

The party's over

Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton and Britney Spears are off the party circuit and out of the public eye. In recession-hit America, ordinary people have their own problems to face — and now disapprove of the A-list antics they once loved

BY **PAUL HARRIS**
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From left to right: Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton and Britney Spears.
PHOTOS: AGENCES



It is a phenomenon that once seemed unimaginable but Paris Hilton, socialite heiress and symbol of a tarnished age of cheap fame, no longer hits the headlines.

Hilton, whose waif-like blonde form first came to global attention via a sordid sex tape and then morphed into a vast commercial empire, is now a much rarer fixture on the gossip circuit. She is even living with a steady boyfriend in Los Angeles. Her one-time partner in hard-partying crime, Nicole Richie, is now a mother with two children.

Nor is Hilton alone in fading from view. Two years ago, singer Britney Spears was engaged in a public meltdown, tailed by a pack of paparazzi that had many speculating she would not survive the attention. At the same time, actress Lindsay Lohan was famed for her partying, not her screen talents.

American film and television seemed to be engaged in an orgy of bad behavior that spurred a flood of media hand-wringing over the state of the US' most powerful cultural export: its celebrities. But now Spears is back on tour and apparently healthy. Lohan is going sober.

The most popular and acclaimed new celebrities in the US are figures such as country star Taylor Swift, a quiet-living 19-year-old. The most talked about hit movie in America, the latest in the Twilight series — *New Moon* — makes a sub-text virtue of its characters not having sex. Even the market price for paparazzi shots of celebrities has slumped by a third.

Snarky gossip Web site Gawker summed up the surprise situation best when a headline on a recent post lamented: "You'll miss Paris Hilton now that she's gone." That is going way too far for most people. But in a world wearied by scandals of the rich and famous, it is the shocking move no one saw coming: America's celebrities are behaving just fine.

Perhaps no one exemplifies the change better than Spears. In 2007, the pop princess' career was hurtling towards a crash of epic proportions. She was a constant feature of the party circuit in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and New York. She was famed for being photographed wearing no underwear. As her career stalled, she was trailed by a

huge pack of paparazzi even as she seemed to be going into meltdown. She even publicly shaved her head and then started dating one of the photographers tailing her. Eventually she was carried away from her home strapped to a stretcher and admitted to hospital.

That was then. Spears is now healthy and on a concert tour, albeit subject to a tight regime. Only two years ago many pundits were forecasting her early death. Now Spears is back on top.

But others, too, seem to have put their bad behavior behind them. Hilton — once a fixture on the reality TV circuit — is now slipping off-screen. She is in a stable relationship, and her most recent bout of publicity resulted from releasing a new shampoo line. Lohan, too, has adopted a more sedate profile. She faced jail time in 2007, but has since reportedly started therapy and stopped drinking. Now most headlines that Lohan generates come from her own tweeting on Twitter, rather than partying until the wee hours.

Cultural experts believe that the trend could be linked to the global economic crisis that has gripped the world for more than a year. With millions of Americans unemployed and losing their homes, celebrity shenanigans have given way to more weighty and meaningful concerns.

"The economy has sucked all the oxygen out of the room when it comes to other things. The 'flippant factor' of that sort of behavior by celebrities has made it appear much more unacceptable," said Dann Pierce, professor of popular culture at the University of Portland.

Blatant excess is no longer acceptable: although many finance houses and investment banks are again awarding huge bonuses to staff, this is in the face of public discontent that would have been unthinkable two years ago. Goldman Sachs, a focal point for such disquiet, has decided not to hold a Christmas party this year and has banned staff from funding their own celebrations.

Now it seems that public disapproval over the behavior of the wealthy has spilled over into the world of the famous.

Celebrity interviewer Gayl Murphy also believes that ordinary Americans no longer derive schadenfreude from the antics of stars owing to the very real problems in

their own lives. "People used to like seeing celebrities melt down because it made them feel that their own more stable — but ordinary — lives were better. But now people are losing their homes and their jobs. They have their own meltdowns to deal with," Murphy said.

Indeed the most high-profile celebrity scandals of the past year have not involved A-list stars or household names. The sort of media attention in the US once lavished on Spears, Lohan and Hilton has instead focused on "Octomom" Nadya Suleman and Jon and Kate Gosselin, a soon-to-be divorced couple who had a reality TV show. Though such people are hardly ordinary in the usual sense of the word, they are not actresses or rich or singers.

A similar cultural backlash was widely expected after 9/11. At that time, the concept of the "death of irony" and an end to frivolity was much discussed in the wake of the tragedy and the emergence of a seemingly scary new world of threat to the American heartland. "We have seen this sort of thing before in pop culture's response to very serious world events," said Pierce.

But it is not just a case of celebrities suddenly deciding to act more soberly. It is also because, as media organizations see a growing disquiet over reports of hard-partying stars, they run fewer stories about them.

Hilton, who appears to be living so quietly, has in fact been annoying her neighbors with loud partying. The police have received numerous complaints and the local council has been dragged into the affair. However, although a handful of gossip Web sites carried the story, no serious outlets have bothered with it. "At the moment, Britney could walk down the street naked with a chimpanzee and we would not hear that much about it," said Murphy.

