%—say that fandom, for them, typically needs to develop organically over time in response to a celebrity’s professional output, rather than being the result of a specific moment or interaction. In this respect, celebrity fandom has a lot in common with fandom for specific brands and products. Previous NRG research has demonstrated that consistency and longevity are key ingredients for brands that want to build credibility with consumers,<sup>6</sup> and it seems the same holds true when it comes to public figures.

But professional longevity, by itself, isn’t enough to guarantee fandom. Fandom, ultimately, is an expression

**Q: How do you typically decide to become a fan of a celebrity?**



**Q: How would you describe celebrities you know the most about?**



of an intensely personal connection between fans and the celebrities they follow. Psychologists often refer to this as the phenomenon of “parasocial relationships”; a form of one-sided friendship that has become increasingly common over the past two decades.

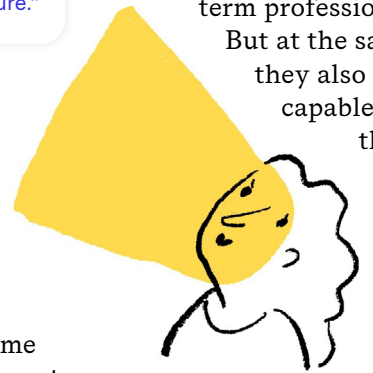
Cultivating that sort of relationship in the age of social media requires celebrities to exist “in the moment”—to proactively share the human side of their lives on social media and demonstrate an engagement with the topics and trends driving the pop culture zeitgeist. By more than a 2-to-1 margin, **social media users say that they know more about celebrities who maintain an active presence on social media**

and who engage themselves in current events, rather than those who adopt a more aloof and distant public persona. And while familiarity with the public doesn’t, on its own, guarantee attention capital, it is a crucial first step along the process of generating and sustaining attention and building a fan base.

Here, we can see the fundamental paradox at the heart of attention in the era of social media—and why capturing and holding it can be so difficult. **To truly maximize their attention capital, celebrities are required to exist both within and outside of the current cultural moment.** On the one hand, they need to cultivate the type of timeless personal brand that can only be achieved through long-term professional success.

But at the same time, they also need to be capable of inserting themselves into the current news cycle, creating opportunities for potential fans to learn more about them and develop a sense of personal connection.

They need to be, in other words, both like us and better than us; relatable, yet also aspirational; intensely human, and, at the same time, more than human. The celebrities who truly understand this paradox—and know how to position themselves in such a way as to satisfy both of these sometimes competing needs—are the ones who are most likely to emerge at the top of the pile when it comes to attention capital.



<sup>6</sup>“Unleashing the power of fans through the fandom formula.” National Research Group, July 20, 2023

# Unpacking celebrities' Attention Capital DNA

NRG's research on the drivers of public attention suggest that there are two key elements necessary for celebrities and public figures to accumulate truly sustainable attention capital: a brand that can exist independently of the current moment in pop culture, and the ability to insert oneself into that moment in a way that feels organic and relevant.

While there's no one "correct" way to achieve either of these two conditions, our research suggests a number of factors that can help contribute to each of them.



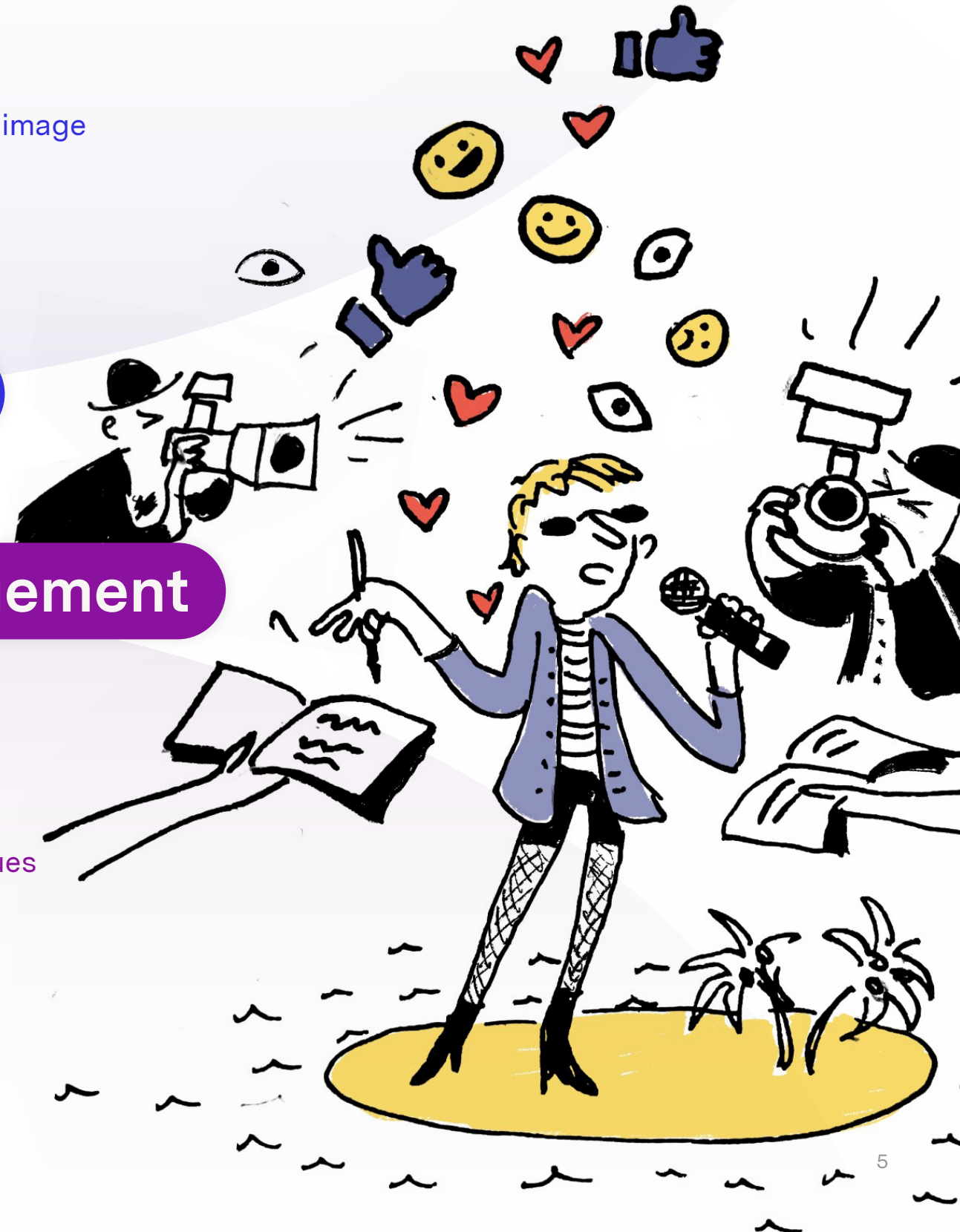
- Extensive body of work
  - Consistent and distinctive personality and image
  - Ground-breaking achievements
  - Recognition and accolades
- {can contribute to}

**Timeless brand**

+

**"Of the moment" engagement**

- {can be achieved by}
- New projects
  - Connection to current events
  - Moral/political leadership on social issues
  - Involvement in drama/scandals



# The drive for cultural relevance is one reason so many celebrities are now looked to as **moral authorities**

 There are many different ways in which celebrities can demonstrate immediate cultural relevance and insert themselves into the news cycle on a consistent basis. Obviously, a consistent and active professional output—appearances in new movies or TV shows, releases of new music, new product launches, etc.—can create an ongoing sense of cultural relevance, as can appearances on talk shows and podcasts, profiles in magazines, and other forms of media appearances.

But one of the most potentially impactful—and riskiest—forms of immediate cultural relevance is the ability to provide a sense of moral leadership when it comes to particularly thorny social or political issues. Increasingly, **the dynamics of attention capital are incentivizing celebrities to understand themselves as political actors—and fans, therefore, are increasingly looking to the celebrities they idolize for moral guidance and political leadership.**<sup>7</sup>

The upshot of this is that the boundaries between politics and entertainment have become porous to the point of being almost non-existent. Arguably, Donald Trump—the reality TV star turned President—represents the most visible example of this trend, but he’s far from the only one. When the biggest pop star

