# Celebrity brand break-up: fan experiences of para-loveshock

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*Abstract*

When consumers become fans of celebrities, they can form intense emotional attachments that resemble a kind of love. Although the love felt for celebrities is based on one-sided parasocial relationships, fans nevertheless experience a trauma that they consider to be very real when these illusory relationships end. We explore how fans manage and perform their break-up with a beloved celebrity brand following public allegations of wrongdoing. Building on Giddens' theorization of loveshock – which encapsulates the disorienting after-effects of falling out of love – we propose the new concept of para-loveshock. Para-loveshock is performed socially and discursively through three fan practices: grief enfranchisement; flagellation; and indignation. Recognizing how fans perform and legitimize their trauma through these practices helps to sensitize managers to the importance of consumer identity work following celebrity transgressions. This has implications for how damage control efforts are planned and how managers engage with fans when responding to celebrity transgression.

*Keywords:* Celebrity brand, Fandom, Giddens, Loveshock, Parasocial Relationships, Transgression

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The market-mediated relationships that consumers forge with celebrities play an important part in their lives. Celebrities, or what have been approached as person-brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019), human brands (Thomson, 2006), or celebrity brands (Kerrigan et al., 2011), can provide consumers with a source of entertainment, a catalyst for inspiration, and the illusion of companionship (Wohlfeil et al., 2019). As with all relationships, however, the relationships that consumers form with celebrities are precarious, and can be negatively impacted by some perceived wrongdoing or transgression, engendering negative feelings (Banister & Cocker, 2014; Finsterwalder et al., 2017). In the context of shifting global judgements and their impact on consumers' tolerance of celebrity misbehaviour – especially in light of "cancel culture" (Wei & Bunjun, 2020) and the #MeToo movement (Rose, 2021) – fan responses to transgressors are likely to be a concern for brand managers, public relations teams, and media coordinators who are reliant on celebrity fandom.

Existing business research on celebrity misbehaviour emphasizes various moral reasoning strategies undertaken by consumers to maintain support for celebrity wrongdoers, while insulating themselves from dissonance (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Wang & Kim, 2019). Though that work reveals the complexity of the psychological processes through which consumers evaluate negative publicity about a celebrity, we know less about the socio-cultural and interpsychic consequences that celebrity wrongdoing has for consumers who identify strongly as *fans*. There is general academic consensus that being a "fan" far exceeds simply purchasing or consuming products associated with a particular celebrity, and describes a person who exhibits extraordinary levels of loyalty, emotional attachment, and enthusiasm for that celebrity (Wohlfeil, 2018). Fans can often go to great personal and financial lengths to pursue their fandom, using their devotion to the celebrity as a resource for identity construction, and even celebrating and displaying their passion in social contexts. In these regards, a celebrity

functions like a brand for fans and, like any brand, develops its meaning through social construction and interaction amongst its devotees (Fournier, 1998; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). A celebrity can thus be viewed as a *celebrity brand* whose fans seek out transmedia products, performances, and endorsements associated with the celebrity, but also engage in meaning-making through social construction and interaction in a logic that resembles the cult appeal of branded content (Kerrigan et al., 2011).

For those who invest much of their time, money and emotional energy in their fandom, the handling of "collective trauma" following critical junctures in their relationships with brands is recognized as a deeply relational activity (Russell & Schau, 2014; Weijo et al., 2019). This paper explores transgression as a critical moment capable of engendering the total dissolution of fans' relationships with a celebrity brand. Celebrity transgression, we argue, gives way to a shared experience of heartbreak amongst fans, which they manage collectively and interpersonally within the wider cultural context that surrounds them. Recognizing that non-fans – or broader culture – may not acknowledge the validity of their heartbreak or may evaluate it negatively, fans work to negotiate and legitimize the depths and reality of their loss.

Our exploration is underpinned by the following research question: how do fans manage and perform "falling out of love" with a celebrity brand in the event of alleged celebrity transgression? Addressing that question provides a response to calls for further research on the social and communal domains that critical junctures in consumer-brand relationships play out within (Russell & Schau, 2014).

To facilitate our enquiry, we draw upon and expand sociologist Anthony Giddens' (1992, p.103) theorization of "loveshock", which encapsulates the disorientation and distress associated with the ending of a relationship. We propose the new concept of *para-loveshock* to capture fans' experiences of mourning the dissolution of a relationship with an idolized figure they have no proximate or reciprocal interactions with. Our concept is underpinned by the

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assumption that fans' love for celebrity brands is parasocial or, in other words, characterized by a one-sided emotional commitment that is unlikely to be reciprocated except in the individual fan's imagination (O'Guinn, 1991; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012). Bringing the theoretical lenses of parasocial relations and loveshock together, we theorize how fans *reify,* rather than simply cope with, their trauma as a way of legitimizing the significance of their relationship with the celebrity brand and its dissolution. By reifying – or "making appear real" – their trauma, fans assure themselves and others that their fandom is or was a "real" thing with its own weight and importance.

To ground our theorization, we draw on accounts from devoted fans of the critically acclaimed American actor, Kevin Spacey, in the wake of sexual abuse allegations made against him in 2017-18. By exploring the ways that Spacey fans socially and discursively leverage their trauma as a way of negotiating their fandom and its dissolution, this paper contributes to business research in two ways. First, while others have shown that consumers are motivated to come to terms with and even overturn a brand's perceived missteps (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015; Weijo et al., 2019), our work reveals that, depending on the wider social and cultural context, consumers as fans may not seek resolution or forgiveness for a brand's alleged transgression, and instead accept it as an opportunity for self-expression and self-understanding. Second, and relatedly, the role of trauma in fans' self-expression provides further understanding of the functions of *pain* for consumers. While a nascent stream of research has focused on how exposing the physical body to pain can provide consumers with life-affirming and regenerative escapes (Scott et al., 2017), we reveal how emotional forms of pain – such as heartbreak – fulfil an important role in negotiating and grounding expressions of self. These insights have implications for how managers coordinate interventions or damage control efforts following allegations of transgression that impact celebrity brands.

## 2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

### *2.1 Celebrity Transgression: A brief background*

A celebrity transgression is defined as any act undertaken by a celebrity figure that violates that which is considered normatively acceptable by society and, in doing so, undermines the trust or expectations of the public (Finsterwalder et al., 2017). Existing research highlights how celebrity transgression presents a quandary for consumers who struggle to balance their own moral integrity with their affection for the transgressor (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Kwak, 2016; Wang & Kim, 2019). Work in that area emphasizes that a celebrity's wrongdoing risks compromising a consumer's own moral standards leading to cognitive dissonance, which must be dealt with through moral reasoning strategies such as "rationalization" or "decoupling". Through moral rationalization, individuals find the psychological means to reconstrue the consequences of transgressions to ease feelings of dissonance and ensure that their own moral standards are not violated (Lee & Kwak, 2016). Through moral decoupling, individuals detach the celebrity's performance from acts of wrongdoing, so that they can morally denounce transgressive acts while continuing to personally celebrate the celebrity's professional performance (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013).

