

The Importance of Morality and Conformity to the American Dream

Often epitomized as the true achievers of the American Dream, as many are well-known personalities residing in lavish homes and earning millions of dollars, celebrities of television, Hollywood, and academia alike are constantly under the limelight (Epstein 55). Admired by numerous fans, while also berated by the media, celebrities demonstrate the limitations of the American Dream in that instead of solely receiving recognition for their acting skills or intellect, they are continually facing reporters and paparazzi who do little more than invade their privacy. Dustin Diamond of *Saved by the Bell* fame is one such celebrity whose personal life has been brought to the center of media attention as a result of a leaked controversial sex tape that he created to pay off his overdue mortgage bill (Nichols). Most commonly recognized for his role as “Screech,” a high school nerd who is befriended by the popular kids, Diamond encountered much negative criticism once evidence of his involvement with pornography surfaced. As a child star who attained success at a young age, Dustin Diamond embodied the essence of the American Dream. But his fall from stardom, a consequence of his entanglements in a series of sex videos made to settle his large debt, represents the loss of Diamond’s innocent, “geeky” image that defined him throughout the late eighties and early nineties. The substantial amount of attention surrounding his downfall illustrates not only our preoccupation with celebrity life, but more importantly, the conflicting nature of the American Dream. On the one hand, we are taught to rise above and create a distinguishing name for ourselves in the world by accomplishing our goals of wealth and prosperity by any means possible. But, in pursuing success, we as Americans are expected to conform to society’s moral standards. In reality, although we are encouraged to strive for our deepest aspirations of fame and fortune, we must do so within certain ethical bounds.

Child actors are unlike other celebrities in that they have achieved stardom at a young age. The fact that many child stars grow up in front of the silver screen, slowly maturing into adults in the presence of admiring audiences, allows for the creation of a deep-rooted connection with

fans and the public, along with the media. Younger actors are typically recognized as role models for children and adolescents who feel as though they can relate to the stars. This bond can be described in relation to the Social Identity Theory, introduced by psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner, which states that we feel our own identity is enhanced when we are part of a group, and especially when that group includes a celebrity of status and popularity. Therefore, identifying ourselves with celebrities makes them more relatable, and as a result we hold certain expectations from them (Lawrence 2009). The idea of expectations is intensified when dealing with child stars who have already obtained the promises of the American Dream by achieving fame and wealth as youngsters.

Similarly, Dustin Diamond was only twelve years old when he took on the role of “Screech,” a lovable, geeky character whose image remained virtually unchanged throughout the course of the TV series. Since inherent in the American Dream is a desire for status, wealth, and fame, Diamond revealed the reality and truthfulness of the dream, which he achieved with hard work as a child. One of the first modern teen-oriented shows, *Saved by the Bell* was an iconic sitcom that featured the typical daily lives of innocent teenagers. The popularity of this show was not only the reason for Diamond’s rise to fame, but also bred the massive amount of media attention following his “fall from grace.” Audiences were shocked at the transformation of Diamond’s young, squeaky-clean image, as the youth are expected to uphold traditional American values of morality, not succumb to the sinful, promiscuous behavior of pornography.

According to sociologist Charles Kurzman, “celebrity is status on speed,” because “it confers honor in days, not generations,” and “it decays over time, rather than accumulating” (Kurzman 347). In other words, celebrity status is ephemeral in nature, short-lived and easily lost. When a well-known personality is tainted with controversy, it does not take long for the media to tarnish the reputation of the celebrity by printing negative stories in tabloid magazines. But, perhaps the attention surrounding celebrity scandals is indicative of our concern for American society’s moral decay, rather than our desire for entertainment or impulse to revel in others’ miseries. Because we

tend to identify celebrity, particularly child stars who are role models, with the triumph of the American Dream, they are also our references for the moral state of society. It is argued that the most common perpetrators of moral decay, characterized by licentious sexual behavior, drug abuse, and violence, are the younger generations, who are “the youthful challengers to the establishment” (Bullough).

Consequently, Dustin Diamond’s sex tape is one such example of the decline in American values. Not even his success and reputation as an actor was able to break his “fall from grace,” indicating the significance of morals and proper ethical conduct in American society. The American Dream, though it stresses the hard work, economic stability, and societal status, must be attained with adherence to moral principles. News that Diamond created his sex tape as a publicity stunt to bring himself back into the limelight after over a decade demonstrates the lack of acceptance of behalf of the public in wanting to witness his return to television, as indicated by the negative media attention surrounding the pornography video. Although “Screech” was able to comfortably enter American homes via television sets, the same cannot be said for his sex tape. Underlying the American Dream is a moral obligation that we expect our youngsters, the future of the nation, to uphold, regardless of the fame and publicity immoral antics may grant.

Associated with our concern for American moral turpitude is one of the most conflicting value of the American Dream. While an ultimate goals of the dream is to attain prestige, status, and popularity through hard work and rising above our peers, whether it be financially or professionally, there is at the same time the desire to fit in and conform to society. According to news reporter Larry Christopher, although individualism and nonconformity to the status quo are core American values, there is an inherent “pressure to conform to political, religious or societal norms” (Christopher). For example, Dustin Diamond, in *Saved by the Bell*, was the geeky outcast whose above average intelligence made him the subject of many jokes. Diamond, at age twelve, was also the youngest cast member, when the rest of his co-stars were well into their teens. In his recently

published book Behind the Bell, Diamond reveals his alienation with the other cast members, who were much older than he was and did not appreciate the “tag along little brother” (Modell). But, as Christopher notes, forced conformity breeds rebellion, which in Diamond’s case translated into the desire to get rid of his innocent, nerdy reputation by creating a sex tape. His actions display the continuous struggle between complying with the rules set by society and challenging the status quo to preserve individual identity.