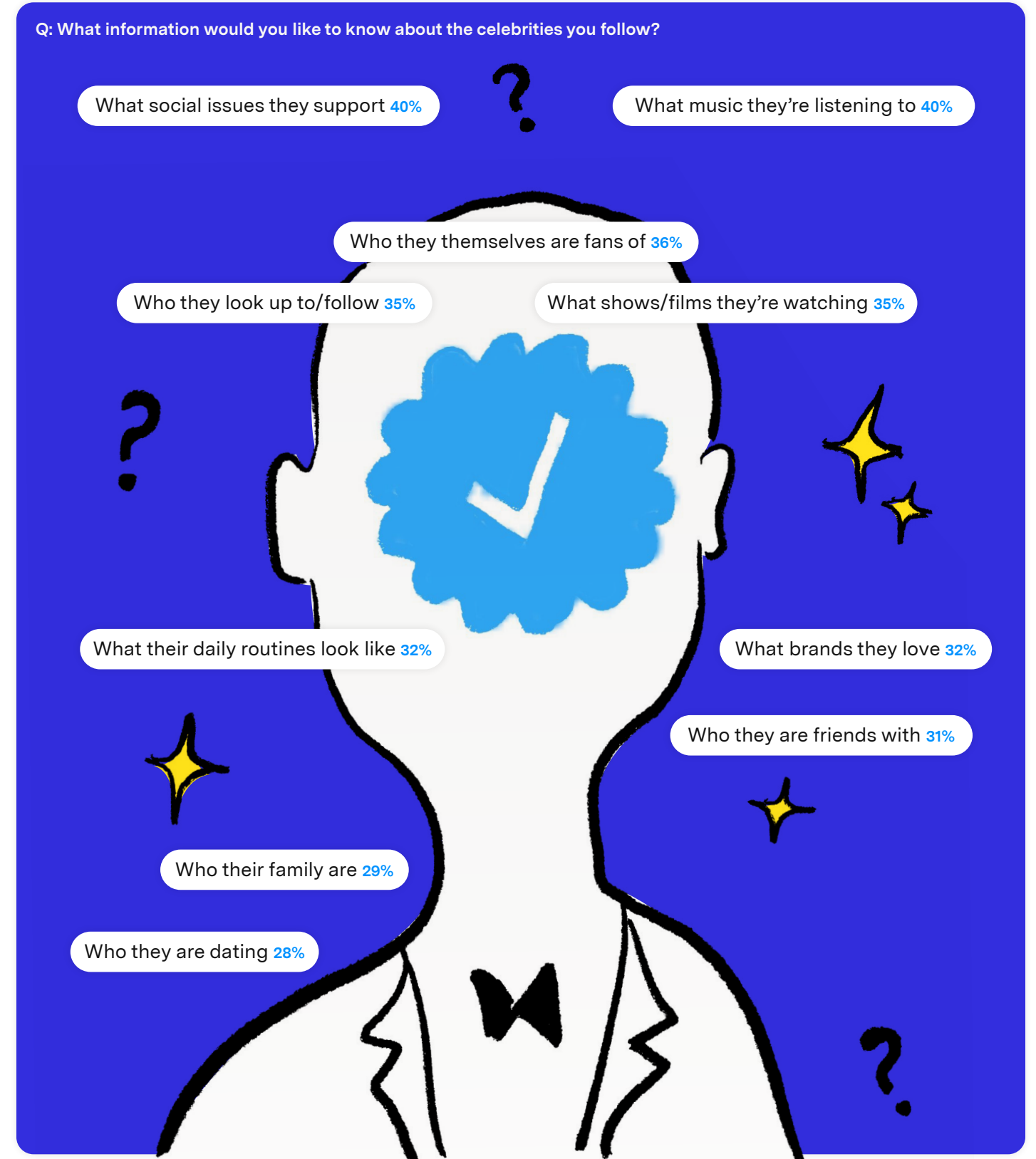
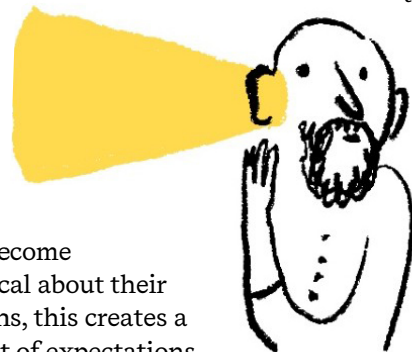
on the planet is wading into Senate races,<sup>8</sup> and when Kim Kardashian is visiting the White House to lobby for sentencing reform,<sup>9</sup> it’s clear that celebrities are highly aware of how political engagement can amplify their attention capital.

And this isn’t just a phenomenon in the US. Across the world, “celebrity politicians” are becoming increasingly common—as demonstrated by the transformation of Volodymyr Zelenskyy from actor and TV comedian to world leader and global statesman.<sup>10</sup> It may not be long before the US gets another celebrity President; one poll in 2021 revealed that 46% of Americans would consider voting for Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson<sup>11</sup>—while a recent NRG study found that Leonardo DiCaprio was the single most trusted public figure on issues of climate change and sustainability, outperforming politicians and activists like Joe Biden, Al Gore, and Greta Thunberg.<sup>12</sup>

As celebrities become increasingly vocal about their political opinions, this creates a new baseline set of expectations

among the general public for what it means to be a celebrity. **Among Americans who follow celebrities on social media, the number one fact they want to know about those celebrities is where they stand on important social issues.** In many cases, fans feel as if the celebrities they support owe it to them to share their social and political opinions—and that failing to speak out on hot-button issues represents a failing of moral leadership and an abdication of personal responsibility.

That may be why, in the wake of the recent crisis in Israel and Palestine, hundreds of the biggest names in the entertainment industry rushed to sign competing open letters making clear their positions on the conflict.<sup>13</sup> That conflict also demonstrates the dangers inherent in the politicization of celebrity, as stars like Amy Schumer who have been particularly vocal in their support for one side in the conflict have found themselves transformed into lightning rods for debate on social media.<sup>14</sup> While celebrities can certainly use their moral and political leadership to amplify their attention capital, doing so clearly comes with some sizable risks.



<sup>7</sup>Caroline Newman, “Q&A: How Celebrity Activists Are Changing Morality In America,” UVA Today, June 28, 2019 <sup>8</sup>Kirsten Spruch, “A Timeline of Taylor Swift’s Political Evolution,” Billboard, May 29, 2020 <sup>9</sup>Jordyn Phelps, “Kim Kardashian West meets with Trump, recently commuted ex-prisoners at White House,” ABC News, March 4, 2020 <sup>10</sup>Joshua Berlinger, “How Ukraine’s Volodymyr Zelenskyy went from an actor playing president on TV to defiant wartime leader,” CNN, February 26, 2022 <sup>11</sup>Sian Cain, “Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson: I was asked to run for US president by multiple political parties,” The Guardian, November 10, 2023 <sup>12</sup>“How media and pop culture are shaping the sustainability agenda,” National Research Group, June 28, 2023 <sup>13</sup>Kieren Williams, “Celebrities sign rival letters in support of Israel and Palestine—signatories in full,” The Mirror, October 27, 2023 <sup>14</sup>Meredith Clark, “Why Amy Schumer’s Israel-Gaza posts were corrected by MLK’s daughter,” The Independent, November 3, 2023

# For many celebrities, **drama** and **controversy** are important components of attention



On the subject of media attention, P.T. Barnum supposedly once quipped: “I don’t care what the newspapers say about me, so long as they spell my name right.” And indeed, today there are many celebrities who take that lesson fully to heart—using drama and controversy to ensure that their names remain constantly in the headlines and at the forefront of public consciousness.

**62%** of social media users say they actively follow celebrity drama

Arguably, the rise of social media has made controversy an even more important component of attention capital. Six in 10 social media users describe themselves as active followers of celebrity drama—and, more

importantly, social media has created opportunities for users to engage with this sort of drama in new ways and to a degree never before possible.

There is perhaps no better example of this than the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard defamation trial that captured the imagination of the public back in 2022. For much of the summer, social media platforms—TikTok in particular—were awash

with content about the trial, as users created memes, picked over the evidence, and speculated about the outcome.<sup>15</sup> In total, 92% of social media users were exposed to information about the trial, while 70% actively followed it to at least some degree.

The Depp v. Heard trial helps to illustrate the key features that dictate whether a particular piece of celebrity drama manages to fully capture the imagination of the general public. For one thing, there were clear sides involved: as with the split between Prince Harry and the rest of the royal family, it created an “us vs. them” dynamic that encouraged social media users to divide themselves into clearly demarcated sides, each with a vested interest in proving the other wrong.

At the same time, it also invited endless opportunities for speculation; people had plenty of opportunities to latch onto specific pieces of information and develop their own theories about the truth of the pair’s relationship. And lastly, it connected to a number of hot-button social issues. Specifically, the trial played into broader public debates around domestic violence and the #MeToo movement—in much the same way that, for example, the Britney Spears conservatorship dispute felt like an extension of a public conversation that was already taking place about the importance of mental health.