The assumption underpinning work on moral reasoning is that when motivated to support a celebrity transgressor, consumers will seek to rationally and pragmatically negate any setbacks to their support. Such a view, while important, is nevertheless adrift from the identity investments, communal constructions, and cultural configurations of the "fan-celebrity" relationship (Hills, 2002; Johnson, 2007). First, while a "non-fan" consumer with only a mild-to-moderate positive attraction to a celebrity might well be able to decouple judgments of performance from judgments of morality, a "fan" tends to experience a robust *holistic* attraction to the real "private person" behind the public persona. For example, Wohlfeil et al.'s (2019) autoethnographic account of an "ardent fan's" private experiences suggests the

multi-constitutional polysemic appeal of any particular celebrity centres on that person's status as a performer but also as "an actual human being when he/she is neither performing a character on screen or stage nor standing in the public spotlight of the media" (p.2037). Similarly, Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) argue for a "two-bodied" conceptualization of the person-brand, whereby the two constituents of the celebrity—the person and the brand—are indivisibly linked. Second, fan commitment to a celebrity is not strictly a rational individuated activity, but is marked by a community ethos, shared fantasies, and "fantagonisms" – which denote fans' activist struggles to claim "personal significance" and intensely felt "possession" of a celebrity's work (Duffett, 2013; Johnson, 2007). Beyond psychological processes, Duffett (2013, p.121) clarifies that "fandom is a sociocultural phenomenon mediating between wider elements that are only connected indirectly to the depths of the mind. These elements, whether discourses, practices, or social identities, frequently *make connections between* the private and public, the individual and collective". Parmentier and Fischer (2015, pp.1243-1246) identify the "fan detective work", the "creation of collective intelligence", "widespread disgruntlement", and "gossiping" that fans engage in when making sense of any perceived missteps of their favourite brands or celebrity brands. Altogether, fandom tends to straddle public and private domains, such that interactions between fans can influence and alter one another's perceptions leading to collective beliefs and micro-cultures.

To claim the identity of a "fan" requires not just a willingness to rationalize any dissonance that can emerge during uncomfortable parts of the fan-celebrity relationship, but also the impetus to socially perform, communicate and legitimize one's feelings amongst like-minded others when there is risk of that relationship ending. Instead of relying on established psychological discourses of moral reasoning in times of celebrity transgression, we consider how consumers discursively and culturally handle the threats posed to their self-identification

as impassioned fans. To provide some conceptual scaffolding for our analysis, we turn to the concept of parasocial relationships.

## 2.2 Parasocial Relationships

The concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs) originated from analyses of audiences' engagement in non-reciprocal interactions with media performers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSRs have been detected in fan engagements with celebrity types as diverse as podcast talk show hosts (Zuraikat, 2020), vloggers (Lee & Watkins, 2016), reality TV contestants (Lewin, et al., 2015) and even the fictitious characters portrayed on narrative TV shows (Russell & Schau, 2014). PSRs denote the fantastical – or imagined – nature of fan-celebrity relationships, whereby "the term *para* denotes a closeness of position: a correspondence of parts, a situation on the other side – but also wrongness and irregularity" (Handelman, 2003, p.138). Fans may hold strong feelings for celebrities and these may appear to them as real, thus signalling "closeness". As Handelman (2003) points out, this closeness is marred by subconscious "wrongness and irregularity" whereby dialogic exchange, mutuality, and the social nuances of sustained togetherness are largely absent. The result is a fictive relationship denuded of the depths, complexity and interactivity we see with prolonged human interactions.

There are a number of theoretical aspects of PSRs, some of which help to reveal how the "fictional takes precedence over the actual" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p.215). The first, most crucial, characteristic is the unrequited commitment of the fan to the celebrity (Rubin & Step, 2000). For individual fans, their adoration is unilateral and non-dialectical; the relationship is inherently one-sided and reciprocity between the two can only ever be suggested or imagined.

A second characteristic of PSRs is intertextuality (Hirschman, 2000; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Engaging in intertextuality refers to the ways that fans follow a celebrity – and make linkages – across multiple and intersecting sites, texts, and cultural narratives including interviews, media reports, autobiographies, behind-the-scenes exposés, and the celebrity's own

oeuvre of work or content. This enables fans to feel as though they truly know a celebrity, not just as a performer but as a "real" and complete person behind their public image.

A third and related component of PSRs is perceived homophily. Fans are more likely to be interested in celebrities with whom they perceive commonalities and similarities, and with whom they can identify, often as a result of projecting one's own personal characteristics onto a celebrity (Eyal & Rubin, 2003).

Fourth, early conceptualizations of PSRs suggest that they function as surrogates for "autonomous social participation" amongst individuals who are inept at maintaining "real" relationships or feel otherwise unpopular or rejected by others (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 223). For Horton and Wohl (1956, p.223), in their original formulation of PSR theory, celebrity figures are made "readily available as an object of love" for the lonely.

Lastly, as alluded to by the above, the concept of love – however unrequited it may be – can function as an integral part of PSRs. The boundaries between love and friendship or companionship are porous; both being based on foundations of intimacy. Accordingly, some have identified that "parasocial love is a fundamental ingredient of the consumption of celebrities" (Illouz, 2009, p.395). By way of example, O'Guinn (1991) observes how some fans perceive their fandom towards the singer-songwriter Barry Manilow as comparable to a committed, loving relationship, with devoted fans referring to him as a significant other, "most typically as lover, husband or friend" (p.105). Elsewhere, in his introspective account of his fan relationship with the film actress Jena Malone, Wohlfeil reflects on feelings of romantic and sexual attraction which signal for him the possibility that he very well could "be in love with her" (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012, p. 517). However, as with any scenario where love and admiration is bestowed on somebody, the relationship can be precarious and susceptible to violations or transgressions. This leads us to consider the concept of loveshock and its value for explaining the disorientating after-effects of falling out of love with a cherished celebrity.

*2.3 Love & Loveshock*

In his work on intimacy and society, Giddens (1992) describes different types of love including *passionate love* "a generic connection between love and sexual attachment" (p.37), *romantic love*, a love that "fastens upon and idealises another, and it projects a course of future development" (p.45), and a *confluent love*, which is "active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the 'for-ever', 'one-and-only' qualities of the romantic love complex" (p.61). Related to confluent love is a *pure relationship* which refers to a:

> "social relation [which] is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (p.58).

A pure relationship exists exclusively for whatever benefits that relationship can provide for its partners (Giddens, 1991, 1992). In this sense, fans' parasocial relationships with celebrities are considered to loosely fall within the category of pure relationships. Keeping with Giddens' conceptualization, Williams (2011, p. 269) classifies fans' attachment to celebrities as "fan pure relationships" on the grounds that "requited emotion is not a requirement for their existence". Although a celebrity may not be able to reciprocate fans' love, there are other benefits that fans derive from the overall celebrity brand such as entertainment, identity attachments, and sociality with other fans.

Pure relationships are characterized by their fragility and high rates of dissolution. Giddens (1991, p.90) states that "anything that goes wrong between the partners intrinsically threatens the relationship itself" and according to Williams (2015, p.26), "a fan pure relationship may only be sustained while it offers ontological security and a sense of trust in the other party". Thus, in a fan pure relationship, the fan may exercise agency and freedom to break off the relationship when the celebrity brand fails to deliver the necessary rewards or fractures the fan's trust through transgression.

When a significant loving relationship dissolves, Giddens (1992) suggests one or both of the relational parties may experience "loveshock", described as analogous to the feelings associated with the suffering of shellshock experienced by combat veterans, more recently reconfigured as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Giddens crystallizes the fallout of relational dissolution as constituted by feelings of withdrawal, grief and blame, letting go of routines and habits, and confronting what went wrong in the relationship.

The concept of loveshock has been extended to fan studies, whereby Williams (2011) explains that when a fan's pure relationship with a beloved object ends (for example through the cancellation of an adored TV series), the fan may experience pain and loss over a period of mourning. To help "ward off potential anxiety" and enable fans to cope with the end of a long-running relationship with the characters of a TV series, Williams suggests fans turn to online fan pages, posting goodbyes and offering stories about the show's impact on their lives (2011, p.273). Comparably, in Russell and Schau's (2014, p.1039) account of critical junctures in consumer-brand relationships, one of their participants, Yvonne, reflects on the importance of grieving the end of a beloved TV series:

> "Because if people don't care about the characters, then it's like oh yeah that's over with. But it's hard to let go of people you care about, it's like somebody that you loved died, or moving away—I think there's a grief process almost…"

Though the ending of TV series provides one particular set of circumstances for grief in parasocial relationships, it is conceivable that fans also grieve when their loving attachments to a celebrity brand are dissolved due to transgression. Russell and Schau (2014) suggest fans' loss accommodation processes may differ depending on the characteristics inherent to the brand they are in a relationship with, as well as the broader socio-cultural context that surrounds its consumption. For them, while the loss of any parasocial relationship can be traumatic, the ways of dealing with it are largely "dependent upon what consumers feel they have lost" (Russell & Schau, 2014, p.1047). The breakdown of a fan-celebrity relationship due to alleged

celebrity transgression amongst a wider culture of cancellation and accelerated scrutiny (Wei & Bunjun, 2020) potentially brings with it a loss of trust and loss of security in identifying openly as a fan.

