

A photograph of Kim Kardashian sitting on a red lounge chair at a poolside event. She is wearing a colorful, patterned halter-neck dress and red high-heeled sandals. A wooden table next to her holds a large bowl of fresh fruit, including strawberries, grapes, and melon. In the background, a large crowd of people is gathered around a swimming pool, with palm trees and a modern building visible under a clear blue sky.

Kim Kardashian in Las Vegas earlier this year, attending a Wet Republic at the MGM Grand promotional event

Kim Kardashian is the undisputed queen of reality TV, charges \$25,000 to namecheck a product in a tweet, and has a net worth of \$35 million. Not bad for someone who admits she has no talent beyond a flair for self-promotion

THE WOMAN WHO MISTOOK HER LIFE FOR A BRAND

INTERVIEW Helena de Bertodano

She has nearly eight million followers on Twitter and, last year, her name was the most searched-for term on Bing. She's Kim Kardashian and, unlike the four tweeters in the world who have more followers than her, she is not a president (Barack Obama, No 3 on Twitter), nor can she sing (Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber and Britney Spears, at Nos 1, 2 and 4 respectively).

In fact, she has no perceptible talent. As she herself says when we meet, "I'm no one. My sisters and I laugh and say, 'Like, who are we?'"

But this is disingenuous. In the US, the Kardashian family is a reality TV sensation – and Kim is the most famous of them all, with sisters Kourtney and Khloé hot on her heels, not to mention their mother (or "momager", a contraction of mother/manager), Kris Jenner. Even if you have never seen their show, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, you cannot escape their images on magazine covers and billboards across America. Kim's engagement to professional basketball player Kris Humphries, and the accompanying \$2 million ring, was headline news. "It's going to be royal wedding number two," said her exuberant sister Khloé. In reality TV terms, Kim Kardashian is queen.

Banal but compulsively watchable, the show launched in 2007 and follows the chaotic, glamour-filled lives of Kim and her siblings. There are now several spin-offs, including *Kourtney and Kim Take New York*. In the meantime, Kim endorses a vast array of products including orange juice, credit cards, jewellery, water, shoes, candles, perfumes, diet products and – apparently heedless of the contradiction – cupcakes. The Va-Va-Va-Nilla cupcake (a reference to the tabloid headlines her curves elicit) was created by a Los Angeles bakery.

The sisters have opened their Dash clothing boutiques in New York, Miami and Calabasas, California, and are planning to go nationwide with Kardashian Kollection outlets in Sears stores, better known for power tools than high fashion. "It will be really fabulous," enthuses Kim, "with our own chandeliers and carpets." Last year, they released an autobiography, *Kardashian Confidential*, full of personal "secrets" and beauty tips, and are now planning a novel about a "glamorous, high-profile and complicated family".

Their talent, if you can call it that, is self-promotion. The 30-year-old Kim's ability to put it out there is a peculiarly modern knack. "Hey dolls," she wrote in a recent tweet. "I'm so excited about the recent launch of my second fragrance, Gold." In another tweet, she admits: "Every day I'm hustlin, hustlin, hustlin..." What she has successfully engineered is a commodification of the public obsession with her, forging a connection between her image



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and whatever product she is trying to sell. She is as much a part of the zeitgeist in the States as Katie Price is in the UK.

We meet on her home turf of Beverly Hills, as she touches down for a couple of days between trips to Miami and Las Vegas. She totters into the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel – near her multimillion dollar, gated faux-Tuscan style mansion – in sky-high Jimmy Choos, an Hermès bag slung over her shoulder, head down as she clickety-clicks on her BlackBerry with perfectly manicured fingers. She is wearing a flimsy chiffon vest that shows off her famous cleavage, tight faded jeans and more make-up than I have ever seen on a real person. Her eyelashes extend about an inch from her face and the gloss on her lips almost

Kim Kardashian, left, with sisters Khloé, second left, and Kourtney, and mother Kris Jenner

reaches her nose. As she makes her way across the patio outside, a vaguely familiar-looking British man wearing a black leather jacket – everyone in this celebrity-saturated restaurant looks vaguely familiar – spots this scantily clad apparition and says, "You must be cold, love." Kim glances up from her BlackBerry and giggles, "I'm fine."

Settling into a black leather banquette, she digs into the bread basket: "I didn't have breakfast today, I'm starving." The fact that Kim has a very un-Hollywood silhouette is one of the reasons people find it easy to relate to her. "I gained like 10, 12lb [earlier this year] – I would literally eat non-stop at the most random places." Nor, like many celebrities, does she refuse to admit to any enhancements: she had Botox injections on the show last year.