Q: Which recent dramas involving celebrities have you been paying attention to? ■ Followed closely ● Followed a bit ■ Aware but didn't follow □ Unaware

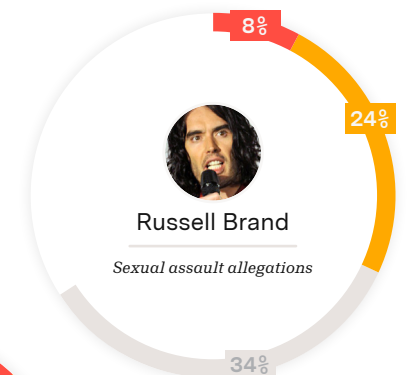
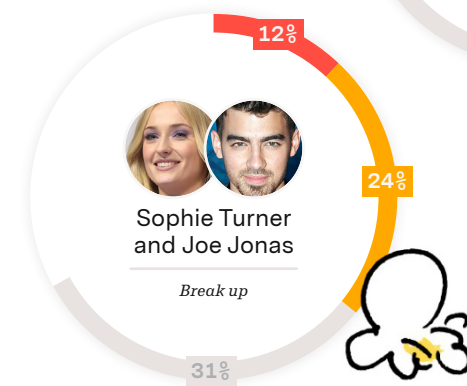
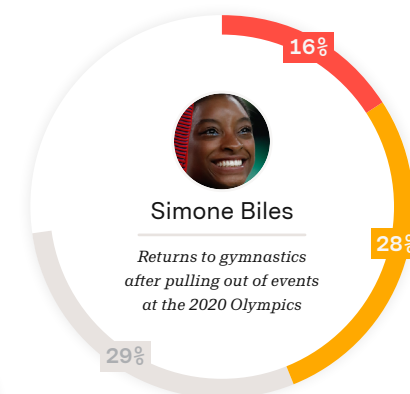
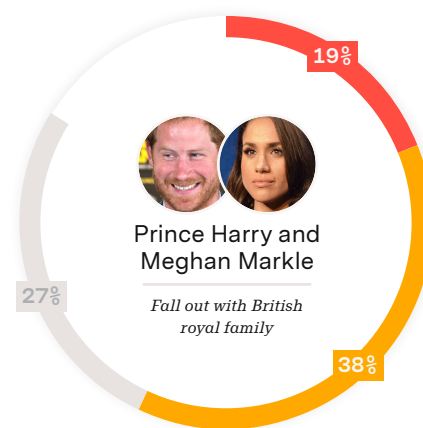
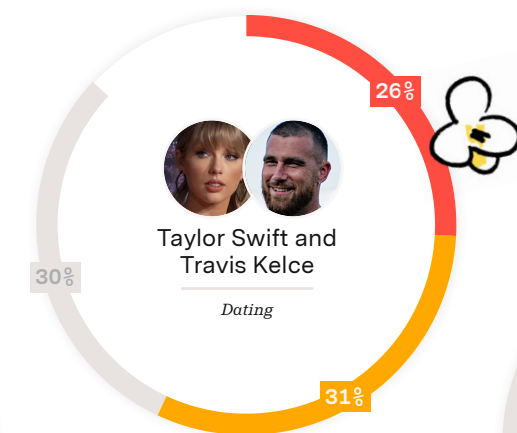
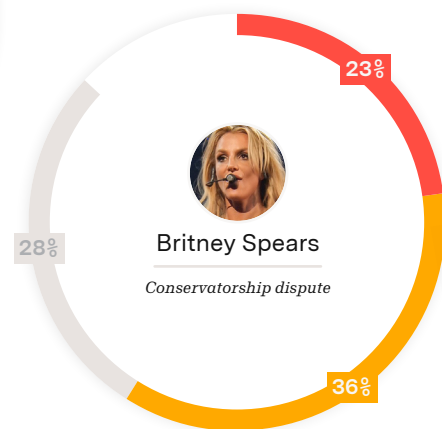
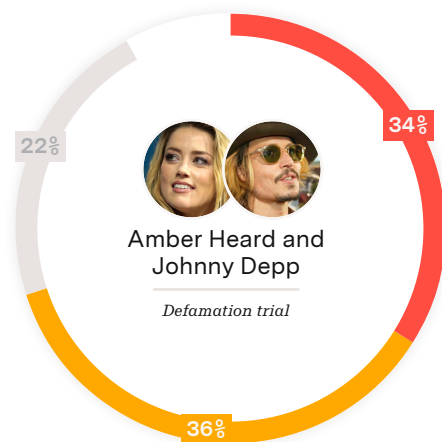


PHOTO CREDIT Amber Heard: Gage Skidmore | Johnny Depp: Andy Templeton | Britney Spears: Drew de F Fawkes | Taylor Swift: Cosmo UK | Travis Kelce: Erik Drost | Prince Harry: Department of Defense EJ Hersom | Meghan Markle: Genevieve | Simone Biles: Agencia Brasil Fotografias | Sophie Turner: Gage Skidmore | Joe Jonas: Anthony Citrano | Russell Brand: Eva Rinaldi

<sup>15</sup> Amelia Tait, “Amber Heard v Johnny Depp” has turned into trial by TikTok - and we're all the worse for it.” The Guardian, May 11, 2022

The increased intensity and visibility of celebrity scandals and drama has also led to an increasingly vocal public debate around the dangers of “cancel culture”—the phenomenon by which social media users attempt to ostracize public figures who are seen as having acted or spoken in a way that is deemed offensive or out-of-line. In much of the world, cancel culture—and its ramifications for freedom of expression—has become a major political question, with even the Pope taking a public stand on the issue.<sup>16</sup>

**Q: How would you describe your views on cancel culture?**

“Cancel culture is a **dangerous threat** to freedom of expression and a form of mob justice.”



“Cancel culture is an **important way** for ordinary people to hold the powerful to account.”

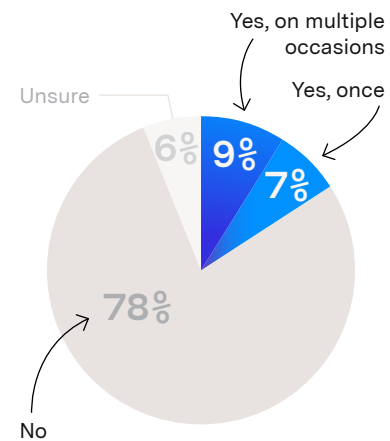
A sizable plurality of social media users agree with His Holiness: 44% see cancel culture as a dangerous form of mob justice, while only 28% believe that it’s an important tool that lets the public hold celebrities and other powerful figures to account. And just 16% say that they’ve ever participated in canceling a celebrity themselves. There is, however, a stark generational divide on the topic: among under-25s, almost 3 in 10 (28%) say they’ve participated in a cancellation on at least one occasion.

In fact, despite the heated public debate around cancel culture, social media users are far more likely to have interacted with celebrities online in a positive context than a negative one. Around a third of people say that they’ve posted a positive comment in

response to a celebrity’s social media post or reposted a positive comment about a celebrity—whereas only 21% have made fun of a celebrity on a social media platform, and just 13% report posting negative comments about them. Moreover, 66% of social media users report that they enjoy posting positive content about celebrities more than negative content, compared to only 3% who say the inverse.

While it’s possible that this data may be skewed by social desirability effects—as people may be more likely to remember and admit to posting positive content—it does suggest that positive attention is a more powerful driver of meaningful action and engagement than negative attention. And while it’s certainly true that there are some celebrities with high attention capital who are also magnets for public controversy, it’s less clear that there’s a causal relationship between these two factors.

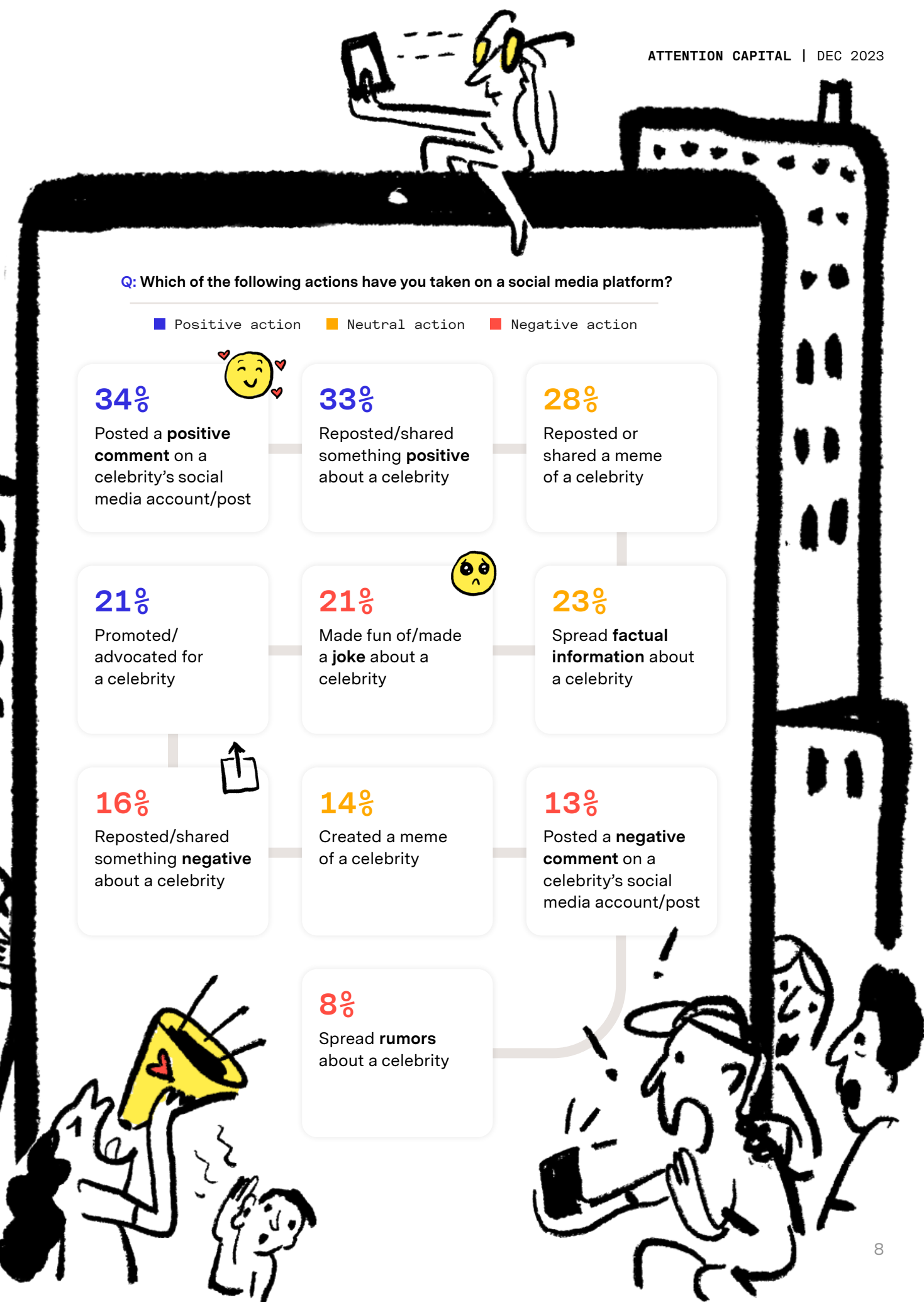
**Q: Have you ever participated in “canceling” a celebrity or public figure?**



