Celebrity: Hollywood, seen through the smoke

By Mireya Navarro

Published: Wednesday, September 21, 2005

**LOS ANGELES —**Anyone following the goings-on of Mary-Kate Olsen in the weekly glossies knows that she is 19, that she attends New York University, that she has battled anorexia and that she dates a Greek shipping heir.

They also know that she smokes, thanks to the fact that in September alone she has appeared in at least three celebrity magazines fishing for a cigarette or holding a Marlboro pack in one hand and a cigarette in another while shopping in Los Angeles.

Such images of stars smoking off-screen were relatively rare five years ago, but with the proliferation of celebrity magazines and the competition for candid pictures, more shots of celebrities smoking are being published, magazine editors, photographers and stars' publicists say. And with smoking bans pushing smokers outdoors, "if you're going to smoke, you're going to get caught," said Gary Morgan, a founder of Splash News.

It is too early to document whether this kind of exposure can influence young readers to light up, but some anti-smoking groups have voiced concern. Existing research has shown a direct correlation between on-screen smoking and the onset of smoking in teenagers. Anti-smoking experts say that seeing celebrities smoking off-screen would have the same effect.

Anti-smoking groups that track the entertainment industry say the incidence of smoking scenes in movies, including those aimed at young people, was the highest in the year ending in April that it has been since 1994, and the increasingly common depiction of movie stars smoking in real life can only make things worse.

While paparazzi pictures of celebrities smoking are still the exception to the rule, they are becoming almost as routine as shots of actors walking around with cups of coffee or cuddling toy Chihuahuas.

In addition to the photos of Olsen (Star, In Touch, Us Weekly), recent depictions have included Leonardo DiCaprio inhaling as he squints from a balcony (People), Kate Hudson contemplatively holding a butt at one of her husband's concerts (Us Weekly) and Kevin Federline taking a drag while holding hands with his pregnant wife, Britney Spears (In Touch), who gave birth last week.

Cigarettes are an indelible part of the Hollywood culture, on and off the screen. On-screen, actors use cigarettes to shape a character; off-screen, if they smoke, sometimes it's their own image they're embellishing.

"Whether it hurts or helps, it's largely pegged to your cinematic persona," said Steven Ross, a professor of history at the University of Southern California who has written books on Hollywood and its influence on society.

"If you have Clint Eastwood smoking, everybody will think he's manly," he said. "Or a femme fatale, Sharon Stone, people would think it's sexy. But if you have a clean and wholesome image, smoking makes you less wholesome."

Many celebrities would rather keep their smoking to themselves. Some stars who are caught with a cigarette plead with the photographer not to use the image, sometimes offering other shots in return.

Morgan, of Splash, said teenagers in particular worry about getting in trouble with a studio or a network.

Stanton Glantz, director of the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education at the University of California, San Francisco, said celebrities should be aware of the negative influence they can have on young fans, adding that magazines are culpable, too.

The higher profile of famous smokers is only one of several disturbing trends, anti-smoking groups that track smoking in the industry said. The Thumbs Up! Thumbs Down! project of the American Lung Association of Sacramento-Emigrant Trails notes that 65 percent of on-screen smoking is being done by the leading actor in the movie and that smoking scenes are now found in more than two-thirds of PG-13 movies.

Various efforts are afoot to counter smoking in movies. Glantz at University of California, San Francisco, has led a project, Smoke Free Movies, that won the support of the American Medical Association and public health advocates in seeking that any movie that shows tobacco use get an automatic R rating and for anti-smoking ads to run beforehand. The group also wants to prevent tobacco companies from benefiting from product identification by banning the showing of cigarette brands on films. (Under a 1998 agreement that limits how tobacco companies can market cigarettes, product placement in movies is no longer allowed.)

So far the efforts have gained no traction in Hollywood because of censorship concerns. "As artists, people need to be able to create pictures that represent real life," said Kori Bernards, a spokeswoman for the Motion Picture Association of America.

Directors and writers said smoking usually fits the needs of the character and film. But in "Scene Smoking: Cigarettes, Cinema & the Myth of Cool," a 2001 American Lung Association documentary about smoking in film and television, Rob Reiner, the director and actor, noted that much of the on-screen smoking stems from the fact that the actors in the film smoke themselves. "Usually what it is, is that the actor in real life smokes, so he finds a way of utilizing his addiction," he said.