"I always order the McCarthy salad," she says, ignoring the menu. "Can I get no cheese, though?" she asks the waiter in a voice that sounds slightly nasal, as though she is recovering from a cold. "And instead of regular bacon, can I get turkey bacon? And can I get it tossed with ranch dressing?"

She is accompanied by her publicist, who agrees to leave us alone, but not before he has set up his tape recorder pointedly between us – presumably in case I make up quotes. I don't need to, as the reality supersedes anything I could invent. As Kim herself says, "People come up and tell me all the time that our show is like the most perfectly written sitcom – but it's real, everything we do and what we go through, that's what's really happening." ➔

Their lives – complete with their fabulous mansions, their Bentleys, their pool houses – are so far removed from those of their viewers and so out of sync with the rest of the recession-hit world that it is like watching an episode of *Dallas* or *Dynasty*. The icing on the cake is that this family is “real”.

“I think if you’re authentic, people either like it or they don’t, but they feel our issues and our problems. At first Khloé was trying to censor herself, like, ‘God, this will be so embarrassing,’ but we just said, ‘No, let’s just be us,’ and that’s what works... I think the world is fascinated with being voyeurs into other people’s lives, living vicariously. They like the glitz and the glamour, but that’s not what we’re all about – we show our issues, the real problems that we’re going through, our make-ups and our break-ups.”

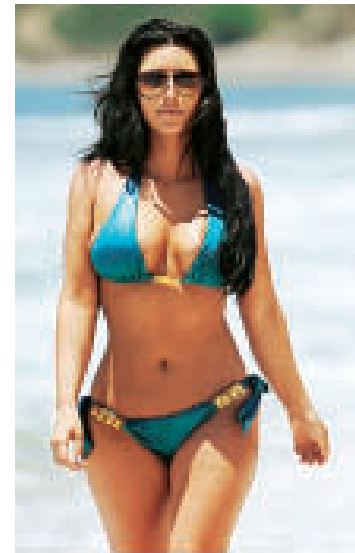
Among the problems aired is the family’s difficulties with Kourtney’s boyfriend, Scott, father of her baby. “He’s disgusting,” screams younger sister Khloé repeatedly on air. “A negative, awful person.” She refuses to allow him into her house and goads him at family meals, even striking him on one occasion. Kourtney threatens to move to the East Coast with Scott if her family can’t be nicer to him.

The sisters argue frequently. “When I see the fights I have with my sisters [on air],” says Kim, “I get mad all over again.” Clips from the new series show that it’s business as usual, with Kris bawling out her daughters, Kim bawling out her brother, Rob, for “living off his sisters”, and everyone bawling out Scott.

The show includes Kim’s stepfather, Bruce Jenner, a former Olympic athlete, and her two teenage half-sisters, Kendall and Kylie, as well as whoever the sisters happen to be dating. “There are so many of us and we all have different personalities – everyone can find someone to relate to on the show.”

So where did the Kardashians spring from? In fact, they’ve always been on the LA social scene. Their father, Robert Kardashian, who died in 2003, was a lawyer and part of the defence team for his friend, O. J. Simpson. But the Kardashians’ fame went meteoric several years after Robert’s death, when two events collided. First, a sex tape was leaked of Kim with singer Ray J – Kim later sued the distributor, Vivid Entertainment, and settled for \$5 million. Then producer Ryan Seacrest agreed (at Kim’s mother’s suggestion) to make a reality TV show about the family. The idea, says Kim, came from TV presenter Kathie Lee Gifford, a family friend. “Whenever she came over, she’d be like, ‘Where are the cameras? You guys are a reality show.’”

They are also savvy about social networking. As Kim puts it, “We’ve taken advantage of modern technology and social media and how to make the best of our situation.” The Kardashians emerged at a time when



‘IF I HAD A GREAT VOICE, THAT WOULD BE AMAZING. BUT MY SKILL IS MARKETING’

celebrities were becoming closer to their public. “Whatever was printed [in the papers] used to be the last word,” says Kim. “But it’s not like that any more. I can get on Twitter and have a say, too, if I feel like it.”

“I’m so in love with my fans,” she adds gushingly. “I read all their comments on Twitter, Facebook and my blog... They are so devoted and loyal. I think of myself as a brand for them.”

Certainly her appetite for publicity seems unmatched, except perhaps by Paris Hilton, a former best friend who no longer speaks to her, apparently piqued at being eclipsed. Kim seems to stop at nothing – posing naked for *Playboy* and posting pictures of herself in skimpy bikinis on her blog; “#2sexy2tweet?” she asked coyly in a recent tweet, attaching a picture of herself wearing next to nothing.