To test this relationship, NRG conducted a MaxDiff analysis of 30 high-profile celebrities, measuring social media users’ perceptions of their level of controversy—how often they’re involved in dramas or scandals—and their cultural relevance—their ability to shape and influence public culture (see page 9 for full results). This analysis found little evidence of a meaningful relationship between the two variables in either a positive or negative direction. In other words, **while it’s clearly possible to be an influential and culturally relevant celebrity who also has a reputation for controversy, involvement in scandals or drama, on its own, isn’t enough to guarantee relevance.**

Ultimately, it’s important to understand the role of scandal and controversy in the framework of the attention paradox—the need for celebrities to balance long-term brand concerns against engagement with the immediate news cycle. Clearly, controversy can be an effective way to keep your name in the headlines and at the forefront of public consciousness. But if that comes at the expense of long-term brand consistency—or if the celebrity becomes known only for involvement in particular scandals—then it is unlikely to help generate sustainable attention capital.

Looking at celebrities through this lens or controversy versus cultural relevance also provides an effective way to map the landscape of celebrity and identify the various functions that different celebrities play in shaping public conversation. Specifically, this analysis allows us to identify four key categories that celebrities can fall into based on their placement across these two axes of the MaxDiff.



<sup>16</sup>Louis Westendarp, “Pope Francis hits out at ‘cancel culture,’” Politico, January 10, 2022



# Controversy vs. Cultural Relevance

Based on a MaxDiff analysis of social media users' attitudes towards a selection of prominent celebrities.  
 MaxDiff analysis is a statistical tool that allows for the ranking of large sets of variables, and the measurement of perceptual gaps between them across multiple axes.

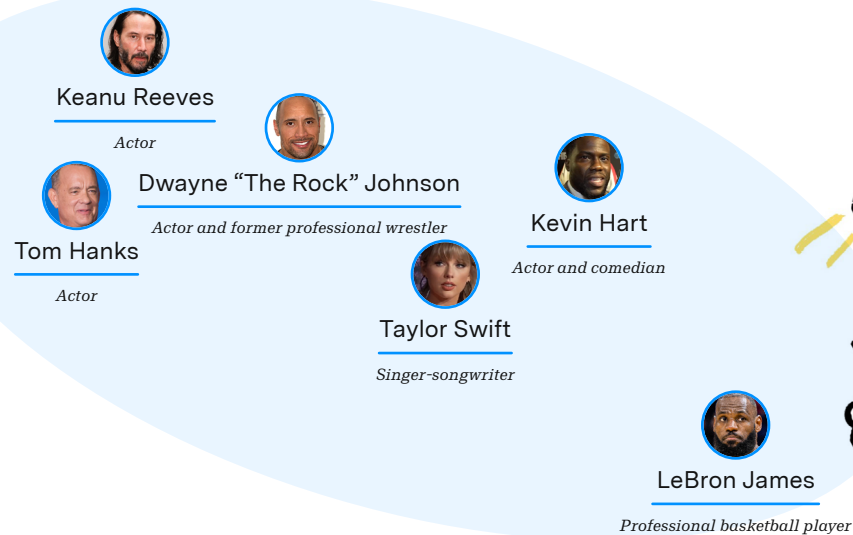


## CULTURAL JUGGERNAUTS

Most relevant,  
 least controversial

These celebrities tend to have cross-demographic fan bases, appealing to the broadest possible range of people. They largely rely on mechanisms other than scandal to maintain their position as part of the cultural zeitgeist—and that means that they have relatively few active “haters” considering their level of fame.

Notably, their positive public images combined with their ability to command attention at-will makes these celebrities uniquely well-placed for crossing into other cultural domains. Dwayne Johnson, Taylor Swift, and LeBron James, for example, have all made a significant public impact through their occasional forays into politics.

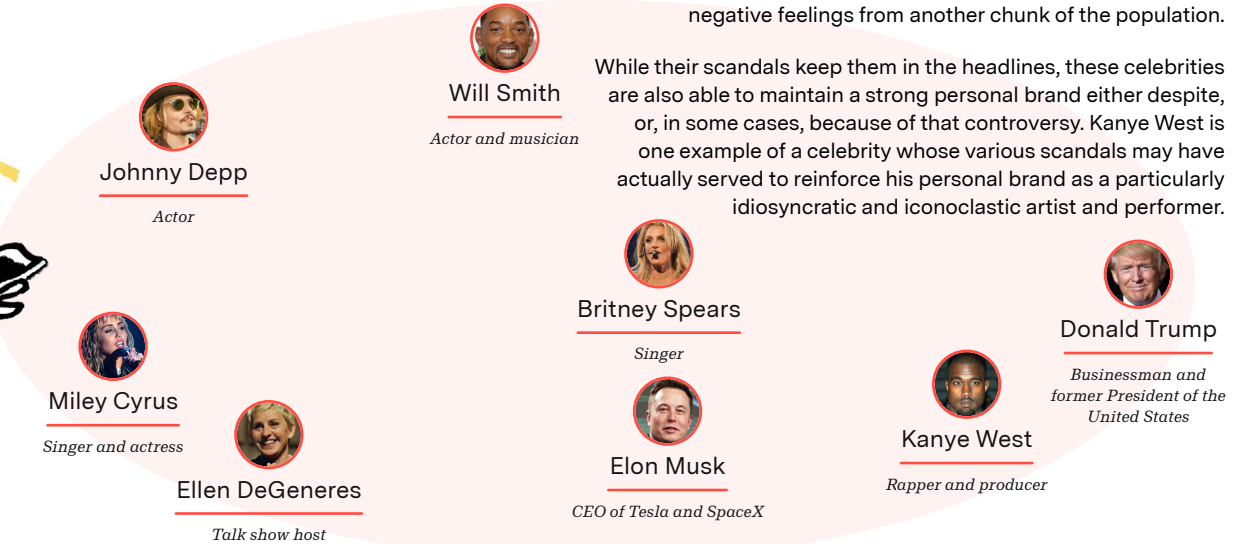


## PROBLEMATIC FAVES

Most relevant,  
 most controversial

Celebrities in this quadrant tend to be some of the most polarizing. Many of them—such as Elon Musk, Johnny Depp, and Donald Trump—manage to have intense fan bases while also inspiring equally strong negative feelings from another chunk of the population.

While their scandals keep them in the headlines, these celebrities are also able to maintain a strong personal brand either despite, or, in some cases, because of that controversy. Kanye West is one example of a celebrity whose various scandals may have actually served to reinforce his personal brand as a particularly idiosyncratic and iconoclastic artist and performer.