Transgression, because of how it may be perceived in broader culture, may mean fans' grief is less easily shared and the validity of their loss is less socially acceptable. Accordingly, continuing to love a celebrity following allegations of immorality may risk compromising fans' own moral standards necessitating a break-up and leaving a vacuum in their lives that may not be understood by non-fans. Managing that loss requires distinct approaches to negotiating, legitimizing and communicating the grief one feels. In this circumstance, the dissolution of parasocial love caused by a perceived celebrity transgressor provokes what we consider to be a case of "para-loveshock", which is performative and based on social drama and carefully shared feelings rather than organic or unfiltered emotion (see also Cronin & Cocker, 2019; Gopaldas, 2014). By exploring how this concept of para-loveshock is expressed by fans, we can address our research question: how do fans manage and perform "falling out of love" with a celebrity brand in the event of alleged celebrity transgression? Before we move on to our analysis, we first provide an account of our research context and methods.

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

### 3.1 Research Context

This study focuses on the "cancellation" of the American television and film actor Kevin Spacey, and fans' experiences of para-loveshock following the loss of his public image. Spacey gained critical acclaim and a cult-like fandom for his acting roles in major motion pictures including *The Usual Suspects* and *American Beauty* culminating in Academy Awards in 1995 and 1999 respectively. Described by Spirou (2014, p.154-155), "Kevin Spacey is undeniably a Hollywood star, however, he is an interesting exception to the rule of celebrity as he has been

referred to as a "private" man […] the fan, audience, critic, and scholar are forced to determine who Spacey is through the roles he chooses, particularly in the readily accessible Hollywood feature films he stars in". For Spirou, Spacey's mystique and commitment to select roles with common traits (usually conniving, manipulative, or flawed characters) has nurtured a desire amongst fans to get to *know* the man behind his characters – "something he [Spacey] is clearly aware of and something he uses" (2014, p.155). In 2011, the streaming platform Netflix outbid HBO to acquire and distribute the political thriller TV series, *House of Cards* starring Spacey in the lead role and becoming identified as "the most expensive drama on television" (Jenner, 2018, p.163). From 2013-17, Spacey portrayed the fictitious US President Francis (Frank) Underwood in the series winning him a Golden Globe Award in 2015.

Spacey's celebrity *brand* status is evidenced through his star appeal to draw in audiences for TV and film projects. O'Reilly and Kerrigan (2013) suggest starring actors function as a key component of a project's marketability, that "stars of films may themselves be read as individual brands" (p.770) and, as brands, "signifiers of professional distinction" (p.774). Beyond their acting performance, part of stars' brand appeal is channelled into the marketing campaigns for film projects through media interviews and discourse about their professional and creative vision. In these respects, Spacey's brand interconnectedness with *House of Cards* and Netflix involved him undertaking extensive public relations and celebrity endorsement activities for both (Jenner, 2018). Furthermore, as a marketable celebrity brand in his own right, Spacey has been contracted as a brand ambassador for various commercial firms over the years, starring in advertisements for American Airlines, Olympus cameras, and Renault automobiles. Promoting their Espace multi-purpose vehicle, Renault integrated explicit references to Spacey's most iconic acting roles, including Frank Underwood from *House of Cards*.

In late 2017, allegations emerged that Spacey had made sexual advances on a minor some years previously. An investigation into the conduct of Spacey during his 11-year tenure (2004-2015) as artistic director at The Old Vic in London, revealed 20 individual allegations of inappropriate behaviour (BBC News, 2017). As a result of the accusations, Spacey was dismissed by Netflix and removed from the final season of *House of Cards* (2018). It was reported that Netflix lost $39 million through firing Spacey from the series and cancelling a (then) upcoming movie project starring Spacey in the lead role (Bradshaw, 2018). Director Ridley Scott also removed Spacey from his film, *All the Money in the World* (2017), citing the commercial impact that the accusations might have on the $40 million project (Rose, 2018).

In the aftermath of Spacey's alleged transgressions and subsequent cancellation, various commentators in the media discussed fan experiences of betrayal and falling out of love with Spacey. Referencing Spacey's portrayal of Underwood in *House of Cards*, Mitchell (2017), writing for *The Guardian* explains how she will miss the character, "If you commit to a character, as I have with Underwood, it can be very difficult to part company with him, no matter what an actor is accused of". With this sense of loss and broken commitment amongst fans in mind, we now outline the methodological considerations underpinning our research.

*3.2 Research procedures*

The empirical work for this paper is derived from a larger socio-cultural study of the fandom and context surrounding the Netflix political drama, *House of Cards* (*HoC* thereafter). A sampling call was undertaken via an advertisement poster that was promoted through the lead author's social network which invited individuals who had watched *HoC* over multiple seasons and intended to binge-watch the latest season to participate in an interview. From an initial pilot sample, the lead author was introduced to others willing to share their experiences leading

to an eventual data pool of fifteen participants, aged between 23 and 69 (see Table 1). Many of

the participants were revealed to be dedicated fans of Spacey and his wider TV and film work.

**Table 1:** *Study Participants*

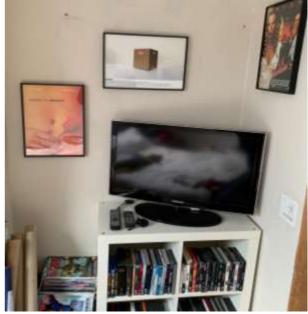| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Occupation | Education |
|-----------|-----|--------|------------|-----------|
| Gary | 41 | Male | Government administrator | Undergraduate degree |
| Sue | 58 | Female | Copy writer | Undergraduate degree |
| Simon | 38 | Male | Musician | Master's degree |
| Camila | 32 | Female | Postgraduate student | Master's degree |
| Craig | 32 | Male | Retail manager | Undergraduate degree |
| Jhanvi | 48 | Female | Social enterprise manager | Professional qualifications |
| Lee | 23 | Male | Product designer | Master's degree |
| Sarah | 36 | Female | Primary school teacher | Teaching degree |
| John | 25 | Male | Retail assistant | Secondary school |
| Phil | 42 | Male | University lecturer | Master's degree |
| Katie | 36 | Female | Solicitor | Master's degree |
| Robert | 69 | Male | Retired councillor | Secondary school |
| Jill | 67 | Female | Retired nurse | Nursing qualifications |
| Martin | 32 | Male | Recruitment consultant | Secondary school |
| Steph | 32 | Female | Sales manager | Undergraduate degree |

Participants engaged in multiple interviews over a three-year period with each data

collection round scheduled to coincide with a new season release of *HoC* (season 4 to 6). The

data drawn upon specifically for this study is taken from the final round of interviews

undertaken at the season six release of *HoC* (November 2018), centering specifically on

whether awareness of Spacey's alleged transgressions impacted upon participants' fan interest

and admiration for him. All interviews lasted between approximately 40 to 70 minutes each,

were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and pseudonymized. Institutional ethical approval

was gained for the study and informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants.

Along with the interviews, the lead author (a devoted Spacey fan of twenty-five years),

undertook a subjective personal introspection (SPI) of his own first-hand encounters with para-

loveshock. The intention was to provide a closer and richer reading of the embodied, sensual

aspects of perceived betrayal, pain and shame as they are experienced by a heartbroken fan.