Inevitably, this behaviour inspires vitriol, provoking comments, such as this one published at The Huffington Post: “[Kim is] just another spoilt, self-centred, narcissistic, attention-seeking fame whore.”

From left: Kim with Kris Humphries (“We’re hoping to get married by the end of the summer;”

she told Jay Leno) in the new series of Keeping Up with the Kardashians; in Mexico last month

Taking a sip of passion fruit iced tea, Kim points out that she has never pretended to be talented. “I’m not a singer, I’m not a dancer, I never said I was. When I did the song [the single *Jam (Turn It Up)*, widely panned], people asked, ‘When is the album coming out?’ Never. I was doing it for fun. I live my life to have fun. My mom signed me up for *Dancing with the Stars* [the US version of *Strictly Come Dancing*] and I was, like, *the worst dancer*.”

She makes the valid point that it’s even harder to become famous for nothing. “I think it’s harder to be yourself and to get people to like you for you, much harder than it is to use your talent. If I had a great voice or was a great actress, that would be amazing. But I’m realistic: my skill and my talent is marketing.”

Although hurt by negative feedback at first, she says she now ignores it. “I used to find it hard to hear stories or rumours about me that I felt weren’t true. Now, I don’t care. I never thought I would be so easygoing and blasé. My publicist just wrote me an e-mail saying that one of the tabloids was claiming, ‘Kris Jenner is forcing all her daughters to get plastic surgery; Kim’s butt is deflating and she needs to pump it up; Kourtney forced into Botox’ – something so ridiculous. I just wrote back saying, ‘Gee, I hope we’re getting a family discount...’ You have to laugh and not pay it too much attention.”

In the past, says Kim, the show has affected her personal relationships. “I can’t get into a relationship with someone who doesn’t understand it... I’m not going to have a fake life on the show or pretend I don’t have a boyfriend. I can’t stop my career for someone else.”

Kris Humphries, whom she has been dating since November last year, appears for the first time in the new series. Kim says Kris took the show in his stride. “He doesn’t necessarily love it, but he accepts it and he’s fine with it.” He ➔

proposed to her in mid-May, surprising her at home with “Will you marry me?” spelt out in rose petals in the bedroom. Kim says she is longing to have a family of her own. “At first, I wanted six kids; now it’s down to four. I think I’ll do the K names, too – I like Kameron.”

Although Kim says she never set out to be famous (“It just kind of happened”), she remembers, as a teenager, being struck by *The Real World* – the programme credited with launching the modern reality TV genre. “When I saw it, I knew what I wanted to do.”

Kim insists her work is not as easy as it looks. “You don’t just show up – there’s a lot of work in building a brand. I’m involved in every last step, whether it’s designing ad campaigns or saying we should launch my product here, not there.” She has her eye on the long-term future. “Our show is not going to last for ever,” says Kim – although her mother envisages another 15 years at least. “She sees: ‘2026 – Kylie [now 13] gets married.’ I don’t really see it happening for that long... but hopefully we’re building a brand that will go on for a long time.”

Kim claims she hates hearing the word “famous” in conjunction with her name. “It’s so annoying that I can hardly say it. It makes me uncomfortable. I hate the word ‘celebrity’, too.” So what would she use? “Well known,” she says primly.

Her upbringing, although privileged, was not perfect. Her parents split up when she was a teenager: “They were going through a hard time and they weren’t good friends.” Soon after they divorced, the family lived through the O.J. Simpson trial. “My mom was best friends with Nicole and my dad was best friends with O.J. We went to the trial once because my dad wanted us to see it. He said, ‘This is a part of history.’ We were sitting right behind O.J. and we looked over at my mom and Bruce, who were sitting next to Nicole’s parents. They gave us the dirtiest look, like, ‘How dare you girls be sitting on that side.’”

But later, her parents mended fences. “Eventually, they said they weren’t going to let anything get in the way of being good parents. After that, they became best friends. On Father’s Day, my mom would cook Bruce and my dad breakfast and we’d do holidays together.”

Kim credits her work ethic to her father, who kept a tight rein on his daughters as they grew up. They weren’t allowed out on Saturday nights, they had to go to church on Sundays and, unlike their friends, did not have credit cards or mobiles. When Kim got a car, aged 16, her father drew up a contract stating that if Kim took drugs, smoked or started drinking to excess, the car would be taken away.

“The contracts were very serious,” says Kim today. “I had to have certain grades, I had to wash my car once a week and I had to pay for my car if I ever bumped it. Which I did. So I got a job at a clothing store.”