Indeed the paparazzi economy — sometimes referred to as the celebrity-industrial complex — has taken a huge battering. A survey by the Daily Beast Web site revealed that celeb paparazzi photos were now selling for 31 percent less than in 2007. "The celebrity media bubble has burst," said Beast writer Nicole LaPorte. That has been coupled with the signing in California last month of an anti-paparazzi law that will punish photographers

who invaded a star's privacy. The law was aimed in part at reducing the chaotic scenes seen around Los Angeles as photographers chase stars in their cars.

Its passing certainly reflected a popular backlash against those trappings of the Hollywood lifestyle that were starting to affect ordinary people's everyday lives in the city.

But trends come in cycles. The wave of seriousness in America after 9/11 eventually disappeared, and gave way to an era of wild partying by young stars, culminating in Spears shaving her head and other celebrities facing going to jail.

Now a new frugality appears to have come into play. Yet this, too, will pass and — as Spears, Hilton or Richie look on, older and possibly wiser — a new generation of hard-partying young stars will emerge.

"Give it a year and a half and, if the economy is no longer staring into the abyss, we will see a return to frivolity and a return to an interest in it," said Pierce. If the good times roll again, so will the celebrities.

Lebanese women come out in force

'Bareed Mista3jil,' a collection of true stories written by lesbian, transgender and bisexual females, tests the limits of the country's conservative mores

BY **NATACHA YAZBECK**
AFP, BEIRUT

They remain anonymous, but their voices are out in force and bold print: a group of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women have braved law and social taboo in Lebanon with a little pink-and-white book.

Bareed Mista3jil, Arabic for "mail in a hurry," is a collection of 41 true stories of women grappling with coming out, religion, family and emigration.

One story is by a woman struggling to reconcile her religion and sexual orientation. Another speaks about the hardships of coming out in Lebanese society and a third deals with rape.

The book, the first such initiative in the largely conservative Arab world, is published by Meem, a support group for lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning women in Lebanon.

Often silenced and marginalized by society and overshadowed by their straight, siliconed counterparts promoted in the media, the stories of

Lebanon's other women have resonated with local and international audiences, and the book has been reprinted after the first batch of hundreds sold out.

"The original idea of publishing a book like this came on a spring night in 2006, while driving down Hamra Street in Beirut," said Shant, the coordinator of Meem.

Three years later, the 223-page book, available in English and Arabic, hit bookstores across the capital, selling at US\$18 for the paperback version.

The stories, referred to as "letters written, sealed, and sent out to the world," are personal, compelling and often painful, tackling religion, citizenship, gender identity and emigration.

But Meem, which started as a support group of four and now counts over 300 members, is still very careful about who it lets in and about going public.

The group is an offshoot of the high-profile Helem, the only legal non-governmental organization for

the protection of gay, bisexual, and transgender rights in the Arab world.

But unlike Helem, which won the prestigious 2009 Felipa de Souza award for its work on gay rights, Meem prefers to remain low-key in Lebanese society, which remains far from gay-friendly.

"Being an underground group, we are careful of how much out there we are and how much we are mainstream," Shant said.

Shant, like many members of the group, only goes by her nickname to protect her privacy in Lebanon, where women cannot pass citizenship on to their children and non-heterosexual activity is still technically a crime.

Article 534 of the penal code criminalizes "unnatural sexual intercourse," punishable by up to one year's imprisonment.

But law or no law, the literature is rolling: Helem and Meem both publish magazines, booklets and articles on their Web sites and offer their



A Lebanese university student reads *Bareed Mista3jil* (Mail in a Hurry) in Beirut on Nov. 24.
PHOTO: AFP

members sanctuary, with meeting houses in the capital.

And despite the political turbulence and sporadic violence of past years, Beirut bears the marks of budding gay pride.

Helem now hosts the International Day Against Homophobia and hundreds of Lebanese came together for the first time in February to protest against the brutal beating of two allegedly gay men.

"We do have a certain freedom," said Natalie, a woman in a gay-friendly pub in Beirut's Gemmayzeh district. "But it still takes a lot of courage to be a lesbian in Lebanon."

"Our families know but choose to say nothing," her friend Noor said. "And as long as religion interferes in politics, we won't be seeing our rights or real freedom in Lebanon anytime soon."

Emigration is particularly high in the lesbian community, according to Meem, as women seek life in more tolerant societies especially as they approach their thirties.

Steven Seidman, a sociology professor at State University of New York at Albany, said non-heterosexual Lebanese face a difficult choice: marry, leave their country or live a double life.

"Marriage is the central event for women," said Seidman, who is researching non-heterosexual communities in Beirut. "Gender respectability is linked to a 'good marriage.'"

"Most of the women telling their stories are very young, below 30," he said. "The question is: what will happen when they hit 30?"

Shant agrees, but says Lebanon has nonetheless witnessed the rise of a "remarkable lesbian community" over the past three years.

"It has brought a powerful new meaning to queer solidarity, understanding, and grassroots activism," she said. "It became clear to us that our stories needed to be heard. In a way, the journey of these stories is similar to the stories themselves. They have come out of the closet."