Achieving such a confessional would likely remain difficult or, at the very least, shallow if relying on third-person accounts via interviews alone. The approach adopted by the first author is consistent with previous accounts of fandom undertaken from a holistic insider perspective (see Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012; Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Over the course of his Spacey fandom, the lead author accrued DVDs of his films and TV shows (including US Region 1 formats released ahead of their UK issue), movie soundtracks, digital downloads, and memorabilia associated with the actor including framed movie prints, posters and an autograph (*see Figure 1*). These collections engender a feeling that Spacey is part of the lead author's everyday life (Wohlfeil et al., 2019).

***Figure 1: Selection of Lead Author's Kevin Spacey Collection***



To prompt an understanding of how feelings of loveshock are felt and negotiated, part of the SPI involved the lead author re-watching a collection of his favourite Spacey films over the months that followed news of the allegations and Spacey's subsequent erasure from popular culture. Attempting to maintain some connection is considered significant when mourning the loss of a loved one, and re-consuming Spacey's work enabled the lead author to bring the affective contours of his relationship to the surface for evaluation. In a similar vein to "thought-

watching" exercises (Gould, 2012, p.455), the author kept diary notes during the re-consumption experience, which he developed into fuller introspective essays in the days after consumption. Those essays were entered into a combined data pool with interview transcripts for this research, and we analysed the introspective and interview data as one combined data set. Inductive analyses of the combined data were undertaken in an iterative "back and forth between part and whole" (Spiggle, 1994, p.495) approach, and emerging interpretations were continuously revised. Analysis employed *open coding* to identify concepts in the data and *axial coding* to develop emerging codes related to larger categories of interest (Spiggle, 1994). Categories were developed into higher order themes through constant comparison with explanatory theories from the literature and the emerging theoretical framework. What follows is our interpretation of a number of occurrences across the main themes underlying our overall conceptualization of para-loveshock.

## 4. FINDINGS

Three major themes are outlined, with each demonstrating a performative aspect of para-loveshock: *grief enfranchisement, flagellation* and *indignation*. First, we reveal how fans' feelings of betrayal are based crucially around qualification from like-minded others and how heartbreak is rendered legitimate through other-directed – or externalized – displays of grief. Second, we reveal how fans' para-loveshock is steeped in self-reproach or "flagellation". By entertaining the possibility that they were somehow culpable for the alleged celebrity transgression, fans nullify their status as detached, distant consumers and augment the impact of their psychic and material commitments to their object of worship. Third, we explore how fans allow their anger and disappointment to be superseded, or *sublated*, by moral outrage or indignation. By allowing personal disappointments to be superseded by morally and societally sanctioned grievances, fans are able to ground and legitimize their emotions publicly. Across

all themes, fans seek out ways of negotiating, legitimizing, and defending the "realness" of their parasocial relationships and their dissolution.

## 4.1 Performative Grief Enfranchisement

The first major theme to emerge centres on fans' efforts to align their feelings with like-minded others to legitimize their sense of heartbreak and betrayal. By externalizing their grief, or placing it in a shared space, they make their feelings socially visible and, thus, more "real". Fans who mourn their adored celebrity's public fall from grace seek to have their heartbreak validated by others because their grief sits beyond what is normatively acceptable (Doka, 1999; Harju, 2015; Russell & Schau, 2014). According to Doka (1999), such sorrow is a form of "disenfranchised grief", described as "a grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported" (p.37). He adds: "The concept of disenfranchised grief recognises that societies have sets of norms – in effect, 'grieving rules' – that attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve" (p.37). Feeling bad about the downfall of Spacey breaks these grieving rules because of how continued fan interest in a suspected celebrity wrongdoer may appear to non-fans. Accordingly, Spacey fans seek out spaces, including online platforms that facilitate, normalize and enfranchise their expressions and sentiments of grief for Spacey. The first author recognized that qualification from like-minded others could serve as a resource to offset feeling alone in his grief and legitimize a feeling of loss that is not openly accepted by greater society:

> *"Spacey is damaged, and so are most of his films and any enjoyment has gone. I spoke to my mum last week about this… She is a massive fan too. She told me about a website where people support him… I looked up the site (supportkevinspacey.com) and people were posting stuff about how much they miss him, the allegations and how his withdrawal from acting and society has created a massive vacuum in their lives. Every post was supporting his comeback and I guess that's the purpose of the site. I didn't post anything because I wasn't sure I was going to belong to this group – I'm upset with him, he's let me down, and he's also embarrassed me a bit." (Researcher field notes, 26/02/2018)*

Although the first author had trouble seeing how he *"was going to belong to this group"*, sites like https://www.supportkevinspacey.com enable aggrieved fans to conceptualize themselves as mourners who may identify with one another's pain, and allow their feelings to be "mirrored, recognised and thus legitimised" (Harju, 2015, p.136). These principles run in parallel with the concept of brand community and other forms of communal consumption, where sense of belonging to an in-group is valued (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). However, beyond some expressions of sharing their grief and identity, much of the data suggests the social interactions of fans were more about saving face and achieving visibility and legitimacy for one's own grief, than for seeking robust forms of community and belonging. This is consistent with "noncommunitarian forms of consumer sociality" where individuals rely on social media platforms to engage and discuss with like-minded others, but primarily as a means to manage personal strategies of self-presentation rather than collective action (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p.730). We see evidence of non-communitarian expressions of fan sociality with one of the interview participants, Lee (23), who upon hearing about the allegations of Spacey's transgressions, turned to Twitter as a place to exorcize his grief:

> *"I was gutted, a bit heartbroken when I heard about the allegations cos I've been a massive fan of him and his movies… It's hard, I don't want to say I'm a fan, but gosh, I think deep down I probably still am (…) I Tweeted at the time of the allegations, how disappointed I was. I was gutted, let down, cos as a fan you only have good memories of him… I was shocked by him as well, I was shocked."*

Lee, a member of a Kevin Spacey online fan page and an avid follower of the actor on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, uses social media as a platform to outwardly project and perform his grief which, in cultural terms, is largely disenfranchised. Besides twice uttering the word "shock" – the very fabric of loveshock – Lee, deploys the grief-stricken language we might associate with a breakup – feeling "heartbroken", "gutted" and "let down". Harju (2015, p.143) suggests grieving online is about "solidifying and 'making real' the fandom". Lee's feelings are expressed through a Tweet and thus reified as a communicable construct allowing

him to establish a degree of publicness for what might otherwise go unseen and overlooked as an exclusively private experience. Sharing their disappointment on the internet allows fans to maintain and manage their own tactics of self-presentation, prompting reactions and inviting exchanges with others.

Importantly, Lee also spoke about how trying to re-consume Spacey's work following his alleged transgressions is less impacted by any actual personal feeling of betrayal, and more by how others (especially non-fans) might perceive him for continuing to support Spacey:

> *"I tried to watch Se7en about three weeks ago now and it was hard… I'm really unsure about this, and whether I can still be a fan. It's hard to admit that you are a Kevin Spacey fan and I watched it my own, and at least I didn't have to justify watching it. You wouldn't admit that you have watched him in public."*

The overriding imperative for Lee appears to be one of impression management rather than the expression of genuine emotion. Lee, who no longer openly identifies as a Spacey fan but nonetheless "tries" to maintain his enjoyment of *Se7en*, admits to watching the film privately so that he does not have to "justify watching it" to friends or family. This resonates with the lead author, who removed an autographed photo of Spacey, that he had displayed on his memo board in his home office. The photo (Figure 2) was special; the lead author had written to Spacey in 2004 about how Spacey's performance in *American Beauty* (1999) had inspired him to make a career change, and the signed photo was a gift from Spacey in return. As with Lee, the first author was cognisant of how his open fandom might appear to others following the public accusations made against Spacey, and was therefore removed from public view.

