Being Bad: The Career Move

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IT would probably require a stopwatch to clock the lag time between sin and redemption lately, as media disgrace is transformed into a bargaining chip in a celebrity's career often before a bad boy or girl has stumbled home from the crime scene and showered off the taint of shame.

What seems evident is that public humiliation has lost its barb. There might have been a time when being caught on camera in flagrante delicto or hoovering up lines of coke would have ended a career. But as Paris Hilton proved, being videotaped by one's boyfriend in a zonked-out state and naked on all fours does not put a hitch in one's five-year plan. If anything, the bubble-gum divinity apotheosized on the basis of a homemade pornography loop, a moronic catchphrase and a mental vacancy cavernous enough for storing yellowcake appears set to enjoy a media half-life about as long as that of a spent plutonium rod.

And this odd realization goes a long way toward explaining recent events in the life of another creature of the age: the model Kate Moss.

The recent career arc of this British model, style emblem, rocker's moll and anointed reprobate of the fashion world could be found unexpected only by those whose attention has strayed from the celebrity mosh pit that now crams the main stage of pop culture. Readers whose Star subscriptions have lapsed may not recall that it was just seven months ago, on Sept. 15, that The Daily Mirror of London ran front page photographs that, it claimed, showed Ms. Moss cutting and snorting cocaine in a London photo studio where Babyshambles, the band of her boyfriend, Pete Doherty, was in the middle of a recording session.

The pictures looked gritty, candid and sufficiently libel-proof that both images and coke-snorting allegations were soon plastered like sleazy wallpaper across the blogosphere. The immediate effect on Ms. Moss’s career was less than promising. She was booted by a group of the clients who had made her one of the richest women in her industry, with estimated annual earnings of $9 million. The Swedish retailer H&M, Europe's largest clothing chain, led the charge, dropping her from an advertising campaign showcasing clothes designed by Stella McCartney after first coming to Ms. Moss's defense.

Nikon Inc.

After rehab, Kate Moss came back to advertising campaigns.

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Kate Moss was the inspiration for "Sphinx," by Marc Quinn.

Stephen White Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube (London)
"If someone is going to be the face of H&M," a spokeswoman said at the time, "it is important that they be healthy, wholesome and sound."

Ms. Moss simultaneously discovered that lucrative contracts with longstanding clients like Burberry and Chanel were not renewed or else dropped. And while she stopped short of admitting to drug use, Ms. Moss did what spin doctors always advise troubled clients to do in a pinch: issue an apology and head for the hills. In Ms. Moss's case, the hills surrounded an Arizona clinic where she went to treat "the various personal issues I need to address," as she said in a prepared public statement, "and to take the difficult yet necessary steps to resolve them."

Yet a strange thing happened to Kate Moss on the way to rehab. Far from becoming a pariah or experiencing a serious fall from public grace, she developed an unexpected level of luster. The 32-year-old woman who has been the subject of controversial press since she was discovered at 14, the onetime waif, the person pilloried for allegedly promoting anorexia, the freewheeling seductress of the British tabloids, the tempestuous destroyer of hotel rooms, the confidante and bosom buddy of Anita Pallenberg and other rock chick survivors from the heyday of hard drugs, found herself bumped up a notch to the status of that most nebulous of beings, the cultural avatar.

And even before the model had checked out of the drying-out clinic, she was inundated in attention and work. W magazine ran a cover story on Kate Moss in November 2005. Vanity Fair made her its cover subject the following month. An issue of the influential fashion magazine French Vogue was dedicated to Ms. Moss, who also served as guest editor.

If her notoriety was bad for the brand, it is hard to see how. Even as the London police were questioning Ms. Moss in January, clients were clamoring for her services. Already by early 2006 she had booked campaigns with Virgin Mobile, Dior, Roberto Cavalli and CK Jeans. She had renewed her contracts with the leather and accessories company Longchamp and, it was rumored in the industry, also with Burberry, whose runway show in Milan she attended in February as the front-row guest of Rose Marie Bravo, the company's chief executive. "It shows how relevant she is," Jenn Ramey, Ms. Moss's American agent, said this week, just days after Nikon introduced a new campaign for its Coolpix S6 digital camera built around a series of photographs of a mostly naked Ms. Moss.

"Kate is the height of style and sophistication," said Bill Oberlander, the executive creative director of McCann Worldwide, the agency that created the Nikon ads, for which Ms. Moss is reputedly being paid several million dollars. "She has this almost superhuman quality."

FOR Anna Marie Bakker, the director of communications at Nikon, Ms. Moss seemed an obvious choice to promote a brand aggressively trying to shed its fusty image and seduce the notoriously fickle imaginations of young consumers. "Part of the appeal is that she is truly an enduring style icon," Ms. Bakker said. "But most importantly, she appeals to Nikon as we try to move our product forward, because she has an edge."

Doctoral dissertations could be written on the layered meanings of "edge," the most overused marketing term of the last decade and one most often deployed to lend freshness to ideas and objects whose use-by date has clearly expired. Yet Kate Moss, whose cool not only fueled an 18-year career at the top of her profession, but also attracted the attention of artists from Lucien Freud to the British sculptor Marc Quinn, can now fairly be said to have added "edge" to her résumé, largely on the basis of her sporadic relationship with the unregenerate bad boy, Mr. Doherty, and the resulting brouhaha about a druggy night spent in a London studio.

"She's ubiquitous, she never speaks publicly and so she's someone who has this muteness, this silence that allows people to project onto her image," said Mr. Quinn, whose painted bronze sculpture of Ms. Moss, in an elaborate yoga posture and with her feet behind her
ears, will be the centerpiece of a show opening in May at the Mary Boone Gallery in New York. "Her image has a life of its own. What was interesting when she had all those troubles with the tabloid press about her drug-taking was that the image and the drug-taking didn’t fit and people couldn’t take that."

Yet just as likely the reverse is true; Ms. Moss's tabloid adventures added to the nest of magpie details that, wittingly or not, we all now seem to accumulate about celebrities and then mold into specious narratives about people we’ve never met. "And that, after all, is what a brand is,” said James Twitchell, an author and professor of English and advertising at the University of Florida. "Celebrities are these extraordinary characters who have no plot, but who are in many ways the easiest characters to follow. They don’t violate expectations because there really are none.”

And so Ms. Moss's cool — the historical cool of bad boys and girls doing things that most of us, being properly middle class, might wish to do but will never get around to, explained Dr. Michael Brody, chairman of the media committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry — becomes something different and better in a marketing sense when one adds a dollop of scandal or edge.

"Edge denotes shame," said Dr. Brody, the kind invoked when, for example, one is caught by a camera huddled over a mound of white powder, neatly chopping lines. "People use cameras to take all kinds of pictures now," he added, alluding to the proliferation of too-intimate images widely available on sites like Craigslist.com or MySpace.com. "If you’re selling a camera in our celebrity-obsessed culture, why not use a celebrity and one who was captured at the scene of a crime?” he said.

The idea is not just sexy, in a dubious but distinctly transgressive fashion. It is also a shrewd exploitation of brand. "From the minute her name came up, we loved the idea of Kate endorsing a camera,” said Mr. Oberlander, the McCann Worldwide executive. What could be better, Mr. Oberlander said, than giving a camera to the woman who has spent her life as the focus of its gaze and letting her “take the lens and turn it on the audience?”