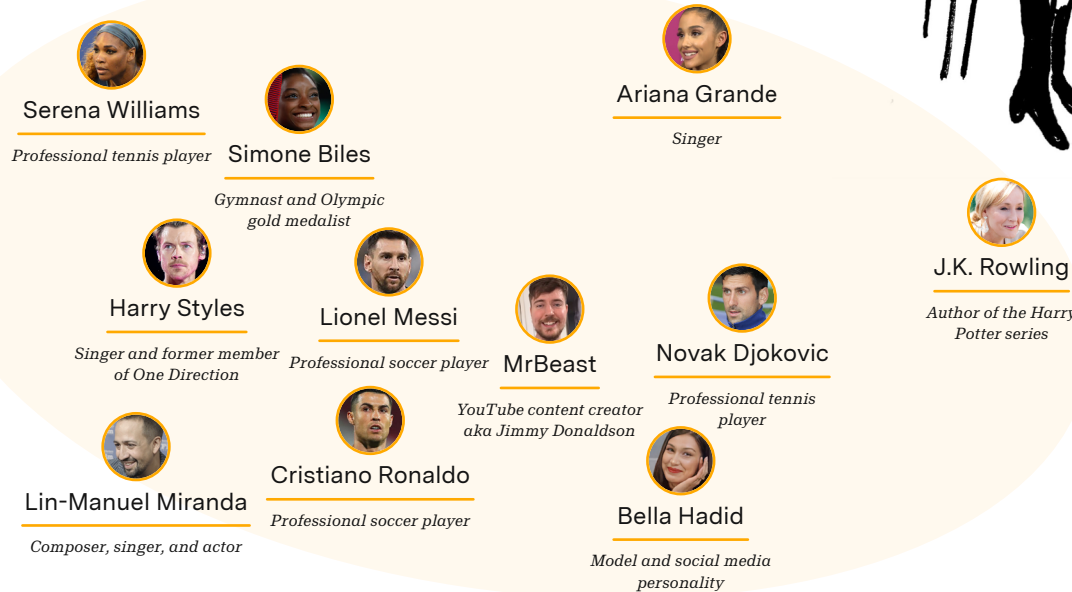
CULTURALLY RELEVANT

## NICHE PERFORMERS

Least relevant,  
 least controversial

Celebrities in this category tend to be well-respected within their individual fields, but may not command significant public attention when those fields are not in the limelight. As a result, their attention capital can be highly variable over time, and they're limited in their ability to shape culture outside of specific windows.

For example, Messi or Ronaldo may command huge levels of attention during a World Cup or other major tournaments, but consumers who aren't invested sports fans are unlikely to be actively seeking out news about them outside of those events.

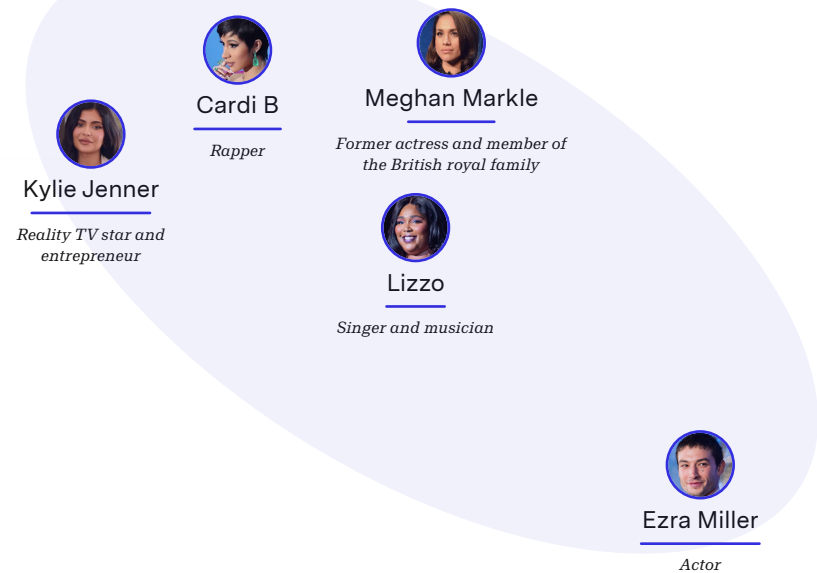


## SCANDAL MAGNETS

Least relevant,  
 most controversial

This may be the most dangerous category for a celebrity to find themselves in. These celebrities risk finding themselves in a situation where their various controversies end up being the only thing that lets them keep their hold on public attention. When interest in the scandal dries up, they may find themselves lacking the ability to command attention on their own terms.

In some cases, celebrities may end up in this category because the specific controversies they are involved in serve to undercut key elements of their personal brand. Or it may be because the public decided that their professional achievements weren't significant or consistent enough to justify the level of controversy surrounding them.



CONTROVERSIAL

PHOTO CREDIT Tom Hanks: Dick Thomas Johnson | Johnny Depp: Andy Templeton | Taylor Swift: Cosmo UK | Britney Spears: Drew de F Fawkes | Kanye West: David Shankbone | LeBron James: Erik Drost | Lionel Messi: Hossein Zohrevand | Cristiano Ronaldo: Mehrdad Esfahani | Serena Williams: Edwin Martinez | Elon Musk: Steve Jurvetson | Donald Trump: Gage Skidmore | Dwayne Johnson: David Shankbone | Kevin Hart: Lance Harris | Keanu Reeves: Governo do Estado de São Paulo | Simone Biles: Agencia Brasil Fotografias | Ariana Grande: Pure DOPE Magazine | MrBeast: Fidias | Bella Hadid: Marie Claire Korea | Novak Djokovic: James Boyes | Harry Styles: Raph PH | Lin-Manuel Miranda: Lyn Fairly Media | Will Smith: Max Morse for Tech Crunch | Ellen DeGeneres: Tulane Public Relations | Kylie Jenner: Vogue Taiwan | Cardi B: Nicole Alexander | Meghan Markle: Genevieve | Lizzo: Raph PH | J.K. Rowling: Daniel Ogren | Ezra Miller: Dick Thomas Johnson

# To successfully **sustain** public engagement, a celebrity's Attention Capital DNA needs to intersect correctly with their cultural domain

Having the right Attention Capital DNA—the ability to satisfy consumers' twin expectations for timelessness and "of the moment" relevancy—is only half the battle when it comes to capturing and sustaining public attention. Equally important is the question of how the attributes and behaviors that define that DNA interface with the broader cultural context in which a celebrity operates.

Specifically, there are five key cultural domains in which we can apply this mode of analysis: music, film & TV, sports, politics, and business & technology. And while attention is certainly a valuable commodity in all of these industries, the rules governing how it can most efficiently be harvested—and maintained—vary considerably across them.

To better understand the commonalities and differences across these domains, we asked social media users to describe the celebrities they considered to be most influential within each of them. Some attributes proved to be highly consistent across all five; "confident," for example, was in the top three attributes for every one of the domains tested, speaking

to the expectation from consumers that celebrities should "feel like they belong" in their respective industries.

Similarly, "respectable" was a word used by consumers to describe top celebrities across all five of these domains. Again, this demonstrates the limitations of an attention acquisition strategy rooted solely in one's ability to reliably generate controversy. Being an object of derision may keep your name in the headlines, but if you don't have a core audience of fans who see you as a figure of respect, your ability to convert eyeballs into meaningful engagement will be highly limited.

Beyond those shared attributes, however, there were some significant differences in how consumers think about celebrities across these different domains. In the next part of this report, we'll unpack the specific factors that serve to drive the acquisition of attention capital in these disparate contexts, as illustrated by the specific celebrities that are top-of-mind for consumers within each of them.





## In Hollywood, young actors struggle to capture the same attention as veteran stars.

When it comes to capturing audiences' attention in the world of film and TV, it goes without saying that some degree of talent is generally a prerequisite—with "talented" being the second most common word picked by social media users to describe celebrities in this field.



### TL;DR Three things to know about attention capital in this space

- 1 The most influential film and TV stars tend to be those that can balance easygoing humor and charisma against the ability to project confidence and respectability.
- 2 In today's Hollywood landscape, having a proven track-record is more powerful than being of-the-moment.
- 3 As a result, younger stars are struggling to command the same level of attention capital as previous generations.

### FAN FAVORITES

Who are people's favorite celebrities in this space?



Tom Hanks Denzel Washington Johnny Depp

However, the specifics of how that talent expresses itself through an actor's public persona are equally as important. And there's a fine line to be walked here: **consumers say that the most influential film and TV stars are those who are both funny and entertaining, yet can simultaneously exude confidence and respectability when the situation demands it.** Actors who can consistently command attention, therefore, tend to be those who avoid being pigeonholed squarely into the "goofball" or "Oscar bait" boxes.

We can see this quite clearly when we look at the list of the most talked about celebrities in this field—which, while not a perfect proxy for attention capital, does give us an idea of who is playing an active role in driving discourse and shaping the public conversation. At the top of the list sits Tom Cruise, who, despite his reputation as the archetypal action hero in movies like *Top Gun: Maverick* and the *Mission*

### TOP DRIVERS OF ATTENTION

What factors do people say make them more likely to pay attention to celebrities in this space?

- In films/TV shows I personally enjoy **60%**
- In popular films/TV shows **50%**
- Take on challenging or transformative roles **39%**
- Have a significant body of work in a specific genre **36%**
- Nominated for or win awards **34%**

*Impossible* franchise, has also found plenty of opportunities to showcase his comedic chops in films from *Jerry Maguire* to *Tropic Thunder*. Similarly, Will Smith is another example of a star who seems equally at home headlining a blockbuster action comedy like *Men in Black* as he does putting in an Academy Award-worthy performance in a film like *King Richard*.

Another factor that unites many of the most talked about celebrities in the world of film and TV is their longevity. Of the top 10 most talked about celebrities in this space, only one—reality star Kim Kardashian—is under the age of 45. This reinforces recent NRG analysis which found that the list of actors who could most reliably pull audiences into cinemas was dominated almost exclusively by stars in their 50s and beyond.<sup>17</sup>

A number of hypotheses have been put forward to explain why younger actors are struggling to convert buzz into attention capital. Some have argued, for example, that social media has shattered the aura of mystique that movie stars once enjoyed. Alternatively, it may have more to do with the current Hollywood landscape and the kinds of films that get made today: in an era where the intellectual property is often the true "star" of the movie, young actors simply don't get enough opportunities to build a brand that can outlive the franchises they're connected to.<sup>18</sup> But whatever the reason, it's clear that actors with multi-decade track records of successful projects are at a distinct advantage when it comes to building attention capital and driving fan behavior.