If they borrowed money from him, they would have to pay him back. “With interest,” laughs Kim. “And at 18, we were cut off. We had to get a job.” I ask her what she thinks her father would make of his daughters now. “He would be so proud of all of us,” she says vehemently. “Individually and how we work together, because we represent what he always taught us – that family is everything.”

It would be easy to conclude that the strictness of her upbringing sparked a rebellion once she grew up. At 19, Kim married music producer Damon Thomas in Las Vegas, divorcing him four years later. And yet, despite the starter marriage, the lurid sex tape and the photoshoot for *Playboy*, Kim manages to peddle a prudish image, disliking alcohol and finding her sisters’ clowning and partying exasperating. On his deathbed, her father asked Kim to take care of her brother and sisters, adding, “I know you’re going to be OK.”

“Before we did the reality show, I was like, ‘I want people to see the real me.’ Everyone probably thinks I’m this wild and crazy girl, out partying all night and drinking and shopping all day. In fact, I’m the most normal out of my sisters. They are so fun and they say I am so uptight. I just like to be by myself. I’m a homebody.” Warming to her theme, Kim describes herself as a neat freak. “The hours I spend just organising and reorganising my home is crazy. Recently it’s gotten ten times worse. I haven’t had a night out in LA in six months. [Last night] I was organising my closet...”

One hilarious episode in the programme shows Kim going into meltdown when her mother forces her to throw a house-warming party. Kim “party proofs” her home, making everyone remove their shoes at the door, and cordons off most of the rooms and the lawn. “Merry Maid Kim is turning into a lunatic,” declares her mother. In the middle of the party, Kim retires upstairs in tears when she discovers red wine on a cushion.

“This interview is the big one,” says her publicist as he reappears. “*The Times* is the British paper. It’s the one the Queen will see.” “The Queen!” trills Kim, “I’m excited.” The idea of the Queen reading an article about Kim Kardashian is ludicrous, but she appears not to find the idea absurd. A fortnight later, when news of her own impending nuptials is released, a “friend” of Kim’s tells *OK!* magazine that Kim wants her wedding “to be bigger than William and Kate’s”.

If her 20.5-carat engagement ring is anything to go by (out-blinging Kate’s mere 18 carats), Kim may pull it off. There will undoubtedly be one similarity to the royal wedding: it will be beamed into living rooms all over the world. ■

Season six of Keeping Up with the Kardashians starts tomorrow on E! Entertainment Television

Famous for being famous (and not much else)

WHO? The Entire Cast of *TOWIE* (*The Only Way Is Essex*, to the ignorant).

Which is? ITV2 won a Bafta for broadcasting the stunted conversations of a group of overtanned Essex youngsters facing the future one club night at a time.

And are these youngsters greedy? Reports say cast members are no longer happy with the £50 per diem for the show and have threatened to quit unless their salaries are upped to the £70,000-£150,000 a year earned by soap stars. Unable to get full-time jobs due to filming, the cast are forced to supplement their incomes with personal appearances, endorsements and magazine deals.

NAME: Paris Hilton.

Why is she famous? The great-granddaughter of Conrad Hilton is also a model, actress, reality television star, author, fashion designer. And she once released an album.

Is that it? Oh... and a sex tape. Leaked on the internet in 2003 and released on DVD, *One Night in Paris* got people’s attention.

And then what? Paris, 30, became the world’s most notorious “celebutante”. Associated Press once experimented with a Paris Hilton news blackout. It lasted a week.

Where is she now? Still churning out reality TV in Oxygen Channel’s *The World According to Paris*, which she recently promoted in an interview claiming, “I’ve nothing to hide.” Indeed.

NAME: Snooki

Real name? Nicole Catherine Polizzi. Snooki’s a high-school nickname gained when she was the first of her friends to kiss a boy.

Why is she famous? For being, according to *The New York Times*, the “stand-out star” in the cultural phenomenon that is MTV’s *Jersey Shore*. Being punched in the face by a stranger during filming didn’t hurt her profile.

What’s is Jersey Shore exactly? A bunch of young Italian-Americans being every parent’s worst nightmare in a beach house.

And people watch this? Last season attracted 9.3 million viewers in the US. So, yes.

What’s next? *Jersey Shore* has just been to Florence where Snooki was questioned by police (though not formally charged) after ploughing her car into two carabinieri.

How much? She nets a rumoured \$10,000 (£6,000) per episode and \$20,000 for red-carpet appearances. Earlier this year she charged Rutgers University \$32,000 to enlighten students with life lessons such as, “Study hard, but party harder.” **ABIGAIL RADNOR**