*Figure 2: Personalized, signed Kevin Spacey Photo.*

Simon (38), a collector of Kevin Spacey memorabilia, also ponders how his fan interest might be perceived by others. In other-directed fashion, his feelings are tied up in impression management rather than in the allegations of transgression:

> *"I think my initial reaction was like oh no! Not Kevin Spacey! It's like you are almost more disappointed in that you have a lost a character than feeling sympathy for the victims, and that sounds horrendous doesn't it, horrific… and there is that disappointment that you are no longer okay to like it. It's no longer okay to be a part of it, it's no longer okay to value that person as such now. I'm just a bit gutted, disappointed (...) I'm worried about how watching Spacey might reflect on me. Like, American Beauty, it was a great film, but by watching it now, does it mean that I am supporting [alleged] sex offenders? Do you reduce the dissonance, by not telling anyone?"*

Simon, who owns a number of original Spacey movie posters and some cherished Spacey-related merchandise, such as a plastic toy figurine of "Hopper" (a character Spacey voiced in the 1998 animated Pixar movie *A Bug's Life*), balances loss and disappointment, not only for a loved one (Spacey), but also for his own fan identity. Simon aims to manage how he might be perceived for re-watching Spacey's work and his grief is calibrated in line with an acceptable presentation of himself. As Hills (2018, p.21) clarifies, "fandom has become not only an internal object (a highly valued and intensely personally felt self-experience) but also an external cultural object incessantly mediated back to the self". Moreover, perceived

judgements from others can lead to more cautious displays of emotions (Cronin & Cocker, 2019; Gopaldas, 2014). Simon seeks to exhibit the "correct" emotional response and the prospect of causing offence to others shapes and influences his choices. Supressing his Spacey fandom, which is an important part of his identity, allows him to function without fear of public reprisal, when inside he admits to actually feeling "a bit gutted".

### 4.2 Performative Flagellation

The next emergent theme centres on fans' self-reproach in their performance of para-loveshock. Besides grief, Giddens (1992, p.103) suggests "blame" must be substantially dealt with before individuals become resigned to the break-up of any relationship. Our findings suggest that when a parasocial relationship dissolves due to transgression, fans discursively negotiate their share of the blame for the break-up, and search for some evidence of their culpability in the celebrity's suspected missteps. Self-reproach following the breakdown of most kinds of relationships is typically non-productive, irrational and undesirable. Yet, within the illusory realm of parasocial fan-celebrity relationships, acts of self-reproach help fans to reify their fandom by convincing themselves and others how much their commitments mattered. We label this as *performative flagellation* which we define as consumers sharing culpability for a celebrity transgression and engaging in self-reproach as a way to legitimize their fannish conceits and commitments. For fans, inserting themselves into an alleged celebrity transgression helps them to validate their imagined relationship and negotiate the weight of its dissolution.

This was particularly evident for the first author when re-watching Spacey's film *American Beauty* not long after the allegations first surfaced. In *American Beauty*, Spacey stars as a middle-class suburban father experiencing a midlife crisis, and becomes infatuated with his teenage daughter's high school friend. "Look closer", a phrase that was featured

prominently on the promotional materials for *American Beauty*, was taken-up by the first author as an invitation to do just that:

> *"The movie tagline, "Look Closer" urged us to never take things at face value – watching it now, that line was pervasive. I see a different film, it's pretty creepy now, and not as enjoyable… Also, by looking closer I see a great actor, skilfully playing somebody else, hiding his true self. There is something more to Spacey than we first see in the characters he plays and I think I always knew that. As I fan, I enjoyed watching him play these sinister characters… So, you wonder if vicariously I, and fans like me, helped to create a bit of a monster – knowing that we love him playing some truly dreadful characters, did that give him confidence to act out his [alleged] unpleasant impulses?" (Researcher field notes, 02/01/18).*

The first author's fieldnotes suggest the possibility that fans are uncomfortable with seeing themselves as passive recipients of their idol's alleged transgression. His musing that he is complicit in "creating a monster" functions as an attempt to establish importance in the celebrity's life rather than accept himself as a distant parasocial admirer. Importantly, that insight conflicts with existing accounts of brand transgression in the literature which assume consumers are motivated to put boundaries between themselves and the transgression to avoid self-reproach (see Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). Our data provides evidence that fans may be motivated to elide all boundaries between themselves and the suspected transgressor, to claim importance in that individual's life. Such behaviour is consistent with accounts of "boundaryless" narcissistic identification, denoting "a preoccupation with the self which prevents the individual from establishing valid boundaries between self and external worlds" (Giddens, 1991, p.170). Following this logic, the transgressions of the celebrity – however distant or separate from a consumer's life they may be – are co-opted and conflated with the domain of the self as a way of legitimizing the emotions consumers attach to their fandom and its collapse.

Phil (42), who only once ever had the opportunity to meet Spacey in person during the early 2000s, subjects himself to reproach for not having some impossible foresight about his idol's alleged misconduct:

> *"You feel really let down. It also reflects on us, and you start to question your judgement and your choices of who to choose to watch as well (...) I don't think it was my fault as a fan, we didn't know, but knowing now what I know about Kevin Spacey, I would choose not to spend as much time watching things that Kevin Spacey is in. If I had known, I would have switched off"*

By claiming that the allegations made against Spacey "also reflect on us", Phil rejects his status as some remote, unknowing parasocial observer, and asserts that his and others' identification as fans is subject to reproval. Though Phil recognizes that he was not personally responsible for Spacey's alleged misbehaviour, his self-criticism for not dissolving his fandom earlier and his resolve to question his own future judgements can be read as a form of flagellation. By seeking out and adopting consequences of a celebrity's suspected misdemeanours for their own lives, fans blur the boundary between their own conceits and external realities. As Giddens (1991, p.170) suggests, "Narcissism relates outside events to the needs and desires of the self, asking only 'what this means to me'".

Narcissistic expressions of self-reproach were also evident for Sue (58), who has for more than two decades considered Spacey as her "go-to" actor. She watched him perform live, playing Clarence Darrow and Richard III at The Old Vic (London), and was so mesmerized by his performance as Darrow, she travelled to watch the play a further four times. Sue explains that she processes her break-up with Spacey by second-guessing her own judgements:

> *"I don't follow any other celebs as such, but if Spacey was in something I would always go and see it and he was my go-to actor, I loved watching him. He brought depth to his characters and was a total professional. However, this [alleged] bad behaviour has made me question myself a little bit, my own judgements and his [alleged] bad behaviour feels very shallow... I couldn't get my head around it, and I feel a bit betrayed by him ... When I watched him play Clarence Darrow at The Old Vic, it was one of the best bits of theatre I had ever seen... I feel upset by that now... I feel for the guy but I also feel for us cos we have to watch all this happening. He's not the man I trusted".*

Sue's suggestion that *"I feel for the guy but I also feel for us"* is important because it highlights how porous the boundaries between the self and external world have become in her experience of para-loveshock. Her wilful elevation of the fans' subject position ("us") in Spacey's alleged

transgression suggests "an expression of narcissistic absorption" (Giddens, 1991, p.170) rather than genuine culpability. From this, we can surmise that one of the ways fans perform their para-loveshock – and thus have their feelings of heartbreak recognized by themselves and others – is through blurring the boundaries, however firm they may be, between transgressor and one's self. In these respects, self-reproach serves to legitimize one's grief during a break-up with a celebrity brand but, more broadly, functions as a distinguishing marker of one's fandom. While studies of reactions to negative publicity about celebrities show how non-specific *consumers* try to create boundaries between themselves and suspected transgressors (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Lee & Kwak, 2016), our study reveals that self-identifying *fans* try to remove them.