### TRENDING TITANS

Which celebrities do people hear talked about the most?

- Tom Cruise
- Tom Hanks, Will Smith
- Brad Pitt
- Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson
- Kim Kardashian
- Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Aniston
- Johnny Depp, Jennifer Lopez

Average age: **55**  
Male: **70%** | Female: **30%**

PHOTO CREDIT Denzel Washington: MTV UK | Tom Cruise: Dick Thomas Johnson | Tom Hanks: Dick Thomas Johnson | Will Smith: Max Morse for TechCrunch | Brad Pitt: Department of Defense News Features | Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson: David Shankbone | Kim Kardashian: Cosmo UK | Leonardo DiCaprio: Presidencia de la República Mexicana | Jennifer Aniston: Angela George | Johnny Depp: Andy Templeton | Jennifer Lopez: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

<sup>17</sup>Ashley Rodriguez, "Movie stars who draw audiences to theaters are getting older, raising questions about young Hollywood's star power," Business Insider, April 24, 2023 <sup>18</sup>Wendy Ide, "Why film stars are getting older - and what it tells us about Hollywood's new struggle," The Guardian, May 28, 2023



## In sports, attention capital often depends on what goes on outside the games themselves.

In the world of sports, a player’s ability to hold the attention of the public often has as much to do with their perceived sportsmanship and integrity as it does with their athletic talent. Compared to other parts of the entertainment industry, social media users were more likely to use terms like “respectable” and “admirable” to describe the most influential celebrities in this field—and the exhibition of strong sportsmanship and leadership was the second most commonly cited factor for driving interest and attention.

**TL;DR** Three things to know about attention capital in this space

- 1 Trending titans are mainly young, predominantly male, and exhibit more diversity than other domains.
- 2 Crucial attributes for attention-grabbing athletes are talent, sportsmanship, and top performance, marked by record-breaking achievements.
- 3 Increasingly, athletes who can command public attention are those who embrace their status as role models and agents of social change.

### FAN FAVORITES

Who are people’s favorite celebrities in this space?



Lionel Messi | LeBron James | Michael Jordan

Ultimately, there’s an expectation for athletes to act as role models in a way that doesn’t quite have any parallels in fields like music or film & TV; **fans want to feel that they’re investing their attention in figures who are going to use it to have a positive impact both on their sport and society as a whole.**

That may be one reason why LeBron James is both the most popular and most talked about athlete in America today. While his on-court performances are the stuff of legend, James has also made his charitable endeavors a core part of his public persona; through his LeBron James Family Foundation, he has worked tirelessly to reinvest the profits of his success back into his hometown of Akron, Ohio, opening elementary schools for at-risk children and funding thousands of college scholarships.<sup>20</sup>

Notably, James was one of the first athletes to understand that the rise of social media had begun to erode many of the traditional barriers

### TOP DRIVERS OF ATTENTION

What factors do people say make them more likely to pay attention to celebrities in this space?

Recognized as a top performer in their sport **49%**

Exhibit strong sportsmanship or leadership **47%**

Play for a team I’m a fan of **46%**

Won major championships or competitions **44%**

Broken records or achieved significant milestones in their sport **35%**

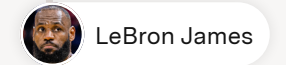
between the worlds of sports and politics. In hindsight, it’s clear that the “hoodie protests” he organized in 2012 in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin represented a major turning point, both for basketball and the wider sporting world—ushering in a new era in which top sports stars were empowered to use their attention capital as an engine for social change, and paving the way for other notable “athlete activists” such as Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond the ability to provide a sense of moral leadership, consistency and longevity have also proved to be important drivers of influence: fans want to invest their attention in players who have proven that they can stand the test of time, rather than those who have one or two strong seasons. That may be why Michael Jordan, despite retiring over two decades ago, remains one of the most talked about athletes in the US—and why Serena Williams was both the only woman and only player not from a team sport to crack the top 10.

Previous NRG research has highlighted the growing importance of narrative storytelling in driving sports fandom—and that’s a trend that only looks set to accelerate as the worlds of sports and celebrity gossip become increasingly intertwined. Recent news about the relationship between Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce—and the resultant spike in merchandise sales for Kelce’s Kansas City Chiefs<sup>22</sup>—only serves to underscore how important personal narratives can be in determining who holds attention capital at any given moment.

### TRENDING TITANS

Which celebrities do people hear talked about the most?



LeBron James



Tom Brady, Patrick Mahomes, Travis Kelce



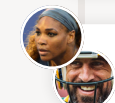
Michael Jordan



Lionel Messi



Steph Curry, Cristiano Ronaldo



Serena Williams, Aaron Rodgers

Average age: **40**  
Male: **90%** | Female: **10%**

PHOTO CREDIT LeBron James: Erik Drost | Tom Brady: Jeffrey Beall | Patrick Mahomes: Jeffrey Beall | Travis Kelce: Erik Drost | Michael Jordan: Department of Defense photo D. Myles Cullen | Lionel Messi: Hossein Zohrevand | Steph Curry: Erik Drost | Cristiano Ronaldo: Mehrdad Esfahani | Serena Williams: Edwin Martinez | Aaron Rodgers: All-Pro Reels

<sup>20</sup>Tim Reynolds, “LeBron James’ off-court legacy complements NBA success,” NBA, February 3, 2023 <sup>21</sup>Kevin B. Blackstone, “LeBron James helped revive the daring spirit of athlete activism,” The Washington Post, February 11, 2023 <sup>22</sup>Carly Thomas, “The Taylor Swift Effect Is Very Real and It’s Now Taking the Sports World by Storm,” The Hollywood Reporter, September 28, 2023

## To build attention capital, politicians need to position themselves as the figureheads for larger social movements.

Compared to the other four domains of celebrity covered in this report, there are several unique dynamics at play that dictate who consumers pay attention to in the world of politics. For one thing, attention capital in this sphere is highly time-bound and context-dependent: for many people, politics is a subject they pay very little attention to in general outside of election season.

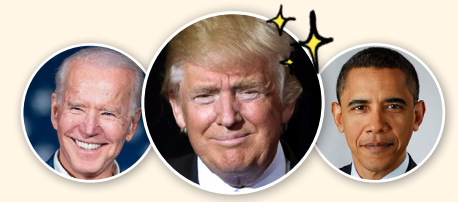


### TL;DR Three things to know about attention capital in this space

- 1 Attention in the world of politics is highly correlated with proximity to high office and institutional power.
- 2 Politicians who can best capture public attention are often those who successfully position themselves as the figurehead for particular social movements or policy initiatives.
- 3 In an increasingly polarized political landscape, controversy is often an inescapable part of what it means to command attention.

### FAN FAVORITES

Who are people's favorite celebrities in this space?



Joe Biden      Donald Trump      Barack Obama

Moreover, **the ability of specific politicians to command attention tends to be highly dependent on their proximity to institutional power.** It's no coincidence that the three most talked about politicians in America—and the three who evoke the most passionate emotions among the public at-large—also happen to be the three men who have most recently held the office of President.

Nonetheless, it is possible for a politician to successfully build up attention capital even without the bully pulpit of the Presidency—especially if they can position themselves, in the public imagination, as the foremost spokesperson for a specific policy initiative or social movement.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez might be the best example of a politician whose ability to command attention significantly outstrips the limitations of her office. The

third-term Representative from New York is the most talked about member of either house of Congress—finding herself at the center of public attention far more often than more senior congressional Democrats like Hakeem Jefferies or Chuck Schumer. Certainly, much of that can be attributed to her status as the de facto spokesperson for the American progressive movement,<sup>26</sup> and her role as a figurehead for national campaigns on issues like Medicare for All and the Green New Deal.

On the other side of the aisle, Ron DeSantis is another example of a politician who has successfully captured public attention through his personal affiliation with a signature set of issues. Since his election in 2018, the Florida governor has made his state a central battleground of the right-wing backlash against “woke culture,” and himself personally as a champion of “parental rights” in American schools.<sup>27</sup>

Both DeSantis and Ocasio-Cortez are also examples of how, in an increasingly polarized political environment,<sup>28</sup> your ability to command attention often has as much to do with who your enemies are as anything else. Here, we can see a degree of tension between who voters would *like* to pay attention to, and the incentives created by today's media landscape. While 4 in 10 social media users say that they would pay more attention to a politician who can bring people together and bridge social divides, in practice, those sorts of figures can often struggle to attract coverage on both social and legacy media, relative to more polarizing and controversial figures.

### TOP DRIVERS OF ATTENTION

What factors do people say make them more likely to pay attention to celebrities in this space?

