

Out of the Box: Of Bears, Bulls And Baldies

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MUCH like the Dow and Nasdaq, one name that trades on the celebrity stock index has been rather volatile lately: Marriage-stopping, underpants-dropping, rehab-hopping and hair-chopping Britney Spears.

In this era of the cell-phone-documented rise, fall and rebound, Spears seems ready for her post-crackup closeup, a third act accompanied by public forgiveness and a convenient CD drop.

Also taking stock of the situation? E-poll Market Research of Encino, Calif., which culls "E-Scores" on the awareness, appeal and attributes of 3,000 celebrities among the public. It's hard to establish a Britney baseline, but E-poll has studied her public perception for six years, since June 2002—back when only 58% of respondents saw her as overexposed!

Even in a world of Mel-downs and TomKatfoolery, Spears' spiral seems special. "It's pretty amazing if you look at her scores from June of 2002 through her Kevin Federline days to this month," said Gerry Philpott, E-Poll's president/CEO. "The shaving of her head was the exclamation point on her freefall."

Certainly, the instant-news nature of the TMZs and Perez Hiltons of the Web world have contributed to her fall from graceland by chronicling everything from carseat capades to crotchwatch.

"The last two years or so we've seen a much more rapid acceleration of where [celebs] are going to go," Philpott said. "Now there's a tipping point: Show me your talent or get off my TV." If a star was considered overexposed by 10% of the public, it was worrisome a few years ago. Britney's current E-score for overexposure: 72%.

Whether her hair is weaved or shorn, Spears' face awareness has increased over the years while her appeal has steadily declined. Positive attributes such as "Sexy" "Confident" and "Stylish" have all hit bottom while negative attributes like "Creepy," "Kooky/Wacky" and "Overexposed" have skyrocketed. "Emotional"—which in Spears' case is not a positive trait—jumped from 15% last month to 35% in March.

While a comeback is never completely out of the question, the fact that Spears has children makes her road a hazardous one to maneuver. "I think this sends a message to other [stars] and their handlers," Philpott said. "The public's perception can change, but when you see numbers like this, you have a real uphill battle."