### 4.3 Performative Indignation

The final theme centres on how personal experiences of para-loveshock are validated through a process of sublation. In Hegelian philosophy, to sublate is to cancel and to preserve; or rather, to supersede while retaining some aspect of that which is superseded (Spears & Amos, 2014). In the context of Spacey's alleged transgression, sublation took the form of fans cancelling their personal disappointment with Spacey's ex-communication from popular culture, while preserving their feelings of pain through moral "indignation" toward his suspected wrongdoings. The "extrovert and assertive emotion of indignation" is more of a political and social expression than fan dissappointment and thereby places grievances within the realm of society than the individual (Chouliaraki, 2010, p.111; Meštrović, 1997). Our participants understood that unless they adjusted how they expressed themselves, their feelings about Spacey's ex-communication risked being written off by others as trivial and esoteric. As Wohlfeil (2018) identifies, society has a predilection for viewing the fan subject as "the weird, alienated, obsessive and fanatical loner" who, in situations of emotional turmoil, is perceived

as having "*lost his marbles*" (p.45-46). To avoid such criticisms of pathology, fans attribute their pain to moral issues rather than personal issues, thereby superseding any perceived shallowness of their experiences by non-fans.

The act of sublation could be evidenced through a number of participants diverting attention from their personal disappointment as wounded fans to share passionately instead in the general public's moral outrage with Spacey. Jhanvi (48), for example, who watched all six seasons of *HoC* several times and hosted *HoC* watch parties with other fans, channels her heartbreak into an institutionalised and participatory language of indignation by grounding her concerns to LGBTQ+ matters:

> *"What most appalled me and disgusted me, was that he [Spacey] used [the allegations] to come out as gay, and that has caused a huge backlash and a lot of LGBT activists and gay people thought it was just so wrong… quite understandably. 'Hold on a minute, you have been accused of a sexual crime and you are using this as an opportunity to tell us that you are gay?' I found that really repulsive and unforgiveable, and I immediately went off Spacey, irrespective of the accusations. I can never forgive him, it is absolutely unforgiveable and absolutely inappropriate to use it to oust his sexuality."*

The act Jhanvi refers to here was a Tweet made by Spacey to deny any recollection of wrongdoing. In that same Tweet, Spacey took the opportunity to come out as gay, an act that some read as a deliberate attempt to misdirect attention and circumvent the weight of the allegations. Jhanvi, who herself identifies as a straight cisgender woman, draws upon affronted others ("*LGBT activists and gay people*") to locate her indignation. Furthermore, instead of fixating on how Spacey's removal from *HoC* hurt her personally, Jhanvi renders her heartbreak legitimate by aligning her arguments with institutionally legitimate actors that have publicly condemned Spacey:

> *"I think Ridley Scott and Netflix were absolutely right to fire him. Could his career be rehabilitated? I kind of feel that it shouldn't be and therefore I am taking a principled stand with them [Ridley Scott and Netflix]… So, I think Spacey should be punished and absolutely not let him work. Actors are role models and Spacey has let us down."*

By citing a multi-billion-dollar media company and an academy award winning director who both dropped Spacey from their projects, Jhanvi establishes evidence that it is fair and just to be upset with Spacey. "Sublation processes", Spears and Amos (2014, p.442) suggest, "work to preserve or forward a culturally prevalent viewpoint while reducing or cancelling less prevalent ideas". Jhanvi cancels her status as a "let down" fan but preserves her pain by channelling it into a wider and more prevalent moral stance, what she calls a "principled stand". In doing so, she turns her relationship with a fallen idol into one with a "folk devil", what Cohen (2002) defines as a classification of social figures that function unambiguously as "visible reminders of what we should not be" (p.2). A similar expression of sublation can be found with Camila (32) who reduces her status as a disappointed Spacey fan and claims legitimacy for her feelings by drawing parallels with other celebrities who were at the centre of negative publicity, Louis CK and Woody Allen. In doing so, she supplants personal disappointment but preserves its affect by situating her arguments within normative realms of indignation aimed at men abusing positions of power:

> *"I was quite disappointed with Spacey and it doesn't just happen to him, but also to someone else I loved, which is Louis CK. I was like why, why, oh why would you have to ruin everything? (…) Like then he [Spacey] came out and said he was bisexual, or gay, I don't know. I was like, you can do anything you want with your sexual life, but we are talking about [alleged] assault and that is different. It was so poorly managed (…) The way he [Spacey] managed the allegation, has made it easier for Netflix to remove him from House of Cards and made it easier for the fans to disown him. (…) I just completely turned off, also cos I haven't seen anything from them anymore. I have just completely disconnected from them. (…) I also did that with the director, what's his name. Ah yeah, Woody Allen. I have also blocked Woody Allen, I can't watch him."*

By allowing consumers to assemble a discourse that absolves a celebrity of being the sole perpetrator of suspected transgressions, sublation draws critical attention to the market- or industry-wide conditions that are conducive to immorality. Here, Camila, who used to adorn the walls of her study with posters and prints from Spacey's films, alludes to the roots of her heartbreak not lying with Spacey alone but with systemic male abuses in the entertainment

industry. Also, Camila suggests the actions undertaken by a mainstream legitimate actor (Netflix) makes *"it easier for the fans to disown him"*. The fact that such a major institution with its own "marketplace sentiments" (Gopaldas, 2014) had condemned Spacey confirms for Camila that something truly bad has happened here, thus validating her heartbreak and insulating her emotional labour from devaluation.

The act of fans sublating their personal feelings to morality is qualitatively different to processes of moral decoupling discussed elsewhere in the celebrity transgression literature (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). In the case of moral decoupling, those who are sufficiently motivated may separate a celebrity's transgression from their performance to maintain support for that celebrity. Moral sublation, however, centers on how those who have lost their support for a celebrity locate their feelings in the domain of generalized moral outrage. Moral decoupling is undertaken to maintain one's *moral standards* whereas moral sublation draws upon morality as a platform to legitimize one's *feelings*. Because sublation means allowing one's personal grief to be superseded by shared discourses (like morals), employing this strategy poses less danger of one's emotions being dismissed by others as fannish conceits.

The need to express moral indignation, rather than personal disappointment, to allow fans' heartbreak to be taken seriously by others is evidenced in the lead author's introspective work. His field notes describe trying to communicate his break-up with Spacey in ways that allow for his pain to be considered acceptable by non-Spacey fans:

> *"For the past few days I've been thinking about Spacey a great deal and I wanted to talk [with others] about having watched The Usual Suspects. It's hard to publicly say I watched Suspects. You go through so many thoughts (…) I've put so much into following [Spacey], and I have so many good memories of this film. It rewarded me with cultural capital at college, it helped me ace an interview for a job at a local cinema, and it was a film that I watched repeatedly with my older brother, giving us something to share and enjoy together. If I repeated this, people would say 'get a grip!' I know that. I tried a different tact and I crowbarred him into a conversation with friends from my walking club. We were talking about the TV series, Mindhunter on Netflix, and I mentioned that I was surprised that Netflix still had Spacey films on their platform, and would anyone watch one? This opened up a conversation about whether Netflix were right to sack him and an interesting discussion around the #MeToo Movement. (…) It gave me an*

*audience to share things with. I condemned him too, and that was the prevailing mood in the group. They were particularly disappointed with how he conflated his apology with coming out…"* (Researcher field notes, 17/12/17).