Have policies and values I agree with **66%**

Involved in major policy initiatives / reforms **49%**

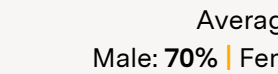
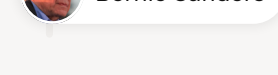
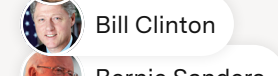
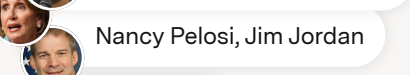
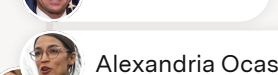
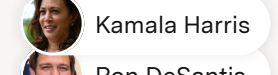
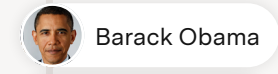
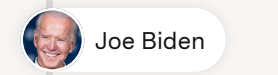
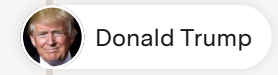
Organized important social movements **43%**

Bridge political divides or foster dialogue between opposing groups **40%**

Hold an important political office **38%**

### TRENDING TITANS

Which celebrities do people hear talked about the most?



Average age: **66**  
Male: **70%** | Female: **30%**

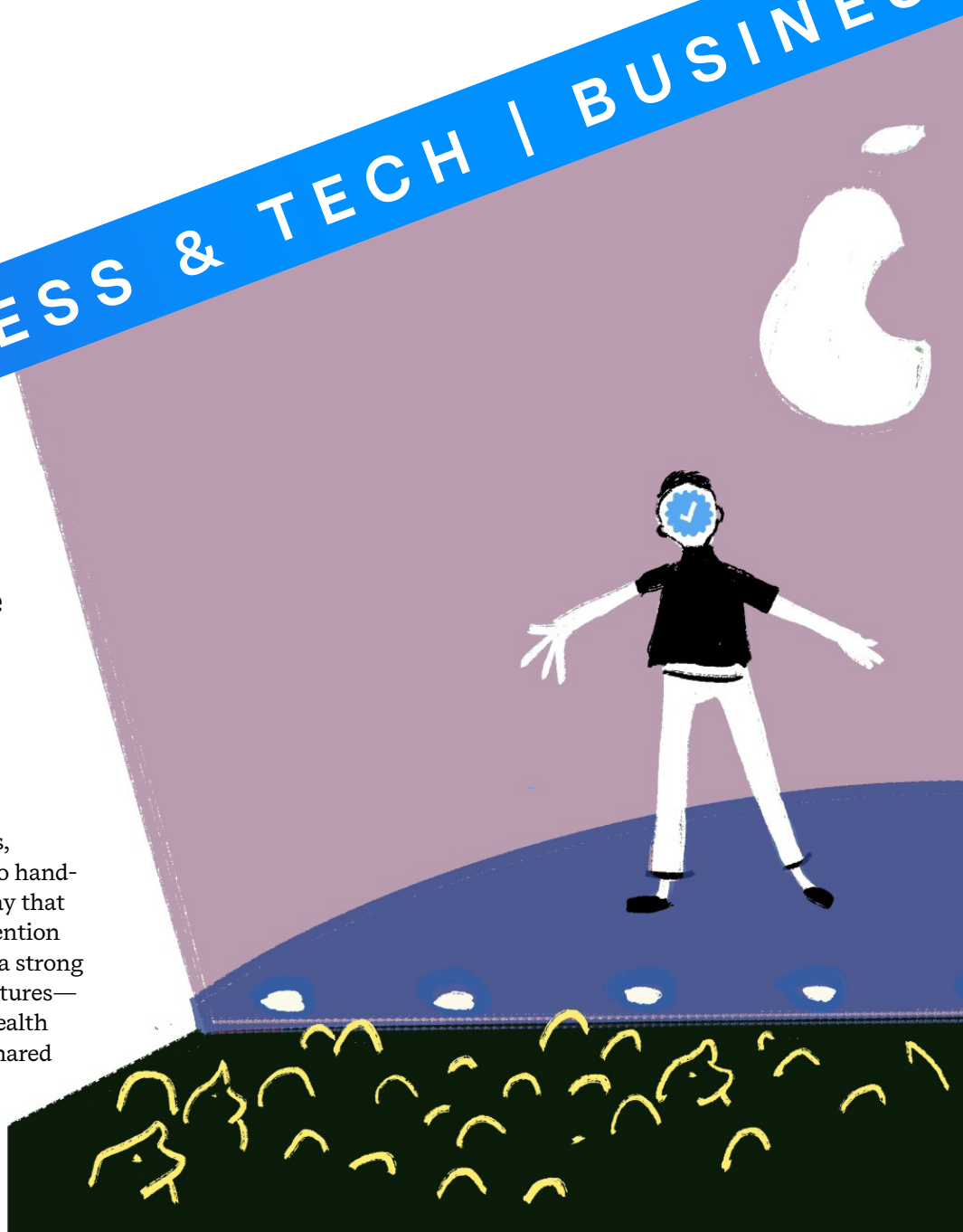
PHOTO CREDIT Donald Trump: Gage Skidmore | Joe Biden: Adam Schultz | Barack Obama: Pete Souza | Kamala Harris: Senate Democrats | Ron DeSantis: U.S. Secretary of Defense | Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: Senate Democrats | Nancy Pelosi: U.S. Department of Labor | Jim Jordan: U.S. Congress | Bill Clinton: National Archives and Records Administration | Bernie Sanders: Shelly Prevost

<sup>26</sup>Dorothy Wickenden, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez On The Path Forward For The Left,” The New Yorker, February 21, 2022  
<sup>27</sup>Jocelyn Gecker, “How Ron DeSantis used Florida schools to become a culture warrior,” Associated Press, August 23, 2023  
<sup>28</sup>Drew Desilver, “The polarization in today’s Congress has roots that go back decades,” Pew Research Center, March 10, 2022

# A | BUSINESS & TECH | BUSINESS

## Innovation is the name of the game for business and tech leaders who want to capture public attention.

For business and tech tycoons, attention and success often go hand-in-hand. Social media users say that they're more likely to pay attention to business leaders who have a strong track record of successful ventures—and identified conspicuous wealth as one of the most common shared attributes among influential celebrities in this arena.



### TL;DR Three things to know about attention capital in this space

- 1 The most talked about business and tech celebrities are almost exclusively white and male—and are, on average, 61 years-old.
- 2 Beyond wealth and success, consumers are more likely to pay attention to business and technology leaders who are perceived as being at the forefront of innovation and emerging tech.
- 3 By a considerable margin, Elon Musk is the most talked about celebrity in this space—due, in large part, to his distinctive personality and penchant for controversy.

### FAN FAVORITES

Who are people's favorite celebrities in this space?



Bill Gates    Elon Musk    Mark Zuckerberg

But wealth, on its own, isn't enough to explain why some of America's billionaires seem to do a better job of capturing attention than others: why it is, for example, that Bill Gates is the second most talked about celebrity in this field, whereas his successor at Microsoft, the almost-as-wealthy Steve Ballmer, doesn't make the top 10.

**To truly stand out in this field, you have to be able to position yourself as a true visionary; more than just a canny investor or speculator, but someone who plays an active role in ushering in new product trends and shaping the technology landscape.** "Pioneering" was one word frequently used by consumers to describe the most influential business and tech leaders, and many said that they were more likely to pay attention to those who had a clear association with new product innovation or emerging technologies.

That's why billionaires like Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg—all of whom are clearly identified in the public consciousness as the primary founders of their respective tech companies—seem to capture the

### TOP DRIVERS OF ATTENTION

What factors do people say make them more likely to pay attention to celebrities in this space?

Track record of successful business ventures **45%**

Invest in emerging tech or new products **34%**

Share my values **34%**

Strong personality or controversial opinions **32%**

Influential thought leaders in business **31%**

public imagination more than tech CEOs who inherited their positions from someone else, like Tim Cook, and billionaires who acquired their wealth from non-tech related sources, such as Warren Buffet and Jamie Dimon.

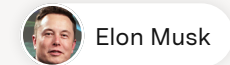
So it's no surprise then that the most talked about billionaire in America also happens to be the one who has done more than anyone else to make his reputation for visionary innovation central to his personal brand. Moreover, Elon Musk also encapsulates many of the other attributes that serve to drive attention in this space.

For one thing, he has fully embraced the role of "billionaire as showman," unafraid to showcase his distinctive personality even when it means wading into controversy. Additionally, he has cultivated a status as a true thought leader; through his specific ventures and investments, he has inserted himself directly into some of the most pressing public debates of our time, on topics like climate change and sustainability, free speech, AI, and more.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, however, the case of Elon Musk also serves to illustrate the limitations of attention capital—especially when that capital is accrued and sustained through an endless cycle of controversy. His outspoken public persona—particularly in the year since he acquired Twitter—has made him an increasingly polarizing figure.<sup>24</sup> While the loyalty of his online superfans seems to be more fervent than ever, his ability to influence behavior outside that core audience may be on the downswing, as evidenced by the recent struggles of his social media platform to retain advertisers.<sup>25</sup>

### TRENDING TITANS

Which celebrities do people hear talked about the most?