Nevertheless, the negative publicity Diamond received for his sex tape suggests the importance the American public places on social values, among which includes proper moral behavior. Though an actor is expected to stand out and be revered by fans, he must have an understanding of ethical conduct. As a result, individualism and success is closely tied to conformity and morality; one can pursue fame and fortune, but not at the expense of immoral actions. There is an fundamental, yet contradictory, quality in the American Dream that stresses we abide by a social contract, following the laws set out by our society. Behind these regulations dedicated to maintaining social norms may be the fear that the moral incompetence of celebrities, the living embodiment of the dream in terms of wealth and success, foreshadows the decay and breakdown of our society as a whole. Without rules that dictate proper social behavior, there would be no distinction between good and bad, resulting in the dissolution of our culture’s framework and principles.

In addition to this fear for the deterioration of traditional values is the fear correlated with the illusion of the American Dream. The current economic depression in the United States has generated great financial insecurities among many lower and middle class American citizens. The increasing prevalence of the working poor, those who work long hours and still remain below the poverty line, is establishing what is now referred to by many as the myth of the American Dream. As described by journalist David Kamp, hard work today does not automatically confer economic prosperity, which is why many feel the dream is dying. When this belief of the American myth is juxtaposed with the fall of once successful celebrities, like Diamond, who have also experienced

financial instability, we tend to doubt our own abilities, and more significantly, the ideological foundation of our country. At the same time, we are afraid that if a celebrity, who is arguably at the pinnacle of status and prestige, can encounter economic difficulties, then the average American, who is part of the middle working class, is not necessarily shielded from such fiscal crises. In essence, beneath the insecurities and fear of the loss of American Dream, there is an underlying hope for financial insecurity and stability. We want our achievements and success to be permanent, enduring, and unwavering, a concept that correlates with our idea of conformity.

Just as there is anxiety regarding fluctuations in financial situations since economic security is characteristic of the dream, there is also a deeply embedded sense that people should remain in their places in society, conforming to social and moral norms. For instance, Diamond was never able to get rid of his “geeky” image; even after over a decade of the finale of *Saved by the Bell*, he is more fondly recognized as “Screech.” Although he appeared on several well-known reality television shows including *Celebrity Fit Club* and *Weakest Link*, much of Diamond’s popularity has been derived from the teenage sitcom he acted in years before. This connection to the past illustrates the American belief that an individual, in spite of his goals of achieving fame and success, must conform and follow the roles, whether it be of a father, brother, or son, established by society. When Diamond’s sex tape was released, one of the reasons he received so much negative attention was because the public was not willing to witness the transformation of a young, “geeky” kid into a porn star. Thus, Diamond failed to uphold the social role and position granted to him by the American people. But had Mario Lopez, who played A.C. Slater, an athletic, popular jock on the same TV series, released the sex tape, the public’s reaction would have been different since Lopez had already established himself as a cool, good-looking, girl-magnet on the show. On the surface, though such differences in response may come across as double standards, they are actually a portrayal of a core American ideal, the belief in conforming to established societal roles, and accordingly, to the codes of moral behavior.

However, one star who was able to break free from the restrictive, fixed roles of society without receiving so much negative media attention such that it would cause her to lose her hard-earned status and popularity is singer Christina Aguilera. Starting off as a child singer in *The New Mickey Mouse Club*, a television show that aired in the nineties, Aguilera rose to fame when she playback sang for the Disney film *Mulan*. Her first album won her the title of “Pop Princess,” planting her image as an innocent, simple girl. But, with the release of her next album, *Stripped*, Aguilera took on the name “X-tina,” adopting a more provocative, sexual persona. Nevertheless, her transformation, seen as ambitious, bold, and risqué rather than shameless and racy, was not perceived in the same negative light as Diamond’s sex tape. In fact, her album sold over 300,000 copies and her songs found their place at the top of the Billboard charts. Even though Aguilera did not display proper morals in the traditional American sense, she was still able to achieve success in terms of continuing to remain one of the top pop stars in the nation (D’Angelo). But, although it seems she was able to attain the goals of the American Dream in spite of not conforming, in actuality, her new image beared great semblance with Marilyn Monroe, an iconic, old Hollywood actress of the fifties. In this sense, Aguilera did not shock her audience with something completely new, innovative, and ground-breaking, but instead played off and assumed the image of a classic, established heroine of the movie industry. It could be for this reason that Aguilera’s transition into a promiscuous pop star did not ruin her career or subject her to the ridicule of the public. Thus, though at the core of American values is the observance of moral behavior, success is also determined by conformity and adherence to social roles, even if those roles were paved by someone else.

One of the greatest paradoxes of the American Dream lies in the conflict between individualism and conformity. The idea of reaching the top, achieving our goals, and attaining fame contrasts with the notion of complying with societal norms, along with preserving morality. But the fact that we as a culture are so obsessed with celebrities and their scandals may reveal something

about how we view ourselves and what we see as our own shortcomings and faults. Perhaps there is a fear that the moral fabric of our society, as indicated by celebrity misconduct, is slowly disappearing. Though many attribute the attention surrounding celebrity lives to our desire for entertainment, wish to escape from the real world and enter a fantasyland, or even make ourselves feel better about our own situation, they fail to realize the great extent to which celebrities are representatives of the American Dream, and therefore bound to receive large amounts of recognition, whether it be negative or positive.

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