

# Public Perception of Disney Stars: Britney Spears, Miley Cyrus, Zendaya

By Gülin Kirman

Disney has been a big player in the entertainment industry ever since the release of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in 1937. With owning countless franchises, companies, and channels as well as launching its digital platform, Disney has been a part of the lives of everyone for nearly nine decades. Aside from providing entertainment for millions, Disney has also started the careers of many talented people that we listen to on our phones or watch on our screens today. Many of these stars we know and love today got their start on Disney Channel when they were young. Unfortunately, though not all of them had a good and stable relationship with fame and public perception. To further understand this point, we will be looking at three celebrities who started their career by taking part in a show on Disney Channel.

Britney Spears:

Britney Spears was cast in The Mickey Mouse Club back in 1992 when she was 11 years old. Her castmates included now well-known names like Christina Aguilera, Ryan Gosling, and Justin Timberlake. After the show's cancellation in 1996, Spears moved back to Mississippi and had a "normal" life until releasing her first album, "...Baby One More Time" in 1998. The album debuted as number one on U.S. Billboard 200 and was certified two-times platinum after only a month. The album became the biggest-selling album ever by a teenage artist. Upon these achievements, Britney Spears was labeled a teen idol and had gotten into the hearts of many with her bubble-gum persona. However, her feature in the April 1999 cover of the Rolling Stone received a lot of criticism from the American Family Association (AFA). They referred to the cover as "a disturbing mix of childhood innocence and adult sexuality" and called on "God-loving Americans to boycott stores selling Britney's albums." Spears addressed the criticism by saying she saw nothing wrong with the cover. With the release of her second album, "Oops!... I Did It Again", it was seen that both her music and public image had gotten more charming. This was seen as a setting stage for her third album "Britney" which was released in 2001. In this era, it could be understood from the meanings behind her songs and her music videos that Spears was transitioning into adulthood and was distancing herself from her bubble-gum persona. During 2006-2008, Britney Spears struggled with her mental health, and her erratic behaviors were highly publicized. In early 2006, Spears was claimed to be a bad parent to her 4-month-old son and because of paparazzi pictures and news coverages about this, she was visited three times by the Child Protection Services, however, no charges were filed. On 16 February 2007, the infamous incident of Britney Spears shaving her head and later that day getting a hip

tattoo happened. Following these days and the last news of her partying uncontrollably, her distraughtness in interviews and her poor performances not only made the claims of bad parenting go even further but also made a lot of people mock her and label her as an “emotional wreck”.

After going in and out of several rehabilitation centers, she had nearly a month of stay secluded in a luxurious rehabilitation center. When she came back, she was back on stage wearing knee-high boots, a short white skirt, and a pink bra top paired with a long brown wig. It seemed like Spears was restoring her image and was in a better space mentally. However, after storming out of a photoshoot, getting a divorce and losing custody of her sons, getting dropped by her management firm, having few hit-and-run trials and drug tests; instead of getting better, public perception of Britney Spears was even worse. In regards to these incidents, her father Jamie Spears became her conservator in 2008, and to this day, he still is. This conservatory has sparked a lot of controversies in the last two years. Many fans speculated about the necessity of the conservatory and suspected whether or not Jamie Spears was taking advantage of Britney rather than helping her. In 2019 a source close to Britney stated that it was good for Britney, and she had no problems. Also in 2019, Britney Spears had a month-long stay in a mental health facility, and sources close to her again stated that she was putting her health first and was in an “indefinite work hiatus”. In late 2019, the posts of Britney Spears on social media attracted a lot of attention. Her posts were seen as “weird”, and it was speculated that she was being held under the conservatory of her father against her will. Thus the #FreeBritney movement started. People are realizing more and more how the media mistreated her and how the people in her life let her down when she needed them. A documentary released on February 5, 2021, sheds light on the situation even more. The movement is still going on, and famous names are also expressing their support to the cause on social media. The goal of the movement is to give the freedom Britney Spears to live according to how she wants. [\(1\)](#) [\(2\)](#)

Miley Cyrus:

Miley Cyrus got her first recognition when she first started playing the title character in Disney Channel’s Hannah Montana. Cyrus was only 14 years old when the series premiered in 2006. The series was wildly successful and was quickly labeled as the highest-rated show in basic cable. Hannah Montana was about the 16-year-old Miley Stewart who was leading a double life as a teenage pop star. After the first season, Miley Cyrus went on a tour with Cheetah Girls and later on went to release a soundtrack of the show. At these times, she had a public image as a teen idol. Everyone loved her acting and singing on Hannah Montana so much that her merch was sold worldwide.