Elon Musk



Bill Gates



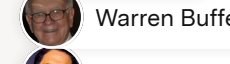
Mark Zuckerberg



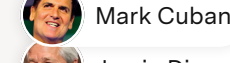
Jeff Bezos



Tim Cook



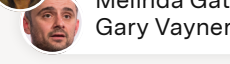
Warren Buffet



Mark Cuban



Jamie Dimon



Melinda Gates, Gary Vaynerchuk

Average age: **61**  
Male: **90%** | Female: **10%**

PHOTO CREDIT Elon Musk: Steve Jurvetson | Bill Gates: Kuhlmann Munich Security Conference | Mark Zuckerberg: Anthony Quintano | Jeff Bezos: Seattle City Council | Tim Cook: Austin Community College | Warren Buffet: Aaron Friedman | Mark Cuban: TechCrunch | Jamie Dimon: Financial Times | Melinda Gates: Chatham House London | Gary Vaynerchuk: Insider Images Andrew Kelly

<sup>23</sup>Reuters Finance, "How tweets by Tesla's Elon Musk have moved markets," Reuters, November 8, 2021 <sup>24</sup>Bess Levin, "A Reminder of Just Some of the Terrible Things Elon Musk Has Said and Done," Vanity Fair, April 26, 2022 <sup>25</sup>Alex Hern, "Twitter's value down two-thirds since Musk takeover, says investor," The Guardian, May 31, 2023

# As the media landscape continues to evolve, attention capital may become **more valuable than ever**



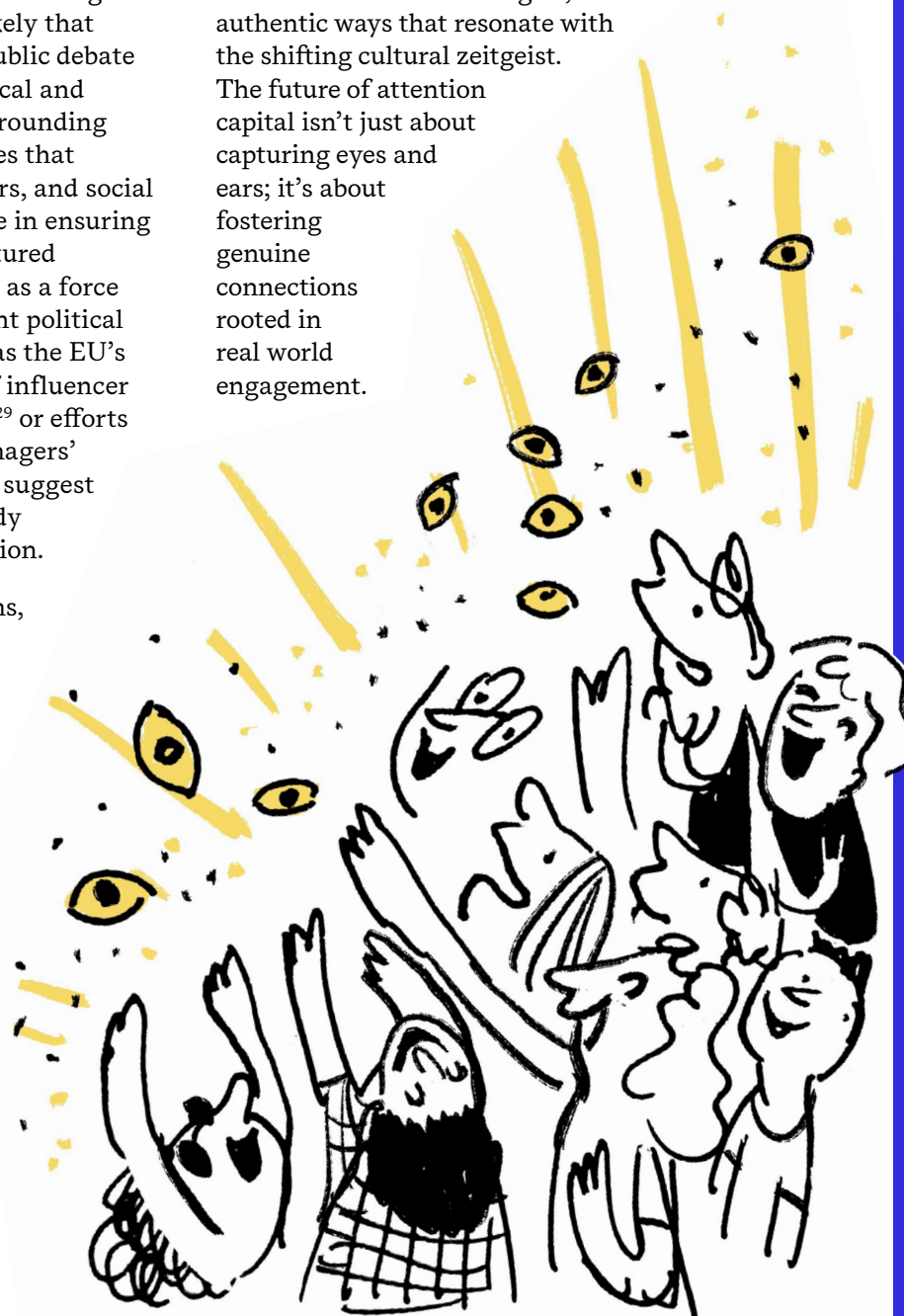
The past decade has been one in which the core paradigms of mass media have been stretched to their limits, redefined, and reimagined—often, at unprecedented speed. As social media has become both more accessible and more deeply integrated into every aspect of our lives, the true value of attention—the ability to hold the public’s interest beyond the 24-hour news cycle and convert that interest into meaningful engagement—has never been clearer.

Casting our gaze forward, it’s clear that the next 10 years will continue this trajectory of transformative change. New technologies like Augmented and Virtual Reality have the potential to make digital media environments more immersive than ever before, offering new ways for celebrities and influencers to engage with fans. And the deeper integration of AI and machine learning into the social media landscape could well usher in a new era of content personalization, changing the rules of the game yet again for those looking to capture and sustain public attention.

Moreover, as attention capital becomes an ever more vital component of the modern digital economy, it seems likely that we’ll see increased public debate about the psychological and ethical questions surrounding it—including the roles that celebrities, influencers, and social media platforms have in ensuring that attention is captured responsibly and used as a force for social good. Recent political developments, such as the EU’s increased scrutiny of influencer marketing practices,<sup>29</sup> or efforts in China to limit teenagers’ social media usage,<sup>30</sup> suggest that things are already moving in this direction.

For all of these reasons, the next decade may well see attention capital become an even more valuable asset class than it is today. For brands and public figures, success in this new environment will depend on their ability to

adapt to these changes, embrace new technologies responsibly, and engage with audiences in meaningful, authentic ways that resonate with the shifting cultural zeitgeist. The future of attention capital isn’t just about capturing eyes and ears; it’s about fostering genuine connections rooted in real world engagement.



## KEY LESSONS

for brands looking to leverage the power of attention capital

### 1

The ability to hold public attention over time requires celebrities to be both “timeless” and “of the moment.”

By using the framework of Attention Capital DNA, and evaluating a celebrity’s ability to satisfy both sides of this equation, brands can identify partners and brand ambassadors who are most likely to be effective drivers of consumer behavior over an extended period of time.

### 2

While online drama—from lighthearted relationship gossip to more serious scandals—can be a powerful tool for maximizing short-term exposure, celebrities who rely exclusively on scandal to maintain their cultural relevance will often be less effective at driving meaningful action and engagement from consumers.

Ultimately, consumers find more emotional fulfillment in engaging with celebrities in a positive way than they do from following scandals, despite the immediate dopamine hit it provides. Without the foundations of a strong cultural output, public figures who become known exclusively for their scandals will often struggle to command the respect necessary to meaningfully convert eyeballs into engagement.

### 3

Properly understanding a celebrity’s potential for accruing attention capital requires a contextual approach. The drivers of attention can vary considerably depending on the cultural domain in which a given celebrity operates. For example, musicians and business leaders benefit more from perceptions of being self-made, whereas athletes are more likely to hold public attention if they’re perceived as morally admirable role models.

Celebrities that can effectively fulfill these expectations will not only rise to the top of their respective fields; they’re also the ones most likely to be able to build a fan base that transcends it, and to shape consumer behavior beyond the limitations of their respective cultural domain.

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## METHODOLOGY

Unless otherwise specified, data in this report comes from a study of 1,001 US social media users, ages 18 to 64, conducted online in October 2023. Respondents for this study were selected and weighted to be representative of the national US population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and income. Each respondent in this study was asked about their relationship with celebrities in two of the five cultural domains (film & TV, music, sports, business & technology, and politics) referenced in this paper. For “Trending Titan” visualizations, celebrities who appeared in multiple categories are displayed only in the category in which they ranked highest.

## WORDS & ANALYSIS



Fergus Navaratnam-Blair



Jasmina Saleh



Lucy Murrey



Grady Miller



Katie Kelley



Alicia Driscoll

## DESIGN & ILLUSTRATIONS



Design by Grace Stees



Illustrations by Hannah Robinson

<sup>29</sup>European Commission to step up scrutiny of influencers’ business practices,” Reuters, October 17, 2023 <sup>30</sup>China proposes to limit childrens’ smartphone time to a maximum of 2 hours a day,” Associated Press, August 3, 2023