Here, while the lead author talked about his heartbreak with others, his awareness that they would not "get it" (and possibly chastise him) initially prevented him from engaging in any sort of "cathartic venting" (Weijo et al., 2019, p.130). His experience mirrors the folk concept of *exulansis* which describes a tendency to give up on trying to talk to others about an experience because they simply will not be able to relate to it (Koenig, 2015). To overcome his exulansis, the lead author sublates his personal grief, and "crowbars" Spacey into a conversation about related, but arguably larger and more important, issues such as the #MeToo Movement. These conversations allow him to retain his original emotion, but to upgrade it to a legitimate platform for communication and debate. From this, we recognize that fans who experience para-loveshock may supplant their personal disappointment with moral indignation to gain a supportive audience for their feelings.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Overall, the themes emerging from our analyses reveal aspects of how self-identifying fans manage and perform falling out of love with a celebrity brand in the event of an alleged celebrity transgression. Interestingly, all themes are characterized by a difficulty or unwillingness of fans to detach or decouple the "two-bodied" celebrity brand (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) during the dissolution of their relationships. Our analyses show how the two "bodies" of the celebrity brand — the private person and the public performer — are, from the perspective of love-shocked fans, inseparable and interdependent. Fans fall out of love not just with the person but also with the performer's artistic outputs. By exploring how fans negotiate and legitimize the depths and reality of such a complete break-up from a relationship partner, each of our themes provides insight into how suspected celebrity misbehaviour is handled from

a socio-cultural perspective, in contrast to the more psychologically grounded accounts in the literature (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). In doing so, our analyses intersect with calls for more research on the social and intersubjective ways that consumers address critical junctures in their brand relationships (Russell & Schau, 2014).

While Russell and Schau (2014) focused on how consumers cope with the loss of a relationship partner in the context of narrative brands concluding – such as a TV show ending – we explored the dynamics of a relationship ending due to alleged celebrity brand misdeeds. Brand breakups without perceived wrongdoing, such as those outlined by Russell and Schau (2014), are processed differently to those when the brand is perceived as having expressly transgressed. By accounting for how self-identifying fans engage in performative processes of grief enfranchisement, flagellation, and indignation as part of their shared experiences of para-loveshock, we reveal the importance of performing a celebrity brand break-up within the wider social currents of cancel culture. Our conceptualization makes two contributions to business research.

First, while others have highlighted the willingness of consumers to reconstrue and overturn a brand's perceived missteps when it aggrieves them (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015; Weijo et al., 2019), our work reveals that fans retain and invoke their grief in performative ways when motivated to break up with a brand. Previously, Weijo et al. (2019) reported that "consumer coping efforts usually take a more active approach and seek to realign the brand relationship by overturning perceived transgressions" (p.129). Parmentier and Fischer (2015) suggested consumers who engage in various coping practices do so in the hope that they can "attract the attention of, and help correct perceived missteps made by, managers of a brand they have greatly enjoyed" (p.1247). Although consumers' efforts to cope with and overturn brand transgressions provide important insights for researchers, we must not lose sight of consumers' actions when they do not seek resolution, or offer forgiveness, for perceived

wrongdoing. In the contemporary climate of cancel culture, with its tendency towards punishing suspected transgressors and blanket intolerance for all alleged misconduct, maintaining one's identification as a fan becomes less tenable and requires careful negotiation following accusations of celebrity transgression. In this paper, we explored how love-shocked fans see the allegations of wrongdoing against a celebrity brand as an opportunity for self-expression, self-understanding and a re-writing of their identity.

Giddens (1992, p.103) mentions "Becoming resigned to the break, 'bidding goodbye'" as a crucial predicate to the experience of loveshock. With our study, we see fans operationalize this resignation at a parasocial level through the withdrawal of their support from a celebrity brand rather than some ethos to redeem it. Moreover, our findings can be read as fans "playing up", "playing to" or "playing with" how much their withdrawal of support hurts. Emphasizing how hurt they are enables them to legitimize, enfranchise, and ultimately reify the dissolution of their imaginary relationships. Fans' handling of parasocial trauma can be understood as expressive rather than palliative, since it signals the significance of their fandom and its erasure for both themselves and others. Though we unpacked this in the context of fans' break-up with Hollywood star Kevin Spacey, the phenomenon is transferable to other cases of alleged celebrity transgression under cancel culture. For example, comparisons can be drawn to the para-loveshock of ex-fans of Morrissey (the former frontman of *The Smiths*) who came together to arrange an anti-racism party to express their opposition to the English rock singer's support for the far-right (Perraudin, 2018). Like the "principled stand" taken by Spacey's heartbroken fans in our data, ex-fans of Morrissey organised a space to socially exteriorize, perform, and sublate their feelings to the level of moral communicable issues.

Similarly, fans of the *Harry Potter* brand used their online platforms to project and perform their break-up with the brand's creator, celebrity author JK Rowling (following remarks made by the author on Twitter that were perceived to be transphobic). Rather than

work to resolve their grief privately, fans' externalization and sublation of their feelings played out on social media and fan websites. The webmaster of one such fansite posted a statement explaining, "Although it is difficult to speak out against someone whose work we have so long admired, it would be wrong not to use our platforms to counteract the harm she has caused" (Anelli, 2021). Fans express themselves publicly in the current climate of cancel culture, using their grief and indignation to signal, adjust, and negotiate identity-related or ideological attachments.

As a secondary, but related, contribution, this paper expands our understanding of the purpose that pain serves for consumers. Recent work has shown how physical forms of pain fulfil an escapist function in consumer culture. Scott et al. (2017) suggest that, in the context of adventure challenges, cuts, wounds, and burns allow consumers to escape the artificiality of their mundane "decorporealized" existence, and experience something ostensibly more authentic, more real. In this paper, we have touched upon a curious reversal of this. We have revealed how consumers' negotiation, enfranchisement, and reification of non-physical "emotional pain" enables them to remain committed to something that is, in the same logic, less authentic, less real. Compared to physical pain, emotional pain is less material, caused by the loss of a love-object, and is defined as "a feeling of brokenness resulting from a traumatic event, which suddenly shatters the external cover that represents a person's identity and facilitates connection with others" (Meerwijk & Weiss, 2011, p.404). The emotional pain experienced from the collapse of their parasocial relations with a celebrity reflects and reifies the loss of consumers' self-identification as fans. In Horton and Wohl's (1956, p.215) original theorization, "para-social relations provide a framework within which much may be added by fantasy". Here, we suggest that the fantasy of heartbreak functions as key additive in parasocial relationships. When the celebrity brand is threatened by transgression, the discursive and social

handling of emotional pain (such as heartbreak) functions for consumers as a way of expressing and proving the weight of their convictions and identifications as fans.

Beyond the role that physical pain can play in reminding consumers of the "realness" of their corporeality, our lesson for business research is that emotional pain serves the function of convincing consumers of the "realness" of their fantasies. Consumers might turn to physically painful experiences offered by market intermediaries, such as CrossFit or Tough Mudder, when seeking a dose of unfiltered corporal reality (Scott et al., 2017). However, when seeking to sustain or revise a coherent narrative (such as fandom), emotionally painful events in the marketplace – such as allegations of celebrity transgression – can offer consumers a social drama to participate in and integrate to their projects of identity making and breaking. Our thinking, in these regards, is also consistent with nascent work in consumer research that identifies emotions as rhetorically oriented, discursive categories that can be drawn upon to perform social actions in the marketplace (Gopaldas, 2014; Valor et al., 2021). Following Gopaldas' (2014, p.1000) identification of broad sentiments that can exist in the marketplace like "contempt for villains" or "concern for victims" and Valor et al.'s (2021, p.638) calls that we pay closer attention to how these "broad marketplace sentiments operate downstream", we identify the expressive functions of emotional pain at the level of the individual. It is at this point of lived experience that we can begin to clearly unpick the performative dimensions of emotions when fans face negative publicity about celebrities.