However, her image changed drastically throughout the years. The release of her album “Can’t Be Tamed” in 2010 showed that she wanted to distance herself from her teenage persona. Although it sparked some discussion, overall reactions were positive and supportive. Her fourth album, “Bangerz” was released in 2013 and sparked a lot of controversies. The album itself was highly acclaimed. It got numerous nominations, sold 270,000 copies in the first week of its release, and became the third-highest opening week for a female artist. However, this era also included huge changes for Miley Cyrus regarding her lyrics, music videos, physical appearance, and public image. She had completely distanced herself from her teen idol persona; she had short hair dyed in platinum blonde, her outfits were a lot more revealing, her music videos showed her nearly naked, and her lyrics had gotten more explicit. Although she received a lot of love and support, she also received a lot of criticism for her new style. Many people deemed her as going crazy and found her performances, music videos, outfits, and statements highly inappropriate. After touring a year and so, Cyrus decided to take a retreat for some while and moved to Malibu, adopted some pigs and focused on her philanthropy. When she returned to the spotlight, she joined The Voice as a judge and was seemed to be a lot more subtle, although still original and unique. Nowadays, Miley Cyrus is getting a lot of praise for her new music, and her live performances are going viral. Recently she has posted a letter to Hannah Montana in honor of the show’s 15th anniversary. The letter and the overall interaction of Miley Cyrus with the show have warmed the hearts of many fans who grew up watching Hannah Montana. [\(3\)](#) [\(4\)](#)

Zendaya:

Zendaya started her career as a fashion model before getting cast as Rocky Blue alongside Bella Thorne on Disney Channel’s Shake It Up. The show premiered on November 7, 2010, when Zendaya was only 14 years old. The show displayed not only Zendaya and Bella Thorne’s acting and dancing abilities but also their singing skills. Shake It Up lasted for three seasons and ended in 2013. At this time public viewed them as talented sweethearts who had a bright future in the entertainment industry. In February 2013, she was announced as one of the contestants in season 16 of Dancing with the Stars. She finished the competition in second place. Consequently, Zendaya was in the spotlight for her dancing skills at the time. Zendaya also got a lot of admiration for her fashion. Both in award shows and public appearances, many people were looking at her for fashion inspiration. In the 2015 Oscars, a comment made by Giuliana Rancic about her hair smelling of “patchouli oil” and “weed” received a lot of outrage. Many people, including famous names, stated that the comment was racist. Zendaya took hold of the narrative with an Instagram post saying, “Me wearing my hair in locs on an Oscar red carpet was to showcase them in a positive light, to remind people of color that our hair

is good enough. To me, locs are a symbol of beauty and strength, almost like a lion's mane." Her statement went viral and was reshared by many. Shortly after, Mattel announced a Barbie modeled after Zendaya's Oscar look. Zendaya made her feature film debut with Marvel's Spider-Man: Homecoming. When the news of the movie was first released, some people were against the idea of Zendaya playing MJ, a character that has previously been played by red-haired actresses who were white. Lots of people supported Zendaya and shut down the racist comments. When the movie was released, even though having a relatively short scene, many critics praised her as a "scene-stealer" and the film's "MVP". In December 2017, she co-starred in The Greatest Showman with Zac Efron. Efron and Zendaya played lovers in the movie, and despite the nine-year age difference, their chemistry was praised by critics. In June 2019, Zendaya began starring in HBO's Euphoria. The series was accolated for its writing, acting, and soundtrack. For her portrayal of Rue Bennet in Euphoria, Zendaya won an Emmy. General thoughts around her win were she deserved it. Lastly, we have seen her in Malcolm & Marie starring Zendaya and John David Washington. The film was released on February 14, 2021, on Netflix. The film was filmed during the COVID-19 pandemic and was in black and white. The film was highly anticipated, but upon its release, it received a mixed reception from both the critics and the social media. The plot and the writing of the movie were criticized, and some even expressed discomfort regarding the twelve-year age difference between John David Washington and Zendaya. Those who felt uncomfortable with the age difference, Zendaya stated that the reason behind it was they still saw her as a teenager rather than the adult she is. Nonetheless, her performance in the film was agreed by many to be magnificent. Zendaya is seen as one of the greatest performers of her generation. Her Works, her fashion, her social media presence and overall herself is often regarded as a role model. It is also quite impressive how she had a huge impact at such a young age. [\(5\)](#) [\(6\)](#)

All in all, even though every Disney star has their different path, at one point in their career, they have stated that working as an entertainer and being in the spotlight at a young age has affected them. This also includes the stars we have explored in this article. All of them have not only stated that they felt pressured to keep a clean and wholesome image but also they have received criticism when they did other projects and got out of their Disney era public image. We can only wish for these stars to shine brighter and have the freedom to shape their careers and lives the way they want to without unnecessary criticism.