## 6. CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

With the ongoing scrutiny of celebrities in today's cancel culture, understanding how fans' identities are maintained, rejected, or altered following allegations of transgression remains a crucial, if overlooked, area of importance for business research and brand management. Our research has shown that consumers who identify strongly as fans engage in a number of

performative tactics – grief enfranchisement, flagellation, and indignation – to negotiate their feelings about alleged celebrity transgressors amongst a wider culture of cancellation. Just as feelings of adoration are crucial to their parasocial attachment to celebrity brands, so too are fans' feelings of heartbreak during times of negative publicity. Recognizing how fans perform and legitimize these feelings helps sensitize managers in charge of celebrity brands to the importance of fans' identity work. In the following sections we discuss recommendations for managers and avenues for future research. We use the term managers to broadly denote the celebrity's own talent management or public relations teams, and the marketing management of the production companies or platforms that the celebrity represents or works for at the time of an alleged transgression being made public. For example, in the case of Kevin Spacey, managers include his own publicist and talent agency but also the brand management and crisis communication teams of Netflix, as Spacey has been a spokesperson for the platform and a brand ambassador for Netflix's flagship series, *HoC*.

### 6.1 Managerial Relevance

A key lesson for managers is that fans need space to perform their grief and heartbreak following allegations of a celebrity transgression, thus helping fans preserve the illusions of their parasocial relationships. Our data has shown that a celebrity brand break-up for fans is not easily understood within the cognitive realm of moral reasoning alone; social interactions and expressive discourses are important too. Seeking ways to integrate socio-cultural and identity-related considerations into crisis communications will help managers to better coordinate relations with fans when negative publicity surrounds the celebrity. Monitoring social media, blogs and fan websites provide a useful starting point for identifying fans' feelings and sentiments. Close monitoring of these fan touchpoints can help managers to gauge

and assess the extent to which a suspected celebrity wrong-doing has crossed an unacceptable threshold and may bleed over to wider audiences.

Another lesson for managers is that committed fans may not seek resolution or pardon for the alleged transgressor, but will seize relationship dissolution as an opportunity for self-expression, self-understanding, and re-writing of their identities. Management of celebrity transgression should thus not be directed solely to rehabilitating the celebrity brand's image, but should enable fans to exercise their grief in such a way that helps to preserve the illusion of closeness in their retroactive relationship with the celebrity and their work. We urge brand managers and crisis communication teams to seek ways of enabling what Russell and Schau (2014, p.1056) refer to as a "good death" for the fan-brand relationship. If the transgression is irredeemable, managers can aim to accommodate a gradual and circumspect break-up through staging forums for fan discussion, collective sense-making, and even direct communication with the celebrity brand to preserve past closeness. Such an approach contrasts with the current tendency to swiftly or automatically remove the celebrity brand from public platforms. Russell and Schau (2014) argue that achieving a good death for a consumer-brand relationship avoids a "historical forgetting" (p.1055) of the cancelled brand, and instead introduces the potential for that brand to "live in consumers' individual and collective memories; charged with gratitude and admiration" (p.1056).

Part of the trauma for the fans in our study was that Spacey was "cancelled" almost instantaneously by media organizations – his presence being removed from *HoC*, and his ongoing movie projects discontinued as part of his ex-communication. Executing such an abrupt and complete cauterization of a beloved figure from fans' lives without the opportunity for subtle debate and sense-making must be handled better by public relations and crisis communication teams to preserve some attachments. Softening fans' trauma through the facilitation of conversation rather than blanket ostracism of the alleged transgressor opens the

opportunity for fan-celebrity relationships to be rekindled later or, at the least, for a more dialogic and amicable break-up. Here, we encourage managers who are reliant on celebrity brands' reputations to resist knee-jerk reactions within today's cancel culture. Instead we advocate taking a longer and conversational period after allegations of a transgression are made public, to help stage and coordinate platforms for fans to perform their para-loveshock, to seek clarity on the evolving situation, and to manage the extent of their break-up.

A final item of practical relevance for marketing and crisis communication managers for celebrities and production companies stems from the consequences of performative indignation. Fans' moral sublation – where they allow their personal feelings to be superseded by more general moral discourses – has market ramifications that go far beyond any one celebrity brand. Managers are advised to consider how fans' moral sense-making around the allegations made against one celebrity may implicate other celebrities in real or imagined wrongdoings too, creating a "spillover' effect" (Johar et al., 2010, p.60). The spillover effect is best exemplified by the far-reaching ramifications of sexual harassment accusations made against the American film producer, Harvey Weinstein in 2017. The initial indignation that was trained on Weinstein exposed a disturbing level of wrongdoing or complicity amongst others in entertainment sectors, galvanising the #MeToo movement, and becoming described as the "Weinstein effect" (Cobb & Horeck, 2018, p.489). What felt like a watershed moment triggered a cascade of sexual abuse allegations against celebrities within and beyond the film and TV industry, including Kevin Spacey. Fans' efforts to abstract and generalise their feelings about specific instances of celebrity transgression risk exposing a culture of transgression endemic to celebrity culture in general. Managers must recognize that moral scrutiny and suspicion have the potential to transfer over to other celebrity brands, and decisions must be made on how to manage, contain, or intervene in such a spillover effect.

In these respects, our advice to managers complements and extends the managerial implications of Fournier and Eckhardt's (2019) "two-bodied" person-brand framework. Fournier and Eckhardt "call for attention to risk as a central metric" (p.613) in the management of person-brands such as celebrities, because of the inherent risks that stem from the complexity of working with human performers. To this, we add that risks also stem from the complexity of human fans. Hubris, unpredictability, and social-embeddedness are not the sole preserve of celebrity brands but are also implicit to their all-too-human communities of fans. We agree with Fournier and Eckhardt that stewardship of the human is an essential part of the celebrity brand management project, but stewardship assignments must extend to cover fans too. The added risks that fans introduce to allegations of celebrity transgression via their social experiences – such as performing and legitimizing their para-loveshock – requires monitoring, evaluation, and handling.

### 6.2 Avenues for future research

Beyond our contributions to theory and practice, further research is required to inform how celebrity brand managers develop crisis management and damage control strategies during fans' break-ups within a wider culture of cancellation. Future investigations are necessary to determine whether fans' break-ups with alleged celebrity transgressors are permanent or whether factors such as time elapsed or changes in judgements and sentiments will alter how fans feel. Consumer culture already witnessed one high-profile celebrity brand comeback in the age of #MeToo, when comedian Louis CK returned to stand-up comedy less than one year after admitting to sexually harassing a number of women in 2017. More research is required to determine the longevity and lasting impact of fans' para-loveshock, as well as their responses and reactions to cases of celebrity brand resurgence after their ex-communication. Comparing the contexts, durations, and meanings of transgressions for celebrities whose marketability

recovered versus those whose did not, may yield useful insights into the permanency of break-ups. Understanding how para-loveshock can lead to indefinite separation for some fans versus temporary adjournments for others will require multi-case, and potentially longitudinal, analyses of various fandoms in disparate environments at different historical moments.

Besides permanency, an adjacent area for future research is the scope of para-loveshock. More work is needed to detail whether fans' para-loveshock impacts the entire realm of a celebrity brand's influence equally or some aspects more than others. Such work should determine how far, and to which domains of, a celebrity brand will fans' critique and rejection spread. An important question worth considering is: to what extent will fans break up with the celebrity brand's commercial endorsements and projects, in addition to performances or artistic outputs?

Furthermore, it will be useful for future research to unpack the retroactive impact that para-loveshock might have on fans' relationships with celebrities' past artistic products. Some of our data suggests that, upon encountering negative news about a celebrity brand, fans may "backdate" their disappointment with the celebrity from before the news breaks, such as Camila who "completely disconnected" from Spacey and Louis CK's oeuvres of work. Talent management, publicists, and crisis management teams will benefit from understanding how the past intellectual property, branded materials, and artistic outputs of celebrities might be insulated from the fallout of negative news breaking in the present. For example, finding ways to discourage fans from denouncing the entire *Harry Potter* book series *ex post facto* following J.K. Rowling's controversial Tweets, or attenuating the impact of R Kelly's felony indictments on his musical back-catalogue represent challenges for managers. Future research should seek to investigate how para-loveshock influences fans' re-consumption of a celebrity transgressor's past work and identify ways to insulate past work from current allegations.

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